CPG

Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 12, March/2026, 4

Brought to you by CPG and Dynamic Minds

Dear Readers,

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

Wishing you an informative read, I extend special greetings to all those celebrating the Independence Day of Bangladesh and Greece, and the National Day of Pakistan this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

Webpage: www.cpg-online.de, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPG

Main Sections

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

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

China: Chongqing mayor investigated in widening crackdown in municipality

(ms) China's top anti-corruption watchdog has placed Chongqing mayor Hu Henghua under investigation, expanding a series of cases targeting senior officials in the southwestern municipality.

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) said on March 20, 2026, that Hu is suspected of "serious violations of discipline and law," a standard formulation for corruption. No details of the alleged misconduct were disclosed.

Hu, 62, has served as mayor of Chongqing since January 2022 and is also deputy party secretary of the city. Chongqing is one of China's four centrally administered municipalities, giving it provincial-level

status and making Hu one of the country's highest-ranking local officials.

The case makes Hu the most senior official in Chongqing to be investigated in recent years and signals continued scrutiny of the city's leadership. The investigation follows a series of earlier probes involving officials across different parts of the local political system.

In August 2025, Cao Qingyao, a Chongqing government adviser and former head of the city's Communist Party propaganda department, was placed under investigation for alleged disciplinary violations. Two days later, authorities announced a separate probe into Lan Qinghua, secretary-general of the Chongqing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a key political advisory body.

The near-simultaneous investigations, alongside earlier cases involving Tang Liangzhi, former mayor of Chongqing, and Deng Huilin, the city's former vice mayor and police chief, point to sustained and system-wide disciplinary scrutiny of Chongqing's leadership.

Hu's record has previously drawn scrutiny. In 2023, he received a party warning over failures linked to a 2022 residential building collapse in Changsha that killed 54 people, during his earlier tenure in Hunan province.

The CCDI has not said whether Hu remains in his post. Under China's disciplinary system, officials under investigation are typically removed from active duties while inquiries are ongoing.

Hu is among several officials at the ministerial or equivalent level investigated so far in 2026, reflecting the continued reach of President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign.

The case will proceed through the party's internal disciplinary process before any potential transfer to judicial authorities. [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

China: Former Hubei party chief Jiang Chaoliang indicted on bribery charges

(ms) Chinese prosecutors have indicted former senior official Jiang Chaoliang on charges of accepting "especially huge" bribes, concluding a long-running investigation into one of the country's more prominent corruption cases.

The Supreme People's Procuratorate said on March 17, that Jiang's case had been transferred to the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court following a completed investigation. Jiang is accused of exploiting his positions to secure benefits for others while accepting large amounts of money and property in return.

Jiang, 68, served as Communist Party secretary of Hubei province during the early stages of the Covid-19 outbreak and previously held senior roles in both provincial government and China's financial system. His alleged misconduct dates back to the 1990s, when he worked at the state-owned Agricultural Bank of China.

Prosecutors said Jiang used his positions, including as governor of Jilin province and later as Hubei party chief, to facilitate business deals in exchange for bribes. Authorities did not disclose the total amount involved but described it as "especially large," a designation typically reserved for major corruption cases.

Jiang was expelled from the Communist Party and removed from public office in October 2025 following an earlier disciplinary investigation. He also previously served as a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature.

The case has drawn attention due to Jiang's seniority and his role in Hubei at the onset of the pandemic.

The case will now proceed to trial. [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua]

China: Former Shaolin Temple abbot indicted on corruption charges

(ms) Chinese prosecutors have formally indicted Shi Yongxin, the former abbot of the Shaolin Temple, on multiple corruption-related charges following a months-long investigation into financial misconduct.

Authorities in Xinxiang, Henan province, announced on March 20, that Shi has been charged with embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, accepting bribes as a non-state official and offering bribes. The indictment comes about four months after his arrest and follows an earlier investigation into his activities.

Shi, 60, led the Shaolin Temple—one of China's most well-known Buddhist institutions—for more than 25 years before being removed from his position in July 2025. In the same month, the Buddhist Association of

China revoked his clerical status, stating that his conduct had damaged the reputation of the Buddhist community.

According to official statements, the charges relate to alleged financial irregularities linked to temple operations and associated business entities. The total amount involved has not been disclosed.

The case has drawn attention due to Shi's prominent role in transforming the Shaolin Temple into a global cultural and commercial brand, a strategy that earned him the nickname "CEO monk." His tenure saw the expansion of commercial activities tied to the temple, including performances, tourism and international business ventures.

In addition to financial allegations, earlier reports had also raised accusations of personal misconduct, including violations of monastic rules, though these are not part of the formal criminal charges.

The case will now proceed to trial in a local court in Henan province. [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

China: Sinopec adjusts sourcing and output as oil supply disruptions intensify

(ms) China's state-owned refiner Sinopec said it will not purchase Iranian crude and is seeking to secure alternative supplies as global oil markets tighten following disruptions linked to the Middle East conflict.

Company executives stated that Sinopec is increasing imports from other sources, including Saudi Arabia via the Red Sea port of Yanbu, and sourcing additional crude from outside the Middle East. The company typically relies on the region for about half of its crude supply.

At the same time, Sinopec has reduced refinery throughput by around 5 percent in March and indicated that production levels for April and May will be adjusted depending on supply conditions. The measures are intended to manage input constraints and maintain domestic fuel availability.

The company also said it is seeking government approval to access China's state oil reserves, although previous requests to draw down stockpiles have not been approved. China maintains large strategic and commercial petroleum reserves, which can be used to stabilize supply during disruptions.

The supply adjustments come as domestic fuel prices rise. China's National Development and Reform Commission increased the ceiling for gasoline and diesel prices by about 1,160 yuan (approximately USD 168) per metric ton, reflecting higher international crude prices. The increase was lower than the level implied by global benchmarks, indicating regulatory intervention to limit the impact on consumers.

China's fuel pricing system links retail prices to international crude movements but allows authorities to moderate adjustments. The latest increase is among the largest in recent years.

Market conditions have led to visible consumer responses. Reports showed increased demand at petrol stations ahead of the price adjustment, with queues forming in several cities after notifications of higher prices were issued.

Global oil prices have risen sharply amid supply concerns. Brent crude has traded above USD 100 per barrel, driven by disruptions to shipping routes and reduced availability of Middle Eastern supply.

Sinopec's adjustments also take place against a weaker earnings backdrop. The company reported a 36.8 percent decline in net profit in 2025, reflecting lower petrochemical margins and changes in energy demand.

Overall, the company's actions reflect supply-side adjustments in response to external disruptions. While state controls and reserves provide mechanisms to manage short-term volatility, fuel prices and refinery operations remain influenced by global market conditions. [CNBC] [OilPrice] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3]

China unveils draft financial law to strengthen oversight and reduce systemic risks

(ms) China has released a draft of its first comprehensive law governing the financial sector, marking a significant step toward establishing a unified legal framework aimed at strengthening oversight, reducing systemic risks and supporting long-term economic stability.

The draft law, jointly issued by the Ministry of Justice, the People's Bank of China and other regulators, has been opened for public consultation until April 19. It is designed to provide top-level guidance across the

entire financial system, addressing longstanding concerns about fragmented regulation and gaps in supervision.

The proposed legislation outlines broad principles for financial governance, including stronger centralized leadership, improved macro-prudential management and enhanced mechanisms to maintain currency and financial stability. It also introduces full lifecycle regulation of financial institutions, tighter compliance requirements for financial products and services, and expanded protections for consumers and investors.

Authorities have framed the draft as part of a broader effort to build what officials describe as a “financial powerhouse,” reflecting the growing scale and complexity of China’s financial system. The country now operates one of the largest banking systems globally, alongside significant equity and bond markets, increasing the importance of coordinated and effective supervision.

A key focus of the draft law is risk prevention. It proposes stricter oversight tools, stronger anti-money laundering provisions and higher penalties for financial misconduct, including fraud. The legislation also includes provisions allowing China to take countermeasures against external actions deemed to threaten its financial security.

The move comes against a backdrop of structural challenges within China’s financial system. Analysts have pointed to issues such as regulatory fragmentation, insufficient coordination among supervisory bodies and vulnerabilities linked to shadow banking and local financial institutions. Previous reforms have attempted to streamline oversight, but gaps have persisted in areas where financial activities cut across institutional boundaries.

China’s financial architecture differs from that of other major economies. Compared to the United States and the European Union, which have more fragmented and complex regulatory systems, China’s framework is relatively centralized. However, experts note that challenges remain, particularly in balancing regulatory efficiency with oversight independence and accountability.

The draft law seeks to address some of these issues by creating a more integrated, principle-based regulatory approach. While it does not fundamentally overhaul the supervisory structure, it aims to improve coordination and clarify responsibilities among regulatory bodies. [Bruegel] [China Daily] [Reuters]

China: New critical mineral discoveries strengthen lead in rare earth dominance

(ms) China has reported major new discoveries of critical minerals, including rare earth elements, fluorite and baryte, reinforcing its dominance over resources essential for high-tech industries, clean energy and defense.

Authorities said on March 21, 2026, that new surveys at the Maoniuping mine in Sichuan province identified 9.7 million tons of rare earth oxides, bringing total proven reserves at the site to more than 10 million tons. The findings further consolidate China's position as the world's leading supplier of rare earths, a group of 17 elements crucial for products ranging from smartphones and electric vehicles to advanced weapons systems .

In addition to rare earths, the surveys revealed 27.1 million tons of fluorite and 37.2 million tons of baryte, both classified as "super-large" deposits. Experts said these minerals may be even more strategically significant than the rare earths themselves due to their role in key industrial processes.

Fluorite, also known as fluorspar, is widely used in semiconductor manufacturing and lithium-ion batteries, making it essential for the global electronics and clean energy sectors. Baryte, meanwhile, is a critical component in oil and gas drilling, where it is used to stabilize wells and prevent blowouts. Without it, large-scale hydrocarbon extraction would be severely disrupted.

The discoveries come as competition between China and the United States intensifies over access to critical minerals and advanced technologies. China already dominates global rare earth production and processing, while the United States and its allies have sought to diversify supply chains and reduce reliance on Chinese exports.

Recent years have seen Beijing tighten export controls on certain rare earth materials, requiring government approval for overseas shipments. These measures have been widely interpreted as a response to U.S. tariffs and restrictions targeting China's technology sector.

The findings also align with a broader policy shift in Beijing, where securing access to critical resources has been elevated to a matter of national security. Under its latest five-year plan, China is prioritizing the

stockpiling of key commodities and strengthening domestic supply chains to reduce dependence on foreign technology and protect against global trade disruptions. Analysts say this strategy reflects long-standing concerns over exposure to export controls and technological restrictions imposed by the United States and its allies.

By expanding domestic reserves while building strategic stockpiles, China is positioning itself to support long-term industrial growth, increase self-reliance and strengthen its leverage in global supply chains amid rising geopolitical tensions. [CGTV] [Interesting Engineering] [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Youth unemployment declines but remains elevated

(ms) China's youth unemployment rate declined for a sixth consecutive month in February, though it remains relatively high and continues to reflect structural pressures in the labor market.

The jobless rate for people aged 16 to 24, excluding students, fell slightly to 16.1 percent in February from 16.3 percent in January, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics. The figure has been gradually decreasing since mid-2025, when it reached a peak of 18.9 percent following a surge in new graduates entering the labor market.

Despite the downward trend, employment conditions remain challenging, particularly for young jobseekers with limited work experience. Broader labor market indicators show mixed developments, with unemployment among those aged 25 to 29 rising to 7.2 percent and for those aged 30 to 59 edging up to 4.2 percent.

Officials have identified employment as a policy priority, with measures aimed at supporting college graduates and younger workers. However, analysts point to continued pressures from slower economic growth, deflationary trends and external uncertainties.

Overall, while the latest data indicate gradual improvement, youth unemployment remains above pre-pandemic levels, suggesting ongoing challenges in absorbing new entrants into the labor market. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: Development forum outlines policy focus amid external pressures

(ms) China's China Development Forum in Beijing brought together government officials and multinational executives to discuss economic policy and global conditions.

Chinese officials highlighted priorities in the current five-year plan, including technological self-reliance, industrial upgrading and "high-quality development." The discussions took place as China faces external pressures from trade tensions and rising energy costs linked to the Middle East conflict.

Executives from major U.S. companies attended the forum, indicating continued corporate engagement with the Chinese market. Participation from some other countries, including Japan, was lower than in previous years.

China reported a trade surplus of about USD 1.2 trillion in 2025, contributing to ongoing trade frictions with partners. Officials did not announce major new policy measures during the forum but reiterated existing economic priorities.

The event also addressed supply chains, investment conditions and cooperation opportunities. Officials stated that China would continue to support innovation and maintain stable economic policies.

Some participants described the discussions as more formal and policy-driven compared with earlier forums. [Reuters] [Xinhua]

China: Tencent integrates AI agent into WeChat as competition intensifies in country's tech sector

(ms) China's Tencent has integrated the OpenClaw artificial intelligence agent into its WeChat platform, embedding AI functionality into one of the country's largest digital ecosystems.

The feature allows users to interact with the AI agent directly within chats, enabling tasks such as messaging, file handling and automated responses. The integration follows earlier releases of Tencent's own AI tools for consumers, developers and businesses.

WeChat has more than 1 billion monthly active users, making it a central platform for payments,

communication and services in China. Embedding AI into this system provides immediate large-scale distribution and may accelerate adoption of AI-based tools.

The move comes amid increasing competition among Chinese technology companies to commercialize AI agents. Alibaba and Baidu have recently launched similar systems aimed at integrating AI into enterprise software and consumer applications.

The development reflects a broader shift in China's technology sector toward integrating AI into existing platforms rather than deploying standalone applications. It also aligns with policy priorities promoting domestic innovation and reducing reliance on foreign technologies.

At the same time, regulators have raised concerns about data security and the risks associated with widespread AI deployment, indicating that further oversight may accompany continued expansion in the sector. [Ad-hoc News] [Reuters]

China: Digital yuan program expanded to more banks

(ms) China plans to expand its digital yuan program by allowing around a dozen additional banks to participate, according to sources familiar with the matter. The move would increase the number of authorized institutions from about 10 to more than 20.

The new participants are expected to include joint-stock and city commercial banks, broadening the reach of the central bank digital currency (CBDC) across China's financial system. The People's Bank of China has not officially confirmed the timeline for implementation.

China launched the digital yuan, or e-CNY, in 2019, but adoption has been gradual. Digital payments in China are already dominated by private platforms such as Alipay and WeChat Pay, limiting the immediate impact of the state-backed alternative.

Authorities have taken steps to increase usage, including making e-CNY holdings interest-bearing and expanding pilot programs. By late 2025, cumulative digital yuan transactions reached about CNY 16.7 trillion (approximately USD 2.4 trillion), still below total annual payment volumes. [Caixin Global] [Reuters]

China: Expanding seabed mapping effort highlights dual-use maritime strategy

(ms) China has significantly expanded its efforts to map the ocean floor across the Pacific, Indian and Arctic oceans, in a campaign that analysts say has both civilian and military applications.

According to ship-tracking data and research records, dozens of Chinese vessels have conducted extensive seabed surveys in strategically important waters, including areas near Taiwan, Guam and key maritime chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait. These missions are officially described as scientific research, including climate studies, resource exploration and fisheries mapping.

However, naval experts say the data collected has clear strategic value. Detailed information on underwater terrain, temperature, salinity and currents can improve submarine navigation, concealment and detection capabilities, making it relevant for potential undersea warfare scenarios.

The effort forms part of a broader push to develop what Chinese researchers have described as a "transparent ocean" — a network of sensors and mapping systems designed to monitor maritime environments in real time. The system has already been deployed in parts of the South China Sea and is expanding into wider ocean regions.

The scale of the program reflects China's growing focus on maritime capabilities and its reliance on sea lanes for trade and energy imports. Surveying activities have also concentrated on routes critical to global commerce and areas near U.S. and allied military facilities.

While Chinese authorities frame the initiative as scientific and economic, analysts say it underscores increasing competition over control and understanding of the undersea domain, which is becoming a key element of modern naval strategy. [Reuters]

China-Hong Kong: Court rejects appeals in 2019 legislature storming case

(ms) A Hong Kong court has dismissed appeals from seven individuals convicted over the storming of the Legislative Council (LegCo) building during the city's 2019 protests, upholding both their convictions and prison sentences.

The Court of Appeal ruled on March 18, that actor Gregory Wong and six others had actively participated in the unrest when protesters entered and occupied the legislature on July 1, 2019. The incident marked a major escalation in demonstrations triggered by a proposed extradition bill.

Judges said Wong knowingly entered the chamber despite being aware of the ongoing occupation and engaged with protesters inside, rejecting his argument that he had only been assisting journalists. The court found that his actions supported the riot and upheld his sentence of more than six years in prison.

Appeals by the other defendants, including activist Althea Suen, were also rejected. The court ruled that the original sentences—ranging from around four years to nearly seven years—were not excessive given the seriousness of the offense. [Hong Kong Free Press] [The Standard]

China-Macao: New national security law passed, expanding committee powers

(ms) Lawmakers in Macao have approved new legislation strengthening the role and authority of the city's Committee for Safeguarding National Security, formalising and expanding a body that had previously operated under administrative rules.

The law provides a clearer legal framework for the committee, which was established in 2018 and is chaired by the city's chief executive. It outlines the body's responsibilities, structure and decision-making powers, including authority to determine whether specific matters involve national security.

Under the legislation, the committee's decisions are binding and not subject to judicial review or appeal. The law also allows court proceedings to be conducted behind closed doors if authorities determine that public hearings could harm national security. Judges must refer such cases to the committee, which has the final say on whether restrictions apply.

The Macao government said the law is intended to improve coordination and effectiveness in safeguarding national security, particularly in light of what it described as a more complex international environment. Officials stated that the legislation supports economic stability and social order by strengthening institutional mechanisms.

The measure builds on Macao's existing national security framework. The city enacted its first national security law in 2009 and expanded it in 2023. Compared with Hong Kong, Macao has historically seen less political opposition and fewer large-scale protests, which has shaped a different implementation trajectory for security legislation.

In Hong Kong, national security laws introduced in 2020 and expanded in subsequent legislation have been applied more extensively, including in cases involving political activism, media and civil society. Macao's framework has developed more gradually, with fewer publicly reported cases, although recent changes indicate a move toward closer alignment in institutional design and enforcement tools.

The new law also expands the role of the committee in overseeing the implementation of national security policies aligned with the central government in Beijing. It facilitates coordination with national security advisers and reinforces the integration of central oversight with the region's governance structure.

Observers are raising concerns about the implications of closed-door trials and the limited scope for judicial review, noting potential effects on transparency and legal procedures. Others argue the changes are consistent with broader national security priorities across China's special administrative regions. [Associated Press] [China.org] [Hong Kong Free Press] [Reuters]

Japan: Japan Innovation Party pushes policy agenda to assert role in coalition

(lr) The centrist Japan Innovation Party (JIP), the junior coalition partner of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), approved its 2026 policy agenda at its first convention since entering government in October last year, seeking to reinforce its position after a weak Lower House election showing while the LDP won a landslide victory, securing a supermajority with 316 seats (see AiR No. 6, February/2026, 2).

Party leader Hirofumi Yoshimura outlined key priorities including cutting the number of lower house seats, advancing social security reform, and promoting administrative decentralization through "secondary capitals" and the Osaka metropolitan restructuring plan. The party is specifically pushing for a 10 percent reduction in parliamentary seats during the current

Diet session, framing itself as a driver of political reform beyond what the LDP could achieve alone.

Yoshimura also warned against the fate of past junior coalition partners that faded into irrelevance, urging the party to prioritize reform over political safety. Despite its modest parliamentary strength, he emphasized that the JIP seeks an "equal" partnership with the LDP. [The Japan Times]

Commenting in Yoshimura's statements, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi reaffirmed the LDP's commitment to implementing the coalition agreement. [Nippon.com]

Japan: Opposition bloc joins tax council amid fears of exclusion

(lr) Concerned about being sidelined, the main opposition alliance, comprising the Centrist Reform Alliance (Chudo)—a recently formed coalition of Lower House members of the center-left Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) and centrist Komeito—, as well as other members of CDP and Komeito agreed on March 18 to participate in cross-party sessions on Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's plan to cut the consumption tax on food and introduce refundable tax credits.

The move follows earlier reluctance from the opposition parties, who had initially refused to join the national social security council—set up by Takaichi in February in February—, arguing that the government, following Takaichi's snap election victory that secured her party a Lower House supermajority, had pushed budget deliberations through under tight schedules with limited room for opposition input. With other opposition groups already participating and an interim report on tax reforms expected by June, Chudo joined to avoid being sidelined.

These three leaders also discussed their strategies for the unified local election which will be held in spring 2027, agreeing to cooperate in order to maximize the total number of seats won. [The Asahii Shimbun]

Japan: Government moves to strengthen economic security, boost Global South engagement

(dql) Cabinet approved a revision to the economic security promotion law on March 19, aimed at bolstering national security through support for private-sector firms working on critical technologies, including seabed cable installation and satellite systems. The amendment, aligned with Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's push to increase strategic investment, is expected to be submitted to parliament during the current regular session.

The revision emphasizes expanding Japanese corporate presence in the Global South—Africa, Latin America, and Asia—through projects such as refueling hubs for cargo ships and satellite communications infrastructure. It will also facilitate access to financing via the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, encouraging firms to operate in areas typically avoided due to risk or low profitability.

The 2022 economic security law, originally designed to secure critical supply chains, protect infrastructure, foster advanced technologies, and prevent sensitive patent disclosures, will now explicitly include healthcare in the list of essential infrastructure. Enhanced public-private collaboration will aim to safeguard key facilities against cyberattacks, supported by a planned think tank to monitor advanced technology developments. [The Mainichi]

-

Japan: Navy restructures command to bolster remote island defense

(dql) The Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) has overhauled its command structure to streamline decision-making and enhance operational readiness, amid growing concerns over China's activities near Japan's southwestern islands.

The reform establishes a new Fleet Surface Force to centrally control surface vessels, replacing legacy structures such as the long-standing Fleet Escort Force and integrating mine warfare units. It also includes the creation of an Amphibious and Mine Warfare Group based in Sasebo, tasked with supporting joint operations with ground forces.

The new unit will work closely with the Ground Self-Defense Force's amphibious brigade in defending the Nansei island chain, a strategically sensitive area stretching toward Taiwan, including transporting troops and equipment. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Cabinet moves to tighten drone restrictions amid rising security risks

(dql) The Cabinet approved revisions to the Drone Act to significantly expand no-fly zones around sensitive facilities, widening restricted perimeters from roughly 300 meters to 1,000 meters as part of strengthened counterterrorism measures.

The proposed changes—prompted by rapid advances in drone capabilities, including higher speeds, longer range, and greater payload capacity—will extend protections to key sites such as the Imperial Palace and government buildings in central Tokyo, with temporary restrictions also applicable during high-profile events involving national leaders or foreign dignitaries.

Violations within these expanded “yellow zones” will carry immediate penalties, closing a previous enforcement gap that limited action to drones directly overhead. [Kyodo News]

Mongolia: Draft law to introduce voluntary private pension system submitted

(fs) The parliament received a draft law on private supplementary pensions from Minister of Family, Labour and Social Protection T. Aubakir on March 18, aiming to establish a multi-pillar pension system in the country.

The proposal responds to structural challenges in the current system, where pensions rely solely on the state social insurance fund and are often insufficient to cover future living costs. Demographic trends, including population ageing and longer retirement periods, are increasing fiscal pressure.

The draft law introduces a voluntary, contribution-based, fully funded private pension scheme to complement the public system and diversify retirement income sources. The legislation would set out governance, transparency, and investment rules for private pension funds, while defining the rights and obligations of participants, insurers, and state authorities. It also includes provisions on benefit payments, dispute resolution, and data management. [iToim, in Mongolian]

Mongolia: Central bank holds policy rate at 12 percent amid inflation risks

(fs) The Bank of Mongolia has decided to keep the policy rate unchanged at 12 percent, marking the fifth consecutive decision to maintain the benchmark rate. The central bank noted that its tight monetary policy over the past year has helped bring inflation closer to the target range.

However, persistent uncertainties were highlighted in both external and domestic environments as significant risks that could reignite inflation. Rising global oil prices, influenced by tensions in the Middle East, alongside elevated domestic prices for meat and vegetables, continue to drive inflationary pressures. The bank also warned of potential increases in fuel and food prices. In addition, a slowdown in China's economic growth could negatively affect commodity prices and Mongolia's export revenues.

While inflation remains subject to these risks, the central bank reaffirmed its target of maintaining inflation within a range of 5 percent, with a tolerance band of ±2 percentage points from 2027 onward. [Bloomberg TV]

North Korea: Kim Jong Un reappointed as head of state

(dql) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been reappointed as president of state affairs by the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), reaffirming his control over the country's top governing body and formal head-of-state role. State media framed the decision—made on March 22 at the first session of the 15th SPA—as reflecting unanimous public support, though external observers characterize the process as orchestrated and lacking genuine competition. [KCNA]

The SPA session follows the selection of hundreds of deputies in elections offering only single, pre-approved candidates, with near-total turnout and approval rates.

As the regime's legislature, the SPA is expected to formalize decisions taken by the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, including reviewing the current economic five-year plan and potentially revising the constitution. Particular attention is on whether Pyongyang will codify its "two hostile states" doctrine toward South Korea, reflecting Kim's shift away from long-standing reunification goals. [South China Morning Post]

Meanwhile, Kim announced plans to introduce a formal police system, marking a potential institutional shift in how public order is managed and possibly an effort to present a more conventional state structure. The proposal, unveiled at the second session of the SPA on March 23, is expected to be reviewed in future legislative proceedings.

Kim framed the move as part of broader efforts to strengthen legal and administrative systems, enhance internal security, and improve governance effectiveness. The plan includes transforming existing social security forces—currently under the Ministry of Social Security—into a more standardized police body.

Analysts interpret the initiative as an attempt to align North Korea's institutional framework more closely with international norms and soften its image as an insular, security-dominated state. Related adjustments, such as the reported renaming of the Ministry of State Security and changes to constitutional terminology, suggest a broader rebranding of state institutions. [The Korea Times]

North Korea: UN warns worsening human rights crisis underpins security threat

(dql) North Korea's worsening human rights conditions are drawing renewed scrutiny at the UN, with experts warning that these abuses are closely tied to the regime's military ambitions.

Elizabeth Salmón, the United Nations special rapporteur on North Korea, told the United Nations Human Rights Council that the country's human rights situation has stagnated or deteriorated over the past decade. Her report proposed new benchmarks to track Pyongyang's compliance with recommendations under the Universal Periodic Review (see AiR No. 11, March/2026, 3).

The findings highlight tighter internal controls since the pandemic, including reinforced borders, stricter travel permits, and "shoot-on-sight" orders for unauthorized crossings. Escapees face severe punishment, while only a small number of North Koreans successfully reached South Korea in 2025. The report also points to institutionalized forced labor, with authorities rejecting international calls for reform and formalizing state-directed labor assignments. [Human Rights Watch]

North Korea: Disputed new nuclear claim highlights broader weapons expansion

(dql/co) Debate has intensified over whether the northern city of Kusong hosts a covert uranium enrichment facility after South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-young publicly identified it—alongside Yongbyon and Kangson—as a key nuclear site. The claim marks the first such attribution by a senior official but remains unverified, with experts and even Seoul officials cautioning that available evidence is inconclusive.

While Chung cited remarks by Rafael Grossi, the International Atomic Energy Agency has not explicitly confirmed Kusong as an enrichment facility, continuing to focus primarily on Yongbyon. Existing assessments of Kusong largely trace back to a 2016 U.S. think tank report, with little new corroboration since.

Analysts suggest the renewed attention may reflect shifting interpretations of Pyongyang's nuclear posture rather than concrete new intelligence. Satellite imagery shows limited signs of activity consistent with an active enrichment site, raising doubts about the claim.

However, there is broad consensus that Kusong plays a significant and expanding role in North Korea's military-industrial complex. The region has been linked to missile launches, including the Hwasong-14, as well as ongoing drone development and possible mass production of unmanned systems, potentially informed by operational experience tied to Russia's war in Ukraine. [The Korea Herald]

North Korea: New main battle tank, enhanced combined-arms capabilities showcased

(dql) North Korea has showcased an upgraded main battle tank and integrated combined-arms tactics, underscoring its push to modernize ground warfare capabilities amid evolving battlefield technologies.

According to state media, leader Kim Jong-un oversaw a joint offensive drill involving infantry, armored units, drones, and anti-tank systems, centered on a newly developed tank equipped with an active protection system (APS). The system reportedly intercepted all incoming anti-tank missiles and drones during testing, highlighting a focus on survivability against increasingly drone- and missile-centric threats. [KCNA]

Kim described the platform as unmatched in firepower, mobility, and self-defense, and indicated plans for its widespread deployment across ground forces. He also stressed continued upgrades to keep pace with modern warfare and called for accelerated war-readiness across the military.

The exercise, conducted at a Pyongyang training facility, aimed to refine coordinated offensive operations, including breaching enemy anti-armor defenses using drones for reconnaissance and strikes, followed by mechanized assaults. The drill also demonstrated improved night-fighting capabilities, addressing a previously acknowledged weakness in North Korea's armored forces.

The tank is believed to build on the Chonma-20 model unveiled in 2025, suggesting incremental but targeted modernization. [Yonhap News Agency]

The presence of Kim's daughter at the event further signals her continued visibility in strategic military settings. [Reuters]

North Korea: Pyongyang plans formal police system in push for "normal" state image

(co) North Korea on March 24 said it plans to introduce a formal "police system," signaling a shift from its traditional socialist-style security apparatus toward structures resembling those of conventional states.

Leader Kim Jong Un unveiled the plan during a session of the newly-elected Supreme People's Assembly, emphasizing stronger legal and organizational frameworks for social control and public order management. Observers say the move may reflect an effort to project a more "normal state" image while consolidating governance under formal institutions.

North Korea has traditionally relied on a socialist-style public security system centered on the Ministry of Social Security, combining law enforcement with extensive social control and surveillance functions. These forces operate with limited independence, remain closely aligned with regime interests, and work alongside a powerful secret police apparatus.

Analysts also view the change, alongside other recent institutional renamings, as part of a broader push to systematize rule-based administration without reducing regime control. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: National Assembly passes prosecution reform bill

(co) South Korea's National Assembly on March 21 passed a sweeping reform bill that strips prosecutors of investigative powers and separates investigation from prosecution functions.

The legislation, backed by the ruling Democratic Party (DP), establishes a new agency for indictments, the Indictment Agency under the Ministry of Justice, while transferring investigations to a separate body, the Serious Crimes Investigation Agency under the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.

Prosecutors at the Indictment Agency will no longer have the authority to initiate or direct investigations or seek and execute warrants. They will be excluded from investigations until warrants are requested by the police or the Serious Crimes Investigation Agency.

The agencies will be launched in October this year. The bill was passed after a 24-hour filibuster by the main opposition People Power Party, whose lawmakers also boycotted the vote.

Supporters argue the reform curbs political abuse and strengthens democratic accountability by dispersing prosecutorial power. Critics, however, warn the overhaul could weaken institutional checks and make law enforcement more vulnerable to political influence. [CNA] [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Presidential office convenes meeting to advance shared-growth strategy in defense sector

(co) South Korea's presidential office on March 18 convened a meeting with major defense firms and government agencies to review strategies for co-growth in the defense industry.

Participants, including Hanwha Aerospace, Hyundai Rotem and LIG Nex1 among others, outlined plans to strengthen cooperation with SMEs, emphasizing joint R&D, financial support, shared best practices and supply chain resilience.

Major defense firms have also pledged significant investment in 2026 to strengthen smaller partners and boost technological competitiveness. A total of KRW

642.7 billion (USD 432 million) will be directed toward joint research and development, financial support, and assistance for overseas expansion. A substantial share of this funding will focus on localizing key defense components and reinforcing supply chain resilience.

The initiative forms part of the "co-growth strategy for large and small companies" announced in January to expand collaborative ecosystems into strategic sectors such as defense. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Lawmaker quits ruling party following sexual harassment allegations

(co) Lawmaker Jang Kyung-tae of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) on March 20 announced he will leave the party following sexual harassment allegations and a police panel's recommendation to refer the case to prosecutors.

He stated that he will cooperate with the investigation and seek to prove his innocence to avoid harming the party.

The allegations relate to an incident involving a female aide in 2023, as well as claims of secondary harm through the exposure of the victim's identity. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Officers challenge sanctions over 2024 martial law attempt

(co) Several South Korean military officers disciplined for their roles in former President Yoon Suk Yeol's failed 2024 martial law attempt have filed lawsuits and administrative appeals to overturn the sanctions.

At least seven senior officers—including former Defense Intelligence Commander Maj. Gen. Moon Sang-ho, ex-Drone Operations Command chief Maj. Gen. Kim Yong-dae, and former Army mobilization chief Maj. Gen. Jung Hak-seung—are seeking nullification of Defense Ministry disciplinary decisions.

The measures affected 37 personnel, though only Lt. Gen. Kwak Jong-geun, former Special Warfare Command chief, accepted the sanctions.

The legal actions add a new dimension to the ongoing political and institutional fallout from the aborted martial law declaration, highlighting tensions between

military accountability and judicial review. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Military honors awarded to officials linked to 1979 coup revoked

(co) The government on March 24 announced it has revoked military honors awarded to officials involved in the 1979 coup led by Chun Doo-hwan.

The decision, approved at a Cabinet meeting chaired by President Lee Jae Myung, cancels decorations granted to ten individuals for what were found to be fabricated or unjustified merits, followed a broader review of the Ministry of National Defense aimed at upholding constitutional values.

The 1979 South Korean coup d'état, led by then-Maj. Gen. Chun Doo-hwan, was a seizure of power that established a new military dictatorship, following President Park Chung-hee's assassination. Chun's military regime lasted until 1987. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Government considers measures to mitigate economic and household impact of Middle East crisis

(co) The government is considering a range of measures to mitigate the economic and household impacts of the ongoing Middle East crisis.

Amid growing concern over energy supply instability and sharply rising oil prices, the government is exploring options such as allowing the import of Russian crude oil—currently sanctioned following Moscow's 2022 invasion of Ukraine—as well as demand-side measures, including restrictions on motor vehicle use. [The Korea Herald 1] [Reuters]

On March 24, the government announced a mandatory five-day vehicle restriction system for the public sector, limiting driving based on the license plate number. Electric and hydrogen vehicles are exempt from such restrictions. [Yonhap News Agency]

On March 22, the government announced plans to draw up a supplementary budget worth KRW 25 trillion (USD 16.59 billion) to cushion the impact of the Middle East conflict. The package includes energy price support, assistance for vulnerable groups facing rising costs and measures to address challenges confronting

businesses. It will be financed using higher-than-expected tax revenues, without additional bond issuance. The administration aims to secure passage in the National Assembly by April 10. [The Korea Herald 2]

On March 18, Seoul raised its oil crisis alert from “attention” to “caution”, the second of four levels of its resource security alert system, indicating that supply disruptions have begun to materialize.

Additionally, South Korea secured an additional 18 million barrels of crude oil from the United Arab Emirates after Kang Hoon-sik, the presidential chief of staff, visited the country. In parallel, the government is expected to release strategic petroleum reserves in coordination with the International Energy Agency. [The Korea Times] [Xinhua]

Last week, Seoul also lifted capacity limits on coal-fired power plants and raised utilization rates of nuclear reactors to address potential energy shortages (see AiR No. 11, March/2026, 3).

In the latest development, President Lee Jae Myung on March 24 directed a government-wide emergency response to rising energy risks from the ongoing Middle East war, highlighting threats to crude oil, natural gas, and petrochemical supplies. Lee called for a supplementary budget to mitigate economic fallout, emphasizing it would be financed through projected excess tax revenue rather than new debt.

Lee framed the crisis as a national survival issue, urging public cooperation and highlighting the urgency of passing the supplementary budget quickly to strengthen its impact. He rejected opposition claims of political handouts, stressing government spending on citizens is the proper use of collected taxes. [The Korea Herald 3]

South Korea: Partial return of THAAD launchers to Seongju base

(dql) Two Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) launchers operated by US Forces Korea have reportedly returned to their original base in Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province, after temporary relocation to Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek. Local observers noted one launcher reentered Seongju on Friday, marking the second return this month following a similar move on March 12.

Six launchers were moved earlier amid speculation they might support US operations in the Middle East amid rising Iran tensions. The whereabouts of the remaining four launchers remain unclear.

South Korea's Seongju THAAD battery, deployed in 2017, is the country's sole high-altitude missile defense system, with a single battery comprising six launchers, a radar, and a fire control unit, totaling 48 interceptors capable of targeting missiles at 40–150 km altitudes. [The Korea Herald]

Taiwan: DPP narrows field for Taipei mayoral race, Cheng Li-chun emerges as frontrunner

(dql) The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Taipei Branch has reduced its shortlist for the Taipei mayoral election in November, with Vice Premier Cheng Li-chun emerging as the leading candidate. The party invited city councilors and lawmakers to help Secretary-General Hsu Kuo-yung finalize the list, which initially included Legislators Wu Szu-yao and Puma Shen, Taiwan Forward founder Enoch Wu, and Wang Shih-chien. Both Wu Szu-yao and Wang have declined to run.

Cheng's profile is strengthened by her role in the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade with the U.S.—she led Taiwan's delegation and trade talks—and the potential historic significance of becoming Taipei's first female mayor.

Party insiders say city councilors favor her, though uncertainties in Taiwan's tariff environment could influence her decision. No formal backup candidate has been agreed upon. Shen is considered a possible alternative but may be polarizing for independents.

While Enoch Wu maintains a bid, he received limited support during the branch meeting, though his name has been forwarded to President Lai Ching-te for consideration. [Taiwan News]

The Taipei mayoralty is one of Taiwan's most influential local posts and often serves as a barometer of national political strength for major parties, given Taipei's status as the capital and largest city.

Taiwan: Labor groups protest migrant worker pension policy

(yl) Labor groups protested outside the Ministry of Labor against a planned measure to expand migrant worker coverage under the older labor pension system, set to take effect on April 1.

Under the policy, employers must enroll blue-collar migrant workers who have remained with the same employer for more than 10 years into the legacy system, which requires contributions to a pooled retirement fund.

Labor groups argued the eligibility threshold would leave most migrant workers excluded, as many frequently change employers, and warned firms could terminate contracts before workers qualify. They instead called for inclusion in the newer pension system, which mandates employer contributions of at least 6 percent into individual accounts.

The Ministry of Labor maintained that migrant workers are entitled to benefits under the existing framework if requirements are met, while employer groups cautioned that broader inclusion in the newer system would raise household care costs. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Government eases rules on hiring migrant domestic helpers to support childcare

(acl) Taiwan will allow families with at least one child under the age of 12 to apply to hire migrant domestic helpers starting April 13 under a new policy aimed at easing childcare burdens. The measure was approved by the Cabinet on March 19.

The revised rules replace previous restrictions that limit eligibility to households with three children under the age of six, a threshold widely regarded as too strict. More than 1.44 million households could qualify under the new criteria.

Disadvantaged or special-needs families will receive priority review and pay a reduced monthly fee of USD 62. Qualifying cases include households with children with disabilities or rare diseases, as well as single-parent or disabled-parent families and larger households.

The labor ministry has also pledged support measures to help local babysitters and domestic service workers transition into these roles, including vocational training, employment incentives, and living subsidies.

Employers and labor brokers have welcomed the policy, saying it better aligns with caregiving needs and could help address Taiwan's low birth rate and labor shortages in the care sector.

However, labor and childcare advocates have raised concerns over worker protections, warning that the expanded eligibility could undermine the job stability of around 25,000 childcare workers and risk placing migrant domestic workers–who are not covered by the Labor Standards Act–in low-wage, long-hour employment conditions. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Taiwan News][Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan: President Lai signals openness to restarting nuclear plants amid energy security concerns

(acl) President Lai Ching-te signaled openness to restarting two decommissioned nuclear power plants to meet rising electricity demand driven by the AI sector and potential energy supply disruptions linked to the Middle East conflict. State-owned Taiwan Power Company (Taipower) is expected to submit a reactivation proposal to the Nuclear Safety Commission by the end of March. The move marks a shift from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP's) long-standing goal of a "nuclear-free homeland," achieved in 2025 when the Maanshan plant was shut down.

Speaking at a business event, Lai cited energy security concerns amid the Middle East conflict, warning that oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) supplies could become "slightly tight" in May before additional U.S. shipments arrive in June. Taiwan remains particularly reliant on Qatar, which accounted for 33.7 percent of its LNG imports in 2025.

Lai said recent amendments to the Nuclear Reactor Facilities Regulation Act require the government to allow operators to apply for 20-year license extensions, adding that the Ministry of Economic Affairs has determined the two plants meet the conditions for potential reactivation. Taipower is currently preparing its application for review.

While reaffirming Taiwan's commitment to expanding green energy, Lai said restarting nuclear facilities would not conflict with that goal, citing the need to safeguard energy supplies and support growth in the AI industry.

Opposition parties, the Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP), criticized the shift, calling for an apology over past anti-nuclear positions while acknowledging the necessity. [Focus Taiwan 1][Focus Taiwan 2] [Taiwan News 1] [Taiwan News 2]

AI-driven demand raises risk of energy crunch by early 2030s

Meanwhile, a new report by the Taiwan Research Institute warns that Taiwan could face an energy shortfall by 2032 as rapid growth in AI and high-tech industries drives electricity demand beyond current projections. Power consumption is rising steadily, particularly in semiconductor and electronics manufacturing, with indicators pointing to sustained expansion fueled by AI, 5G, and high-performance computing.

Taipower estimates that AI-related facilities alone could significantly boost consumption, with data centers potentially adding nearly nine billion kWh annually. Total electricity demand could reach 350 billion kWh by 2030—exceeding earlier official forecasts and tightening supply-demand balances.

Planned capacity additions, including new gas-fired plants, face implementation uncertainties, while coal-fired units remain politically constrained due to environmental concerns. This has revived debate over nuclear energy.

Despite recent regulatory changes allowing nuclear plants to extend operations, experts caution that restarts would take years, underscoring a potential supply gap during Lai's presidency. The issue is gaining urgency within the government, reflecting broader concerns that Taiwan's energy policy may struggle to keep pace with its strategic push into AI and advanced semiconductor production, a cornerstone of its economic and geopolitical positioning. [Taiwan News 3]

Taiwan: Defense minister defense Cabinet's special defense budget against opposition alternatives

(acl) At a March 23 legislative session, Defense Minister Wellington Koo told lawmakers that the Cabinet's proposed USD 39.6 billion special defense budget is the most comprehensive among competing plans, as it includes funding for long-term domestic weapons development.

Lawmakers debated proposals from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT), and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), with Koo urging support for the Cabinet's version. He emphasized that, unlike competing proposals focused primarily on financing U.S.-approved weapons systems, the Cabinet's plan also supports domestic development, including 200,000 unmanned aerial vehicles and more than 1,000 unmanned surface vehicles.

Both the KMT and TPP have criticized the domestic production component as fiscally irresponsible, arguing it should be funded through the annual general budget. Koo countered that such an approach would only meet the military's needs on a year-to-year basis and would not support long-term development, adding that a multi-year special defense budget would incentivize local manufacturers to establish production lines in Taiwan, strengthen investment, and help build a "non-red" supply chain.

The KMT and TPP proposals are valued at USD 11.9 billion and USD 12.5 billion, respectively, compared with the Cabinet's broader plan, which covers eight U.S-approved weapons systems, potential future U.S. arms sales, and the domestic procurement of drones and T-Dome multilayered air defense systems. Clause-by-clause reviews of each bill are scheduled later this week. [Focus Taiwan]

The debate comes after the Cabinet's special defense budget, approved and submitted in late November 2025, was repeatedly blocked by the opposition KMT and TPP, which have used their legislative majority since early December to prevent the bill from entering formal review.

Taiwan: First F-16V fighter jet delivery in September deemed feasible

(yl) Taiwan's defense minister said the first of 66 F-16V fighter jets purchased from the United States could be delivered as early as September, indicating that a third-quarter timeline is feasible.

The remarks were made during a legislative session, where the minister said the aircraft could be delivered in the third quarter of 2026 if testing proceeds smoothly. He added that 59 of the jets are currently on the assembly line in the United States.

The update follows a recent visit by Taiwanese defense officials to the F-16V assembly line in South Carolina,

where they were shown the first completed aircraft. According to the defense ministry, the jet will undergo a final acceptance flight in the United States before being delivered to Taiwan.

Taiwan had originally expected to receive the aircraft by the end of 2023, but the schedule was delayed due to supply chain disruptions and labor shortages. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Upgraded Sky Sword II missile to boost air combat capabilities

(dql) Taiwan's military plans to begin mass production of an upgraded Sky Sword II air-to-air missile in 2027, marking a significant step in enhancing the island's indigenous defense capabilities. The improved missile, developed by the National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology, features a new rail-launch system that allows the Indigenous Defense Fighter to carry up to four medium-range missiles instead of two, effectively doubling its payload.

The redesign replaces the older semi-recessed launch mechanism with wing-mounted rails that enable direct ignition upon launch, improving operational efficiency. Technical upgrades—including a refined rocket motor and reduced aerodynamic drag—extend the missile's range from about 60 km to up to 100 km, while improved resistance to electronic jamming enhances targeting reliability in contested environments. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Chinese coast guard vessel expelled from restricted waters near Dongsha Island

(acl) On March 19, Taiwan's Coast Guard expelled a Chinese Coast Guard vessel that had entered restricted waters near Taiwan-controlled Dongsha Island, also known as Pratas Island, in the South China Sea. The area is a disputed territory administered by Taiwan but claimed by China under its "nine-dash line."

According to the Coast Guard Administration (CGA), the vessel was first detected at 9:15am March 18 outside the restricted area and entered Taiwan's waters at around 9:40am, prompting a Kaohsiung patrol ship to intercept it and issue radio warnings ordering it to leave. The vessel exited the area at around 10:55am on March 19.

According to the Coast Guard Administration (CGA), since the beginning of the year, three Chinese Coast Guard vessels have entered restricted waters near Dongsha on four occasions. The vessels did not activate their automatic identification systems, a move that Taipei perceives as part of China's "gray-zone" tactics aimed at testing Taiwan's monitoring and response capabilities. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News]

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

Bangladesh: Gap widens between government assurances and on-the-ground fuel shortages during Eid

(lm) Bangladesh is facing mounting fuel supply pressures during the Eid al-Fitr period—officially observed on March 21—highlighting structural vulnerabilities in its energy system, a visible disconnect between official assurances and actual availability, and growing efforts by the government to secure external financing.

At a structural level, Bangladesh remains highly exposed to global shocks. The country depends on imports for approximately 95 percent of its energy needs, leaving it vulnerable to price spikes and supply disruptions linked to the ongoing Middle East war. Rising shipping costs, tighter global supply, and pressure on import financing have increased the risk of bottlenecks across the domestic distribution system.

On the ground, these pressures are already visible. Across Dhaka and multiple districts, petrol stations have reported empty stocks, limited deliveries, and long queues, with some areas experiencing near-total outages. A temporary two-day suspension of depot supply during Eid has further disrupted distribution, but industry representatives point to broader issues, including inconsistent allocations, logistical constraints, and rising security risks at filling stations. Petrol pump associations warn that continued shortages—combined with hoarding, resale, and pressure on staff—could force closures if conditions do not improve. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2] [Dhaka Tribune 3]

This stands in contrast to the government's position. Energy Minister Iqbal Hassan Mahmood Tuku recently stated that there is no structural fuel shortage, attributing current pressures to short-term disruptions and elevated holiday demand. Authorities emphasize that fuel imports have increased by around 5 percent year-on-year and have urged the public not to panic. [Dhaka Tribune 4]

At the same time, government actions suggest concern over underlying supply risks. Bangladesh is seeking more than USD 2 billion in external financing to secure fuel and liquefied natural gas imports, with negotiations underway with the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Authorities are also exploring diversification of supply sources to stabilize imports under tightening global conditions. [Reuters]

Bangladesh: Dispute over wide-ranging reform blueprint implementation continues

(lm) The dispute over how to implement the "July Charter" has continued following the formation of Bangladesh's 13th National Parliament, with opposition figures reiterating calls for the establishment of a Constitutional Reform Council. Nahid Islam, the opposition chief whip in parliament and leader of the student-led National Citizens Party (NCP), stated recently that there is no scope to reject the charter through constitutional means and warned that the opposition would intensify pressure inside and outside parliament after Eid if the council is not established. [Dhaka Tribune]

The "July Charter," developed after the 2024 uprising and endorsed in a February referendum held alongside the national elections, sets out proposals for

institutional and constitutional change, including measures requiring formal constitutional amendments. Its implementation order provides for the creation of a Constitutional Reform Council, a temporary body intended to prepare those amendments.

Under this arrangement, members of parliament were expected to assume a dual role as legislators and as members of the council. Opposition lawmakers, including those from Jamaat-e-Islami – the single-largest Islamist party and now the main opposition force - and the NCP, took an additional oath linked to the council. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Prime Minister Tarique Rahmen – which won the election in a landslide - did not, arguing that the constitution does not provide for such a body and that amendments must proceed through the established parliamentary process, which requires legislation to be introduced and passed by a two-thirds majority.

Opposition parties maintain that the referendum created a mandate for a structured reform process through the council before amendments are formally introduced, while the government has indicated that reforms should proceed through existing constitutional procedures. [Asia Times]

Bangladesh: Cabinet moves to convert budget ordinances into law amid absence of parliament

(lm) The cabinet has approved the conversion of two ordinances related to the FY 2024–25 supplementary budget and the FY 2025–26 national budget into formal law. [Dhaka Tribune]

The ordinances were originally issued in 2025 by the interim government, which governed Bangladesh following the ouster of the Awami League administration in August 2024 until the elections earlier this month—a period during which no functioning parliament was in place. Under Bangladesh's Constitution, the executive may issue ordinances under Article 93 when parliament is dissolved or not in session. In this case, constitutional provisions requiring parliamentary approval of the annual budget (Article 87) and supplementary expenditures (Article 91) could not be fulfilled, necessitating temporary executive measures to authorize public spending.

Bangladesh: Government outlines first-month reform measures across social, economic, and administrative sectors

(lm) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government has presented a set of reform measures implemented during its first 28 days in office under Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, the party's leader.

The measures include expanded welfare support—such as monthly transfers of BDT 2,500 (USD 20.5) to selected low-income households—and agricultural loan waivers affecting approximately 1.2 million small farmers. Additional steps target administrative practices, including the reduction of privileges for Members of Parliament, as well as adjustments to official working schedules and bureaucratic procedures.

Economic measures focus on stabilizing energy supply, facilitating foreign investment by easing repatriation rules, and supporting export-oriented industries with allocations of BDT 25 billion (USD 205 million). Further initiatives span education, healthcare, and public services, including large-scale recruitment of health workers and expanded digital and transport infrastructure. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: International rights groups call on government to address press freedom concerns

(lm) Nine international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, have urged the government of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman to take steps to protect press freedom and media independence.

In a joint letter, the organizations called on the government to publicly affirm its commitment to media freedom, release detained journalists, and review cases filed against journalists under cyber-related legislation, including the Digital Security Act and the Cyber Security Act, which regulate online content and related offenses. They also urged authorities to end practices such as surveillance, censorship, and internet shutdowns, and to implement recommendations from the Media Reform Commission, an 11-member body formed by the interim government in November 2024, which submitted a reform report in March proposing structural changes to the media sector.

The groups further called for prompt and impartial investigations into attacks on journalists and media outlets, including Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, two of Bangladesh's leading newspapers. The reference relates to coordinated mob attacks in December 2025, when the offices of both outlets in Dhaka were vandalized and set on fire during unrest following the death of a political figure, trapping journalists inside and forcing a temporary suspension of operations. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Cabinet approves accession to WTO investment facilitation agreement

(lm) The cabinet has approved Bangladesh's accession to the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement under the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The agreement is part of a plurilateral initiative—meaning not all WTO members participate—focused on streamlining administrative procedures related to foreign direct investment. It does not introduce obligations on market access or investor–state dispute settlement, which are often sensitive issues for developing economies. Instead, it emphasizes transparency in regulatory processes, simplification of licensing and approvals, and improved coordination across government agencies, including the creation of centralized investment-related information systems. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Country program framework with International Atomic Energy Agency for 2026–2032 signed

(lm) Bangladesh has signed its fifth Country Programme Framework (CPF) with the International Atomic Energy Agency for the period 2026–2032, establishing the basis for medium-term technical cooperation.

Under the new CPF, Bangladesh has identified seven priority areas: nuclear and radiation safety and security; energy; food and agriculture; human health; water and environment; nuclear knowledge management; and industrial applications of radiation technology. These sectors reflect areas where nuclear-related techniques are applied beyond energy production, including medical treatment, agricultural productivity, and environmental monitoring. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Justice sector digital blueprint launched to integrate courts and enforcement agencies

(lm) Bhutan has launched the Justice Sector Digital Blueprint 2026–2029, an initiative to digitally integrate the country's justice system under a "One Justice" framework.

The initiative links key institutions—including the police, prosecutors, courts, and oversight bodies such as the Anti-Corruption Commission—into a shared digital system. It introduces interoperable platforms enabling secure exchange of case data across agencies, with the aim of reducing duplication, improving coordination, and streamlining case handling from investigation to adjudication.

Implementation will proceed in phases, including system development, testing, and integration, with full operationalization targeted by mid-2029. The initiative is supported by the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Sovereign Bitcoin holdings decline sharply amid sustained sales and shift in strategy

(lm) Bhutan's state investment arm, Druk Holding & Investments, has significantly reduced its Bitcoin holdings through sustained sales in 2026, marking a shift from accumulation to gradual liquidation.

Since the beginning of the year, Bhutan has sold more than USD 110 million worth of Bitcoin, including a major transaction on March 17–18 involving approximately 973 BTC valued at around USD 72.3 million. These transfers were partly routed through institutional intermediaries, suggesting structured sales designed to limit market disruption rather than immediate open-market liquidation. Additional transfers earlier in March included transactions of around USD 11.8 million.

As a result, Bhutan's sovereign Bitcoin reserves have declined by roughly 65 percent from their peak. Holdings have fallen from about 13,000 BTC—valued at over USD 1.4 billion and previously equivalent to more than 40 percent of gross domestic product—to between approximately 4,400 and 5,400 BTC, currently

worth around USD 322 million to USD 374 million depending on valuation points.

The reduction follows a broader shift in strategy. Bhutan had begun mining Bitcoin in 2019 using surplus hydropower, enabling low-cost accumulation. However, blockchain data indicates that no significant inflows have been recorded for over a year, suggesting that mining activity has been reduced or possibly halted, although this has not been officially confirmed. Analysts attribute the change to declining mining profitability following the 2024 Bitcoin halving and competing domestic energy demands. [crypto.news 1] [crypto.news 2]

Bhutan: Banks offer higher interest rates to diaspora to attract foreign currency inflows

(lm) Financial institutions in Bhutan have introduced deposit schemes offering higher interest rates to Bhutanese living abroad, as part of efforts to increase foreign currency inflows and strengthen reserves. Domestic savings accounts typically offer around 4.5 percent annually, with fixed deposits ranging from about 6.5 to 9.1 percent depending on tenure. In comparison, remittance-linked products for Bhutanese abroad offer returns of up to 9–9.5 percent, with some banks providing an additional premium of 0.25 to 0.5 percent above standard fixed deposit rates. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Glacier loss accelerates, raising risks to water security and disaster exposure

(lm) New research indicates that glacier loss in Bhutan and the wider Himalayan region has accelerated significantly since 2000, with implications for water resources and disaster risk. The findings were presented alongside regional assessments by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, an intergovernmental organization focusing on the Hindu Kush Himalaya.

A study based on satellite data from 1976 to 2024 shows that 524 glaciers in the Bhutanese Himalayan region have disappeared since the mid-1970s. Total glacier area declined from approximately 2,297 square kilometers to 1,584 square kilometers, representing a loss of nearly one-third. The rate of shrinkage has also increased, rising from about 0.38 percent annually

before 1998 to around 0.95 percent per year thereafter.

Retreat is particularly pronounced in lake-terminating glaciers, contributing to the formation of new glacial lakes and increasing the risk of glacial lake outburst floods, a sudden release of water from glacier-fed lakes. The findings align with broader regional trends, where glacier mass loss across the Hindu Kush Himalaya has doubled since 2000. [Kuensel]

India: Lower House of Parliament revokes suspension of eight opposition lawmakers

(dql) The Lower House of Parliament on March 17 lifted the suspension of eight opposition MPs—seven from the Congress and one from the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—allowing their immediate return to the House. The MPs had been suspended on February 3 for "unruly behavior,", originally for the remainder of the Budget session, which is scheduled to conclude in early April. "

The MPs' 'unruly behavior,' refers to disruptive protests in the chamber during the early of the Budget session, including shouting slogans, entering the well of the House, displaying placards, and defying the Speaker's instructions, which repeatedly interrupted proceedings.

The reinstatement followed a broad understanding between the government and Opposition and was formalized through a voice vote after Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju moved the motion.

The move comes after days of disruption over issues including LPG supply concerns and demands for discussion on the Middle East situation, with the opposition making revocation a precondition for smooth proceedings. The government framed the decision as a measure to facilitate the passage of key financial business, including voting on demands for grants, while underlying political tensions continue. [The Hawk] [The Tribune]

India: Supreme Court urges comprehensive reforms to address overcrowded and under-resourced prisons

(dql) The Supreme Court has, on its own initiative, taken up the issue of inhumane conditions in prisons across the country, directing all states and Union Territories to submit updated data and action plans by May 18. [Deccan Chronicle]

The court highlighted chronic problems such as overcrowding, poor infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, and insufficient rehabilitation programs, and stressed the need to safeguard the welfare of children living with incarcerated mothers and ensure adequate staffing in correctional facilities.

India's prison system, managed largely by state governments under the Prisons Act, 1894, faces severe overcrowding—often exceeding 120 percent of capacity—and a high proportion of undertrial detainees due to trial delays. [Nextias]

India: Supreme Court to review Parsi women's loss of religious identity after interfaith marriage

(dql) The Supreme Court of India has agreed to examine a constitutional challenge to rules within Parsi personal law that can result in women losing their religious identity after marrying outside the faith, a practice alleged to be discriminatory on the basis of gender. [The Tribune]

The court will hear the petition, which raises broader questions over whether Parsi women should retain their faith and associated rights after inter-faith marriage, contrasting with the treatment of men in similar circumstances.

Parsi personal laws, governed in part by the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act of 1936, regulate marital and religious status within the Zoroastrian community and have historically drawn criticism for uneven treatment of women in matters such as religious identity and inheritance in inter-faith unions. [Deccan Herald]

India: Fuel exports reviewed to secure domestic supply amid Middle East tensions

(dql) India, the world's fourth-largest oil refiner, is reviewing its fuel export strategy to ensure adequate supply for domestic markets amid rising crude prices and disruptions stemming from the Iran conflict. The

petroleum ministry warned that export flows may be adjusted if necessary.

All oil and gas companies—including producers, refiners, importers, distributors, and pipeline operators—have been ordered to provide detailed data on exports, imports, inventories, and refining capacity to the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC). This data will allow targeted measures such as export restrictions or calibrated exports to maintain energy security.

India has not imposed a full ban on refined fuel exports but faces acute pressure to maintain supply, especially for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), as shipments from the Strait of Hormuz have largely stalled. The country sources over 90 percent of its oil and most of its LPG from overseas, primarily the Middle East, and has recently purchased Russian oil under US sanctions waivers.

Emergency steps include maximizing LPG production and prioritizing household supply over industrial use. [Reuters]

Russian oil set to regain top spot in India's import mix

Meanwhile, Russian crude is expected to reclaim its position as India's largest oil supplier in March, with imports rebounding sharply to an estimated 2–2.2 million barrels per day after a temporary dip in February.

The February decline—down to around 1 million bpd and significantly below mid-2024 peaks—reflected a combination of reduced intake by Indian refiners and broader geopolitical considerations, including efforts by New Delhi to secure an interim trade arrangement with Washington. This shift allowed Iraq to emerge as India's leading supplier, with imports reaching a two-year high, while Saudi Arabia also increased its share, pushing the Middle East's contribution to nearly 59 percent of India's total oil imports.

However, this reorientation proved short-lived. The escalation of conflict involving Iran and disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz prompted a renewed pivot toward Russian crude, which remains competitively priced and logistically viable. Indian officials indicated that reliance on Middle Eastern supplies has since declined amid the instability. [Reuters]

India: Government pushes corporate law reforms to ease compliance and decriminalize minor defaults

(dql) Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Corporate Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026 in parliament, proposing reforms to ease doing business, simplify compliance, and modernize corporate regulations. Key measures include allowing certain companies to undertake two share buybacks per year (up from one) with a minimum six-month gap and streamlining procedures for fast-track mergers and amalgamations where 75 percent of shareholders approve.

The bill also seeks to decriminalize certain defaults, replacing criminal penalties with civil ones, while expanding regulatory powers for the National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA) to address auditor misconduct. Additional proposals include easing compliance for Alternative Investment Funds structured as LLPs and clarifying that companies under liquidation cannot pursue mergers or compromising arrangements.

Experts note that the changes could provide companies with greater flexibility in capital management, improve corporate governance, and align India's corporate framework with global best practices, while also enhancing enforcement mechanisms for auditors and boards. [Reuters]

India's corporate law framework has historically treated many procedural and technical lapses—such as late filings, minor reporting errors, or compliance defaults—as criminal offenses, often exposing company directors and officers to imprisonment. This punitive approach, critics argued, created a culture of risk aversion, discouraged entrepreneurship, and complicated routine corporate operations.

India: Government launches credit guarantee scheme to stabilize microfinance sector

(dql) India has launched a INR 200 billion (USD 2.14 billion) credit guarantee scheme to shore up its struggling microfinance sector, aiming to restore lender confidence and revive credit flows to smaller institutions.

The program provides state-backed guarantees covering 70–80 percent of loans extended to

microfinance institutions (MFIs), with higher coverage for smaller players. It also imposes lending rate caps to ensure cheaper credit transmission, while requiring MFIs to pass on lower borrowing costs to end borrowers.

The move follows a sharp contraction in the sector, with outstanding loans falling from a peak of INR 4.3 trillion (USD 46.0 billion) in March 2024 to 3.14 trillion (USD 33.6 billion) by end-December, amid rising borrower stress, high interest rates and concerns over aggressive recovery practices flagged by the Reserve Bank of India.

Targeted quotas for small and medium MFIs, as well as limits on loan sizes and lender exposure, are designed to channel liquidity to more vulnerable institutions and prevent concentration risks. The scheme runs until end-June and mirrors a smaller facility introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Reuters] [Financial Express] [Business Today]

India: Parliament panel urges stronger legal protection for gig workers

(dql) An Indian parliamentary panel has called for tighter safeguards for gig workers, recommending mandatory registration on a national labor database and clearer obligations for digital platforms to contribute to their social security.

The Standing Committee on Labour proposed linking workers' engagement with platforms to registration on the government's e-Shram portal, ensuring continued access to benefits such as insurance and accident coverage even if they switch employers.

The panel highlighted that gig workers—widely employed in sectors such as ride-hailing, food delivery and logistics—have become integral to India's economy but largely remain outside formal labor protections. It also stressed the need for clearer legal definitions and enforceable social security provisions for platform-based work.

The recommendations come as earlier government efforts to extend social security coverage to gig workers through new labor codes have yet to be fully implemented. [Reuters]

India: Railways attract USD 942 million FDI and expand global exports

(dql) Indian Railways has attracted USD 942 million in FDI over the past 11 years and exported ₹26,000 crore of rolling stock and components in the last nine years, reflecting strong investor confidence and a growing global footprint. The sector manufactures nearly all rolling stock and critical components, supplying countries including the US, UK, Germany, France, Australia, and Sri Lanka.

The Railway Ministry has also signed MoUs with Switzerland, Germany, Russia, and Spain for technical cooperation in freight and passenger operations, high-speed rail, IT solutions, and asset maintenance. [The Tribune]

India: Army advances modernization and hybrid warfare capabilities

(dql) The Indian Army is actively enhancing its operational readiness and technological edge to address evolving threats on multiple fronts. Recent initiatives include strengthening hybrid warfare capabilities, integrating joint and multi-domain operations, and transforming legacy armored platforms into optionally manned autonomous systems, reflecting a broader push for modernization, indigenization, and networked battlefield readiness.

Hybrid warfare readiness

The Indian Army has affirmed its preparedness to confront hybrid warfare, combining conventional kinetic operations with non-kinetic domains such as cyber, electronic, information, and space-enabled warfare, according to the Standing Committee on Defence report tabled March 18.

On the kinetic front, the Army maintains high operational readiness along all active borders through training, field exercises, infrastructure upgrades, and modernization. New weapon systems, precision munitions, networked communications, surveillance platforms, and mobility assets have been inducted, and theatre-level exercises validate rapid mobilization and combined arms synergy.

For non-kinetic threats, capabilities in cyber defense, electronic warfare, counter-drone systems, spectrum management, and information operations have been strengthened. Dedicated cyber and electronic warfare units, secure networks, and integrated counter-drone grids are operational, while AI, data analytics, and indigenous R&D enhance situational awareness and decision-making.

Jointness and multi-domain operations are a major focus, with integration across the Indian Air Force, Indian Navy, and civil-military coordination, including unified battlefield command. Recent structural reforms in 2025 include the raising of Rudra Brigades, integrating infantry, armor, artillery, engineers, air defense, drones, and logistics, along with specialized units like Bhairav Battalions, Ashni Protons, and Shaktimaan Regiments designed for speed, precision, and technology-enabled warfare.

T-72 tanks to be converted into optionally manned autonomous combat vehicles

(dql) The Indian Army plans to transform its ageing T-72 main battle tanks (MBTs) into remotely controlled, optionally manned armored fighting vehicles to extend their operational relevance beyond 2030 and enhance capabilities for high-risk missions.

The initiative seeks to prolong the service life of around 2,400 T-72s—many domestically produced under license—by 15–20 years at lower cost than procuring new MBTs. It reflects India's broader push for indigenization and modernization of legacy armored platforms while preparing for next-generation, networked battlefield operations.

The upgraded T-72s will undertake tasks such as minefield entry, breaching, decoy operations, reconnaissance, and advance guard duties, aligning with the Army's adoption of MUM-T (Manned-Unmanned Teaming) concepts validated in 2025. These concepts integrate manned platforms with unmanned systems to improve situational awareness, firepower, and battlefield flexibility in digitized, fast-paced operations.

The project will involve industry partners developing two prototypes with autonomous kits that incorporate robotics, sensor fusion, automation, navigation, and control technologies. [The Tribune]

India: Armed forces, space agency expand telemedicine network for frontline troops

(dql) The Indian armed forces and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) agency have formalized a pact to extend satellite-based telemedicine services for personnel stationed in remote and high-altitude border areas.

Under the agreement, the space agency will add 53 new telemedicine nodes to the existing 20 across the

Army, Navy, and Air Force, with an emphasis on locations like the Siachen Glacier. The system uses satellite links, video conferencing, and diagnostic software to transmit medical data, enabling real-time consultations with specialists at super-specialty hospitals.

The initiative aims to overcome healthcare challenges posed by harsh terrain, winter conditions, and logistical isolation, ensuring frontline troops receive timely medical attention. The MoU also outlines maintenance of existing infrastructure and development of next-generation telemedicine capabilities. [The Tribune]

India: Navy to commission new stealth warship

(dql) The Indian Navy will commission INS Taragiri on April 3, the fourth vessel in the seven-ship Nilgiri-class stealth frigate series, built using modular 'integrated construction' to accelerate shipbuilding.

Constructed by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL), Mumbai, the frigate features a sleeker hull, 75 percent indigenous content, and advanced systems including supersonic surface-to-surface missiles, medium-range surface-to-air missiles, and land-attack BrahMos missiles, along with anti-submarine and underwater warfare capabilities.

The 6,700-ton frigate uses a Combined Diesel or Gas (CODOG) propulsion system, with AI-driven planning and modular blocks reducing construction time from eight–nine years to around six. The remaining Nilgiri-class ships—Dunagiri, Vindhyagiri, and Mahendragiri—are under construction and expected to be delivered this year. [The Tribune]

The commissioning of INS Taragiri is seen as marking a significant generational leap in Indian naval capabilities, reflecting advances in indigenous shipbuilding, stealth design, and integrated construction technologies, and strengthening India's maritime security posture in the Indian Ocean region. [The Public World] [Organiser]

India: Central government extends special security powers in Nagaland amid ongoing unrest

(dql) The government has designated nine districts of the northeastern state of Nagaland as “disturbed areas” under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), 1958, for six months, effective April 1. This declaration follows the expiry of a previous six-month AFSPA order in September 2025 and reflects the government’s assessment of continuing law-and-order challenges.

AFSPA grants security forces broad authority to operate in areas affected by insurgency or civil unrest, aiming to restore stability. [The Tribune]

Nagaland has experienced armed insurgency since the 1950s, driven primarily by demands from Naga nationalist groups for greater autonomy or independence from India. Over the decades, the insurgency has led to intermittent clashes between militants and Indian security forces, occasional civilian violence, and periods of political instability.

Recent years have seen peace talks and ceasefire agreements with major insurgent groups, but sporadic incidents of violence and local unrest persist, particularly in border and remote districts.

India: Police arrest additional suspects in Pakistan-linked espionage network

(dql) Delhi police have detained three more alleged members of a spying network linked to Pakistan, including a woman and a juvenile, bringing the total arrests in the case to 18, six of whom are minors. The group is accused of collecting and transmitting sensitive information on security installations, police facilities, and railway stations in Delhi and other states to a Pakistan-based handler via parcels and digital platforms, including WhatsApp.

The operation was led in India, where members were recruited and paid for information while funds came from Pakistan through local money transfer channels to avoid detection. [The Tribune]

Separately, police of the northern state of Rajasthan, in coordination with Air Force Intelligence, have arrested Sumit Kumar, a civilian employee at Air Force Station Chabua in Assam, for allegedly passing sensitive military information to Pakistani handlers. The investigation traces back to January 2026, following the earlier detention of Jhabara Ram in Jaisalmer, which exposed links to a broader espionage network operating across India.

Kumar reportedly shared confidential details about Air Force installations, fighter aircraft, missile systems, and personnel via social media in exchange for payments. He also allegedly helped create accounts for Pakistani handlers using mobile numbers in his name. [India Today]

India: Militants attack Assam Police commando camp in Tinsukia ahead of state elections

(dql) Four Assam Police personnel were wounded when a militant group launched a pre-dawn assault on a commando camp in Tinsukia district on March 22. The attackers fired multiple rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), five of which detonated, prompting security forces to return fire. The suspected seven-member team retreated across the Arunachal Pradesh border. All injured personnel are in stable condition at Assam Medical College and Hospital in Dibrugarh.

The United Liberation Front of Asom—Independent (ULFA-I), a banned separatist insurgent group in India's northeastern state of Assam—claimed responsibility, describing the operation as a retaliatory move for past police crackdowns and alleged drone strikes by the Indian Army. ULFA-I also warned against further actions targeting its members, signaling a renewed flare-up after a relative lull since 2021.

The attack occurred just weeks before the Assam Assembly elections on April 9, raising concerns over security in the northeast. [The Tribune]

Founded in 1979, ULFA-I seeks to establish an independent Assamese state. The group has been involved in armed insurgency, bombings, extortion, and attacks on security forces, often operating along the India–Myanmar border. ULFA-I represents the hardline faction of the original ULFA, rejecting peace talks with the Indian government, while another faction has engaged in negotiations and political processes.

Maldives: Fuel shock strains economy as government expands subsidies and stabilizes supply

(lm) The Maldives is facing a broad energy and cost shock linked to rising global oil prices amid the ongoing Middle East war, exposing structural dependence on

imported fuel while prompting a mix of fiscal adjustments, targeted subsidies, and supply stabilization measures.

The price increase is transmitting across the economy. Higher bulk fuel costs have raised freight charges between Malé, the capital, and outer islands, with cargo operators adding surcharges and reducing service frequency. Passenger transport costs on longer routes have in some cases exceeded MVR 1,600 (USD 104), while broader supply chain pressures are expected to increase retail prices in the atolls, which depend heavily on maritime logistics. Structural vulnerabilities have also become more visible, as essential infrastructure—including water production—relies on diesel, raising concerns over contingency planning and reserve adequacy. Rising aviation fuel costs may also push up domestic airfares. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2] [The Sun 3] [The Sun 4]

At the macroeconomic level, authorities have indicated that project timelines may be extended and spending adjusted, while additional external financing is being pursued to meet foreign currency needs and upcoming debt obligations, including USD 500 million due in April and around USD 1 billion over the year. The government estimates that a one-month continuation of the crisis could cost between MVR 85 million and MVR 90 million (USD 5.5 million–USD 5.9 million). [The Sun 5]

Despite these pressures, the government has emphasized supply continuity. New fuel shipments have been secured, with reserves sufficient until mid-April and additional deliveries scheduled. The State Trading Organization (STO)—the state-owned enterprise responsible for fuel and essential imports—continues to manage procurement while absorbing part of the cost increases through reduced margins and subsidies. Authorities have stated that fuel, gas, and food supplies remain available and that no further fuel price increases are planned following recent domestic adjustments of approximately 18 to 26 percent. [The Sun 6] [The Sun 7] [The Sun 8]

Targeted support measures have been expanded to cushion key sectors. On March 23, the government extended subsidized diesel—previously limited to skipjack tuna fishing vessels—to include yellowfin tuna fishing operations, in response to rising operating costs in the fisheries sector. At the same time, certain groups, including public transport providers and fishermen under existing programs, remain exempt from broader fuel price increases, while private businesses face higher costs. [The Sun 9] [The Sun 10]

Supply conditions for essential household energy have also improved. STO confirmed that a new shipment of liquefied petroleum gas has stabilized availability, allowing the resumption of standard 10kg cooking gas cylinder sales after weeks of rationing caused by delayed imports linked to global disruptions. Distribution has now returned to normal in both Malé and the atolls. [The Sun 11]

The economic impact is unfolding alongside intensifying political tensions. The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has accused the government of prioritizing a controversial constitutional referendum over addressing the cost-of-living crisis, arguing that the administration has failed to provide transparency or implement effective mitigation measures. [The Sun 12]

Maldives: Referendum on merging elections faces legal challenge as broader constitutional reform plans emerge

(lm) The Maldives is preparing for an April 4 referendum—held alongside local council elections—on a constitutional amendment to merge presidential and parliamentary elections, as legal challenges and political divisions intensify.

The underlying reform, passed by Parliament on February 10 by the ruling People's National Congress (PNC)—President Mohamed Muizzu's party, which holds a supermajority in the unicameral legislature—would replace the current system, under which presidential and parliamentary elections are held separately within a five-year cycle, with a single combined vote starting in 2028. To enable synchronization, the reform would also shift the start of the parliamentary term from May to December 1, shortening the current parliament's term by approximately six months.

On February 16, President Muizzu decreed that a public referendum—required under the Constitution for such amendments—would be held on April 4, the same day as local council elections. Since then, the proposal has become a central point of political contestation. The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has called for international scrutiny, arguing that synchronizing elections would weaken democratic accountability by removing mid-term electoral checks. [The Sun 1]

By contrast, the government and aligned parties—including the Adhaalath Party (an Islamic-oriented

political party)—have endorsed the reform, citing administrative efficiency and projected cost savings of approximately MVR 60 million (USD 3.9 million). [The Sun 2] [The Sun 3]

These positions are set against the backdrop of ongoing legal challenges. Most significantly, the Supreme Court on March 23 accepted one of two petitions seeking to halt the referendum, arguing that the question set out in the presidential decree is unconstitutional. Petitioners contend that voters are being asked to approve the ratification of an already-passed amendment rather than to consent to the amendment itself. A separate case challenges the amendment on procedural grounds, while the MDP has also attempted to block the referendum through the Civil Court, though without success so far. [The Sun 4]

At the same time, the government is considering additional constitutional reforms to the structure of parliament. President Muizzu stated on March 23 that the current representation formula—allocating one member of parliament per 5,000 residents, with minimum thresholds per administrative division—could increase the number of seats beyond 100 as the population grows. The administration is therefore preparing a proposal to cap the total number of seats, with earlier indications suggesting a ceiling of 93 members. In parallel, authorities are assessing the introduction of quotas for women and for youth under the age of 30. While gender quotas already exist at the local council level, such mechanisms have not previously been applied to the national parliament, and no youth quota currently exists.

A separate parliamentary initiative to cap the number of seats, introduced in June 2024 by a lawmaker from the ruling PNC, remains under review in a parliamentary committee. [The Sun 5]

Maldives: State-owned port operator appoints deputy CEO despite past corruption allegations

(lm) Maldives Ports Limited (MPL), the state-owned port operator, has appointed former Maldives Transport and Contracting Company (MTCC) chief executive Ibrahim Ziyath as Deputy CEO and Board Member, marking his return to a senior public sector role.

Ziyath previously led MTCC under the administration of former President Abdulla Yameen. His appointment

has drawn attention due to past corruption allegations related to the recruitment of foreign workers during his tenure. In 2021, the Anti-Corruption Commission referred the case to the Prosecutor General's Office seeking charges, though no outcome has been publicly confirmed. [The Sun]

Maldives: Government plans new visas to extend tourist stays amid decline in arrivals

(lm) The Maldivian government is preparing to introduce two new visa categories to extend tourist stays as arrivals decline—by a reported 21 percent since early March—due to disruptions to Middle Eastern air corridors linked to the ongoing war. On March 22, authorities confirmed plans to ease extensions of the current 30-day visa-on-arrival and introduce remote working and content creator visas.

In parallel, the government is advancing diversification efforts, including new tourism segments such as sports fishing, diving, halal tourism, chartered superyachts, and research-based travel, to stabilize demand and reduce external vulnerabilities. [The Sun]

Maldives: Opposition-led local council alleges political interference in cancellation of Eid fireworks

(lm) The Addu City Council has accused the Maldives National Defense Force's Sifainge Cooperative, a military-affiliated commercial entity, of politically motivated interference following the last-minute cancellation of a planned Eid al-Fitr fireworks display on March 21, 2026. Addu City, located in the southernmost atoll of the Maldives and the country's second-largest urban center, had organized the event as part of local celebrations.

The council stated that the service had been paid for in advance and that preparations had already been completed, arguing that the cancellation—officially attributed to technical issues—was intended to discredit the administration, which is led by the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party. [The Sun]

Maldives: Government prepares legislation to enforce death penalty

(lm) The Maldivian government is finalizing legislation to establish a legal framework for enforcing the death penalty, signaling a potential shift from the country's long-standing moratorium. On March 23, authorities confirmed that the Attorney General's Office is close to completing the draft, which is expected to be submitted to parliament during the current session.

The initiative follows several death row convictions upheld through the full judicial process, including at the Supreme Court level, with officials emphasizing that a dedicated legal basis is required before implementation.

The Maldives has maintained a de facto moratorium on capital punishment since 1954, though efforts to reinstate it have resurfaced in recent years, including under the current administration since 2023 [The Sun]

Maldives: Supreme Court restricts access to child abuse interview evidence

(lm) The Supreme Court of the Maldives has ruled that video interviews of children in sexual abuse investigations cannot be accessed by defense lawyers outside court premises, requiring that such material remain under court custody and be reviewed only under controlled conditions within the court.

The decision overturns earlier rulings by a lower court and the High Court that had allowed broader access for evidentiary review, following an appeal by the prosecution.

The judgment is based on the Child Rights Protection Act, which obliges all state institutions, including courts, to safeguard children's rights, and aligns with existing prosecutorial practice limiting access to sensitive material involving minors. [The Sun]

Maldives: State-owned fisheries company signs MoUs with Chinese firm

(lm) The Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company, the state-owned fisheries enterprise, has signed three Memorandums of Understanding with China Machinery Engineering Corporation, a Chinese state-owned engineering firm, to expand chilled-fish processing and export capacity alongside upgrades to cold-storage infrastructure.

Announced on March 21, the initiative centers on a new processing and export facility at the Addu Fisheries Complex to increase procurement and storage capacity. The agreements also include cold-storage and blast-freezing facilities in Thaa Hirilandhoo and Gaafu Dhaalu Thinadhoo, aimed at improving handling and export operations. [The Sun]

Nepal: Anti-establishment party prepares government formation while advancing recall mechanisms

(lm) Nepal's Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), founded in 2022 as an anti-establishment alternative to established political parties, is preparing to form a new government following its landslide victory in the March 5 parliamentary election, securing 182 of 275 seats in the House of Representatives. The party's impressive rise has been driven by public dissatisfaction with traditional forces and was further accelerated by a protest anti-establishment movement in September 2025 that mobilized younger voters.

The party has scheduled a central committee meeting for March 26 to finalize its parliamentary leadership, with senior figure Balendra Shah—a former mayor of Kathmandu—expected to be formally elected parliamentary party leader and subsequently sworn in as prime minister on March 27. Under Nepal's constitutional system, the parliamentary party leader of the majority party is appointed prime minister by the president. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

As government formation approaches, the party is engaged in internal negotiations to finalize the composition of the Cabinet and key parliamentary positions. These discussions reflect a dual leadership structure, in which Rabi Lamichhane, the party president and its principal organizational leader, retains control over the party apparatus, while Shah is set to lead the government. The party has stated that the Cabinet will be limited to a maximum of 18 members, below the constitutional ceiling of 25.

Howevever, differences have reportedly emerged over key ministerial appointments, including the Home Ministry, the ministry responsible for internal security, policing, and district administration. Lamichhane – himself a former home minister - is said to support Dol Prasad Aryal, the party's vice-president and a senior leader, while Shah favors Sunil Lamsal, a close associate from his time at Kathmandu Metropolitan City. At the same time, discussions also cover positions

such as Speaker of the House of Representatives as well as party leadership roles within parliament. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

At the same time, the RSP is moving to operationalize internal accountability mechanisms, including a "right to recall" provision in its statute that allows the removal of members of parliament (MPs) for poor performance or actions contrary to party interests. The mechanism differs depending on the electoral system: proportional representation (PR) MPs can be replaced directly by the party's central committee using pre-submitted candidate lists, while recalling first-past-the-post (FPTP) MPs would require support from party members in the constituency and would likely trigger by-elections.

Nepal's current legal framework does not provide for the recall of elected MPs, creating institutional constraints on implementation. Legal experts note that while PR-based replacement is feasible within existing rules, removing directly elected MPs is significantly more complex and politically sensitive due to the requirement for by-elections and associated costs.

The party leadership has emphasized discipline during the transition, instructing lawmakers to avoid public lobbying for positions and warning against factionalism. Lawmakers have also been directed to prioritize legislative work and constituency engagement, reflecting the party's broader positioning around institutional reform, governance performance, and internal accountability. [The Kathmandu Post 3] [The Kathmandu Post 4] [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: Nepali Congress rejects leader's resignation as internal divisions deepen after election setback

(lm) The Nepali Congress, one of Nepal's main centrist parties and the second-largest party in the new parliament, has rejected the resignation of its president Gagan Kumar Thapa, the party leader who led Congress into the March election, following one of the weakest performances in the party's history.

Thapa stepped down on March 19 after the party secured 38 seats in the 275-member House of Representatives, Nepal's lower house of parliament responsible for forming the government, and after he lost his own constituency. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

However, the party's Central Working Committee, its top internal decision-making body, formally rejected

his resignation days later, concluding that responsibility for the defeat should be borne collectively. A review attributed the defeat to public dissatisfaction with political instability, repeated changes in government, inconsistent alliances, and limited campaign preparation after the leadership transition in January. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

The Central Working Committee meeting, which concluded on March 22, also endorsed the party's 15th general convention as its next major organizational priority, although no date has yet been set. The convention is required under party rules following the special convention held in January that installed the current leadership and obliges the party to convene a regular congress within one year.

At the same time, internal divisions remain unresolved. A rival faction led by Sher Bahadur Deuba, a former prime minister and former party president, together with Shekhar Koirala, a senior party leader aligned with the group, has rejected the leadership structure created by the January convention. The faction has challenged the legitimacy of the current Central Working Committee in the Supreme Court, with a hearing scheduled for April 5, and plans to field its own candidate for parliamentary party leader, the position that leads the party within parliament. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Nepal: Election observers report largely peaceful polls but highlight voter education gaps and misuse of children in campaigning

(lm) Assessments of Nepal's March 5 parliamentary election indicate that the vote was largely peaceful, orderly, and broadly free and fair, but identified shortcomings in voter education, accessibility, and compliance with electoral rules, including the continued use of minors in campaign activities.

A joint observation by ten civil society organizations found that the election was conducted in a stable environment despite low turnout, but identified weak voter education, errors in voter rolls, misinformation on social media, and limited accessibility for elderly voters and persons with disabilities. Procedural issues were also noted, including restricted observer access in some polling stations and instances of zero voting in certain locations. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Separately, monitoring by Children as Zones of Peace Nepal, a child rights organization, documented over 300 cases of children being used in election-related activities, including rallies, campaign promotion, and digital content, in violation of the election code of conduct. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Anti-establishment party's landslide victory reduces pressure for electoral reform debate

(lm) Nepal's mixed electoral system has come under reduced scrutiny following the March 5 general election, in which the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) secured a clear parliamentary majority, challenging earlier arguments that the system structurally produces fragmented outcomes.

Nepal uses a mixed system combining first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR), with 60 percent of lawmakers elected through constituency races and 40 percent through party lists. Prior to the election, political actors had debated revising the system on the grounds that it had consistently resulted in hung parliaments.

The RSP's performance—securing a majority in the 275-member House of Representatives and approaching a two-thirds majority—has shifted this debate. The result indicates that a single party can achieve a governing mandate under the current system, reducing immediate political momentum for structural reform.

Views remain divided. Some political figures argue the outcome reflects exceptional conditions, including voter dissatisfaction with established parties and mobilization following protests in September 2025, and caution against drawing systemic conclusions from a single election. Others maintain that earlier fragmented outcomes were primarily driven by weak candidate selection, unclear policy platforms, and coalition strategies among traditional parties, rather than flaws in the electoral framework itself.

At the same time, limited reform discussions continue, particularly regarding the proportional representation component. Concerns focus on the degree of internal party control over candidate selection and whether current practices fully reflect principles of inclusivity and representation.

Historically, elections held under the mixed system since 2008 have produced coalition governments or

fragmented mandates, including in 2013, 2017, and 2022. The 2026 outcome therefore represents a departure from previous electoral patterns and has, at least temporarily, reduced pressure for immediate electoral system reform. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Presidential review of nomination to upper house continues

(lm) The Office of the President has stated that the interim government's recommendation to appoint Om Prakash Aryal to the National Assembly, the upper house of parliament, remains under consideration in line with constitutional provisions and a pending court petition. The clarification follows media reports alleging delays linked to internal disagreements, which have been rejected by the President's Office.

The recommendation was submitted by the Cabinet on March 15 to fill a vacant seat in the 59-member National Assembly. Under Nepal's constitution, three members of the upper house are nominated by the President on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers, the executive body led by the prime minister. The seat became vacant following the expiry of the six-year term of the previous member. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Human rights commission report implicates ex-prime minister, officials over September 2025 protest crackdown

(lm) Nepal's National Human Rights Commission has implicated former prime minister KP Sharma Oli, former home minister Ramesh Lekhak, and multiple security officials over human rights violations during the "Gen Z" protests of September 8–9, 2025. The protests, triggered by a government ban on social media and broader anti-corruption grievances, escalated into nationwide unrest, leaving more than 70 people dead and over 2,000 injured, and forcing the resignation of the Oli-led government and dissolution of Parliament's lower house.

The commission concluded that the government failed to anticipate the scale of the protests and that the use of lethal force against initially peaceful demonstrators contributed to the escalation of violence. It recommended legal action against several officials, including then police chief Chandra Kuber Khapung,

and called for an investigation into current police chief Dan Bahadur Karki. [The Kathmandu Post]

In parallel, a separate government-appointed inquiry commission led by former judge Gauri Bahadur Karki was established in September 2025 under the interim government to investigate both state actions and protest-related violence. This panel submitted its report to the interim authorities in March of this year, but it has not yet been made public.

Nepal: Conflict victims call for credible transitional justice and reform of commissions

(lm) Conflict victims in Nepal have called on the incoming government and newly elected parliament to ensure a credible and victim-centered transitional justice process, nearly two decades after the end of the country's decade-long Maoist insurgency (1996–2006).

At an event in Kathmandu on March 23 marking the International Day for the Right to the Truth, a network representing victims urged authorities to amend the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, 2014 in line with Supreme Court rulings and international standards.

The group called for the dissolution of existing transitional justice bodies—the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons—arguing that past commissions were formed through opaque political bargaining and lacked independence. It instead demanded new, transparent, and victim-centered commissions selected through open processes.

Victims also called for comprehensive reparation programs, legal action against perpetrators, and stronger accountability mechanisms, citing continued impunity within state institutions. They pointed to unfulfilled commitments under the Comprehensive Peace Accord of November 21, 2006, which required disclosure of the fate of those killed or disappeared during the conflict, noting that investigations remain incomplete and commission reports largely unimplemented.

A petition filed by 334 victims from 67 districts challenging past commission appointments is currently under review by the Supreme Court.

The platform further called for vetting rules to bar individuals accused or convicted of serious human rights violations, corruption, or criminal offenses from holding public office, and urged broader support from state institutions, civil society, and international actors. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Migration patterns shift following political transition and Gulf instability

(lm) Recent developments indicate a potential shift in migration dynamics in Nepal, with changing domestic sentiment among youth following the March 5 parliamentary election and growing return requests from Nepali workers in the Gulf linked to the ongoing war in the Middle East.

Following the election, which saw the rise of the Rastriya Swatantra Party and the expected leadership of ex-Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah, some young Nepalis are reconsidering plans to study or work abroad. Social media trends and anecdotal reporting suggest a cautious increase in optimism about domestic opportunities. This coincides with a decline in outward student mobility, with 22,080 students leaving Nepal on study visas in the first three months of 2026, compared to 28,810 in the same period in 2025. However, officials note that this change cannot be directly attributed to political developments alone. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In parallel, external pressures are affecting migration patterns. According to Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, around 6,000 Nepalis working in Gulf countries have requested assistance to return home out of 82,100 who registered on a government platform established to monitor citizens amid the intensifying war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. Approximately 3 million Nepalis are estimated to work in the region. Authorities have reported injuries and detentions, including arrests related to sharing conflict-related content online, and have temporarily suspended the issuance of new labor permits to Gulf destinations while preparing for potential evacuation measures. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

These developments may indicate an early shift in migration sentiment and short-term mobility patterns, although it remains unclear whether they will translate into sustained structural change.

Nepal: Prohibitory order imposed after Eid-related communal clashes leave injuries

(lm) Authorities in Kapilvastu district—a southern border district in Lumbini Province bordering India—imposed and subsequently lifted a prohibitory order following communal clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities during the Eid festival. The violence began on March 21, reportedly triggered by a dispute over religious practices involving the playing of hymns at a temple near a mosque during prayers. The situation escalated into stone-pelting and wider unrest, leaving at least 23 people injured, including civilians and security personnel. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Pakistan: Detained ex-prime minister undergoes eye treatment as authorities allow Eid contact with family

(lm) Former prime minister Imran Khan, leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), underwent a third eye procedure at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), a major government hospital in Islamabad, on March 23, with officials stating he remained in stable condition before, during, and after the treatment.

The procedure involved an intravitreal Anti-VEGF injection, a standard therapy for retinal vein occlusion—a condition caused by blocked veins in the retina that can lead to vision loss. Khan, 74, has received multiple such injections in recent weeks, with concerns over his eyesight previously raised in court. On March 12, a high court ordered the formation of a medical board of government doctors to assess his condition and determine whether further hospitalization is required.

Khan has been in detention since August 2023 at a prison in Rawalpindi, following multiple convictions and ongoing legal proceedings. Authorities state that these cases are being handled in accordance with the law, while PTI describes them as politically motivated efforts to sideline him. His detention continues to be a central point of political tension, with repeated protests by supporters.

In parallel, the government confirmed that Khan would be allowed to speak with his sons, who are based in the United Kingdom, during the Eid al-Fitr holiday. The announcement followed a public request by his former spouse, who also raised concerns about his health and

delays in visa processing for family visits. Authorities clarified that any in-person visits would remain subject to applicable legal and administrative procedures. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Khan was removed from office in April 2022 through a parliamentary vote of no confidence, which he has described as politically orchestrated, an allegation denied by the government and the military.

Pakistan: Authorities disrupt human smuggling operation in Karachi, four suspects arrested

(lm) Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) announced on March 17 that it had disrupted a human smuggling operation in Karachi and arrested four suspects. According to the FIA, the operation targeted a network attempting to send 33 women from Punjab province to the United Arab Emirates using visit visas. The agency stated that the individuals were allegedly being trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Eid travel surge collides with energy shock and rising cost pressures amid Middle East war

(lm) Pakistan is facing a broad energy and cost-of-living shock driven by the ongoing Middle East war, with rising fuel prices, supply pressures, and government intervention measures affecting households, transport, and macroeconomic management.

In early March, the government had already increased petrol and diesel prices by roughly 20 percent, raising petrol to above PKR 320 (USD 1.14) per liter and diesel to around PKR 336 (USD 1.20). The adjustment reflected global oil market volatility linked to disruptions around the Strait of Hormuz—a critical maritime chokepoint between Iran and Oman through which a significant share of global oil supplies passes—as well as higher shipping costs and risk premiums.

The price increase has had immediate domestic effects. Transport operators have passed on higher fuel costs, with intercity fares rising by roughly 60–70 percent in some cases, significantly increasing travel expenses during the Eid al-Fitr period. Fuel costs continue to feed into broader price pressures across transport, food, and retail sectors, even as headline

inflation remains comparatively moderate at around 6–7 percent, down from a peak of 38 percent in 2023. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Fiscal measures have aimed to balance relief and burden-sharing. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif rejected a further proposed fuel price increase—equivalent to an additional approximately 20–40 percent rise depending on fuel type—ahead of Eid, opting instead for the government to absorb an estimated PKR 24 billion (USD 85.7 million) in costs. At the same time, authorities have increased the levy on high-octane fuel—used primarily by higher-income households—by 200 percent, raising it from PKR 100 to PKR 300 (USD 1.07) per liter. The measure is expected to generate around PKR 9 billion (USD 32 million) per month, while the use of high-octane fuel in government vehicles has been banned. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

To manage demand, the government earlier this month had already introduced a range of austerity measures. These include reduced fuel allocations for public institutions, a shift toward a four-day workweek with partial remote work requirements, and temporary school closures. Additionally, more recent measures include the cancellation of the annual Republic Day military parade on March 23, replaced by limited ceremonial observances, as well as efforts to reduce reliance on road transport by expanding railway freight capacity, with freight volumes projected to increase by 21 percent. [Arab News 4] [Arab News 5]

At the same time, the government is seeking to stabilize supply. Authorities state that domestic fuel availability remains intact, with diesel reserves covering approximately 24 days and additional shipments arriving via Karachi—Pakistan's main port on the Arabian Sea—or already in transit. To sustain imports under tighter global conditions, the government has increased coordination with financial institutions to secure credit for higher-cost fuel procurement, while also relying on support from Saudi Arabia and alternative supply routes through ports such as Yanbu and Fujairah to bypass disrupted Gulf shipping lanes. [Arab News 6] [Arab News 7] [Arab News 8]

Pakistan: ADB launches five-year strategy focused on private sector-led growth and resilience

(lm) The Asian Development Bank has launched a five-year country partnership strategy for Pakistan covering

2026 to 2030, aimed at supporting sustainable and inclusive economic growth through reforms and investment.

The strategy focuses on strengthening private sector development, improving the business environment, and expanding exports and job creation, reflecting Pakistan's efforts to stabilize its economy after a period of external shocks. It also places emphasis on infrastructure development, including transport and connectivity, alongside digital transformation.

A second pillar centers on social inclusion and empowerment, with targeted support for vulnerable groups and gender equality. A third pillar prioritizes climate resilience and sustainability, including disaster risk management, flood control, and clean energy initiatives, in response to Pakistan's high exposure to climate-related risks.

Cross-cutting priorities include governance reforms, public financial management improvements, and regional economic cooperation. The strategy also identifies opportunities in sectors such as critical minerals, railways, and food security. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government introduces port fee reductions to attract transshipment traffic amid Middle East war

(lm) Pakistan has introduced a new incentive framework to attract transshipment vessels to Karachi Port, offering reductions of up to 60 percent on port dues, wharfage, storage, and related charges. Karachi —Pakistan's largest city and main port on the Arabian Sea in the south of the country—serves as the country's primary maritime trade gateway. The measures aim to position Karachi as a regional shipping hub as routes adjust due to disruptions linked to the Iran war, which has increased risks for maritime traffic in the Gulf. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Mining sector in Balochistan faces extortion risks amid security dispute between officials

(lm) Pakistan's mining sector in Balochistan province is facing reported extortion demands from militant groups, according to disclosures made during a session of the Senate Standing Committee on

Privatization, highlighting ongoing security risks in a key resource region.

A senior official from the Pakistan Minerals Development Corporation (PMDC)—a state-owned entity responsible for mineral development—told the committee that coal mining operations are required to pay money to armed groups, including the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist organization designated as a terrorist group by Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The briefing indicated that payments are being made at the operational level, particularly in areas where mining activities are subcontracted to local operators.

The disclosure comes as Pakistan seeks to expand private and foreign investment in Balochistan, a province rich in natural resources including coal, copper, and gold, but affected by a long-running insurgency. The BLA has intensified attacks in recent years targeting infrastructure, security forces, and economic assets.

Provincial authorities have disputed the characterization of widespread extortion. A senior official from the Balochistan government stated that while militant activity exists, no formal complaints have been filed with law enforcement agencies regarding extortion in the mining sector. The official emphasized that large-scale and foreign-operated projects are protected under sovereign security guarantees and have not been affected.

Authorities also stated that security operations are ongoing, including intelligence-based operations targeting militant networks. According to the provincial government, more than 700 individuals identified as extortionists linked to militant groups, including the BLA and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—a separate militant organization operating primarily against the Pakistani state—have been killed in recent operations. [Arab News]

Seychelles: Former president Ramkalawan rejects allegations in Assomption Island inquiry

(lm) Former Seychelles president Wavel Ramkalawan appeared on March 18 before a commission of inquiry examining the development of Assomption Island, where he denied any irregularities related to a long-term hotel project.

The commission is mandated to review the legality of a sublease agreement and development arrangements concerning Assomption Island. Under the agreement, part of the island was leased to a Qatari company for 70 years for the construction of a luxury hotel.

During the hearing, Ramkalawan was questioned about his interactions with Qatari businessman Ramez Al-Khayyat during a 2023 visit to the Maldives. He stated that no formal meeting took place, while confirming that he stayed at a hotel owned by Al-Khayyat and attended a lunch where the businessman was present.

The commission also examined whether any pressure had been exerted on environmental authorities to advance the project. Ramkalawan stated that all procedures had been followed, noting that approximately 300 conditions must be satisfied before environmental authorization can be issued.

Environmental concerns related to the project were raised in the proceedings, particularly regarding potential impacts on Aldabra Atoll, located about 40 kilometers from Assomption Island and recognized as the habitat of the world's largest population of giant tortoises.

The inquiry further requested details regarding Ramkalawan's travel, including visits to Abu Dhabi that were not supported by official documentation. He stated that these trips involved meetings with authorities in Abu Dhabi, which financed the travel.

As part of the investigation, the commission requested the submission of WhatsApp communications, email exchanges, and bank account records.

At the conclusion of the hearing, Ramkalawan stated that he considered the inquiry to be directed specifically at him. [Seychelles News Agency]

Seychelles: Staff-level agreement reached with IMF on final program reviews

(lm) Seychelles and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have reached a staff-level agreement to complete the final reviews of the country's Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) programs. The agreement, announced following an IMF mission to Victoria, is subject to approval by the IMF Executive Board and would unlock a disbursement of USD 45 million, bringing total funding under the programs to USD 105.1 million since May 2023.

The EFF is a multi-year financing arrangement supporting macroeconomic stabilization and structural reforms, while the RSF focuses on climate-related policy measures and resilience. According to the IMF, Seychelles has broadly met its program targets, including reductions in public debt, rebuilding foreign exchange reserves, and strengthening monetary policy and financial sector supervision. Progress has also been reported on climate-related financial risk management led by the Central Bank of Seychelles.

The review comes as Seychelles faces a weaker economic outlook for 2026. Growth is projected at around 1.5 percent, reflecting expected disruptions to tourism, the country's main economic sector, linked to the ongoing war in the Middle East. Higher import costs and reduced tourism receipts are also expected to widen the current account deficit to approximately 7.8 percent of GDP and put pressure on foreign exchange reserves. The IMF has recommended contingency fiscal measures to manage these risks. [Seychelles News Agency]

Sri Lanka: Middle East war strains energy system, power generation, and wider economy

(lm) Sri Lanka is facing mounting economic and operational pressure as the ongoing Middle East war disrupts global energy supply chains, maritime transport routes, and aviation links. As a highly import-dependent economy, the country is particularly exposed to rising fuel costs, constrained shipping capacity, and increasing insurance premiums, placing growing stress on both energy security and trade logistics.

The most immediate pressure is concentrated in the energy system. Fuel prices were raised again on March 22—by around 25 percent—marking the second increase within two weeks as authorities respond to rising import costs. Officials indicated that the price adjustments are intended in part to reduce consumption by 15 to 20 percent, reflecting a shift toward demand management. At the same time, the government continues to absorb part of the shock, incurring losses of approximately LKR 20 billion (USD 68 million) per month to stabilize domestic prices. Broader austerity measures—including a four-day workweek and encouragement of remote work—have also been introduced, signaling preparation for a prolonged disruption. [Daily Mirror 1] [Channel NewsAsia]

At the same time, the government continues to partially cushion the shock, incurring losses of approximately LKR 20 billion (USD 68 million) per month to stabilize domestic prices. [Daily Mirror 2]

Meanwhile, supply conditions remain uneven. Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supplies have been partially stabilized through recent shipments, including around 38,000 metric tons of LPG secured for March—exceeding estimated demand of 33,000 metric tons—after a private supplier halted deliveries to the domestic market. Additional shipments have been scheduled in close succession, including deliveries later in April, with authorities assessing the risk of shortages as currently low but dependent on continued import flows. [Daily Mirror 3]

Fuel stocks are officially said to be sufficient until the end of May after additional April shipments were confirmed. However, diesel reserves remain tighter—a critical constraint given diesel's role as the fallback fuel for both transport and electricity generation—and import logistics have been affected by vessel shortages, delayed shipments, and disruptions to routes linked to the Strait of Hormuz.

At the same time, Sri Lanka faces effective storage constraints, limiting its ability to receive and hold additional buffer stocks. While total storage capacity is estimated at around 400,000 metric tons, a significant portion is reportedly unusable due to unrepaired infrastructure, with only about half of nominal capacity currently operational. [Daily Mirror 4]

These constraints feed directly into downstream vulnerabilities in refining and power generation. A major vulnerability lies in refining and power generation. Daily diesel production at the Sapugaskanda Refinery has already declined to around 1,400 metric tons from a previous capacity of about 1,800 metric tons, while significant volumes of diesel—estimated at over 120,000 metric tons—have reportedly been diverted to power generation, reducing available reserves. The refinery is now expected to shut down after mid-April because crude oil stocks are only sufficient until then and two crude shipments of 90,000 metric tons were canceled. As the refinery produces furnace oil and naphtha used for electricity generation, its closure will force a shift to diesel-based generation at higher cost. While an emergency furnace oil shipment is expected in April, naphtha cannot readily be procured. Authorities say there will be no immediate power cuts but have appealed for reduced electricity use at night, with a tariff decision expected by April 1. [Daily Mirror 5] [Daily Mirror 6]

These pressures are now translating into operational disruptions across essential services and the wider economy. Health workers have warned that hospitals could face severe disruption because doctors and other staff are struggling to travel under the QR-based fuel rationing system and persistent fuel queues. Agriculture is also under pressure, with higher fuel costs pushing up machinery and transport expenses and threatening increases in rice, vegetable, and fruit prices. Public transport costs are rising, and service reductions remain possible if distribution problems persist. Export sectors are increasingly affected, particularly tea—one of Sri Lanka's key foreign-exchange earners—where exporters report losses of USD 10 million to USD 15 million per week due to shipping disruptions and delayed payments. [Daily Mirror 7] [Daily Mirror 8]

To manage risks to food security, authorities have convened importers and distribution agencies to ensure uninterrupted supply of essential goods and stabilize prices. Measures include prioritizing fuel access for transport of goods through an essential services registration system and monitoring prices through published weekly ranges, particularly in state-run outlets such as Lanka Sathosa. [Daily Mirror 9]

Despite all of this, the government rejects the characterization of an internal crisis, attributing current pressures to external supply disruptions and explicitly distinguishing the situation from the 2022–2023 crisis, which it links to failed policies and corruption. This contrasts with opposition-linked and union criticism pointing to planning, infrastructure, and allocation shortcomings, reflecting a broader dispute over the causes of current vulnerabilities. [Daily Mirror 10]

In parallel, authorities are advancing longer-term measures to address structural weaknesses. Plans to expand fuel storage capacity at the Trincomalee oil tank farm—located in a strategically positioned deep-water port on Sri Lanka's northeastern coast—form part of a broader effort to strengthen energy security. The project, supported by a memorandum of understanding with India and the United Arab Emirates, includes modernization of World War II-era storage facilities and the planned construction of a multi-product pipeline connecting southern India to Sri Lanka to improve supply resilience and regional energy connectivity. [Daily Mirror 11] [Daily Mirror 12]

Sri Lanka: Opposition submits no-confidence motion against energy

minister

(lm) The opposition has submitted a no-confidence motion against Minister of Power and Energy Kumara Jayakody to Parliament, with the motion formally handed over to Speaker Jagath Wickramaratne. The initiative was confirmed by the Chief Opposition Whip, indicating broad backing from opposition Members of Parliament. Parliament has scheduled the debate on the motion for April 10. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Court proceedings in Airbus bribery case reveal conflicting claims and expand list of suspects

(lm) Proceedings before the Colombo Magistrate's Court in the ongoing Airbus bribery case have introduced allegations of payments to senior political figures, alongside counterclaims of coercion and further investigative developments. The case centers on a 2016 aircraft procurement deal involving SriLankan Airlines, the country's state-owned carrier.

The Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC), Sri Lanka's anti-corruption body, informed the court that former SriLankan Airlines Chief Executive Officer Kapila Chandrasena had stated that LKR 60 million (USD 204,000) received as part of the transaction was paid to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, with an additional LKR 20 million (USD 68,000) allegedly given to a former aviation minister. Investigators also outlined a financial structure involving a shell company registered in Brunei and accounts in Singapore and Australia, through which approximately EUR 1.45 million in alleged bribe payments were channeled.

Subsequently, Chandrasena submitted an affidavit claiming that his earlier statement was obtained under intimidation and that references to former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his son, Member of Parliament Namal Rajapaksa were not made voluntarily. He alleged that officials of the anti-corruption commission exerted pressure during questioning.

In parallel, CIABOC identified additional suspects, including a former SriLankan Airlines board director and the suspect's spouse, both currently overseas, and requested court-issued arrest warrants. The Magistrate has scheduled March 24 to hear evidence related to the warrant request, while the main suspect remains in remand custody pending further proceedings. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Declassified documents indicate ex-president sought Israeli funding during 1987 election period

(lm) Declassified documents from Israel's Foreign Ministry indicate that former President Junius Richard Jayewardene requested USD 1 million from Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, to support his 1987 election campaign. The request was reportedly made during meetings in August 1987, according to diplomatic cables cited from the Israel State Archives.

The documents relate to a period when Sri Lanka had partially restored ties with Israel after severing relations in 1970, including the establishment of an Israeli Interests Section at the United States Embassy in Colombo in 1984. This occurred amid the country's civil war, during which the government sought external support to address Tamil militancy in the north.

The files indicate that Israel provided military assistance to Sri Lanka valued at approximately USD 30 million, including patrol boats, small arms, communications systems, and training for military and police units. Support extended to specialized units, including the Special Task Force, a police unit involved in counterinsurgency operations. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court sets strict criteria for recognizing foreign divorce rulings

(lm) The Supreme Court of Sri Lanka ruled on March 20 that foreign divorce judgments can only be recognized if they comply with domestic legal requirements, reinforcing strict statutory limits on the grounds for divorce. The Court clarified that recognition is confined to cases based on adultery after marriage, malicious desertion, or incurable impotence at the time of marriage, in line with national law.

The ruling arose from a dispute involving a couple married in Sri Lanka and later involved in proceedings in the United Kingdom, where a foreign divorce decree had been issued. The Court determined that both lower courts had erred in their preliminary findings and ordered the case to proceed before the Colombo District Court for full adjudication under Sri Lankan legal standards. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government maintains domestic approach on civil war disappearances while signaling openness to refugee returns

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has stated that at least 2,764 individuals went missing during the final phase of the country's civil war, which ended in 2009 between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist militant group seeking an independent Tamil state. Authorities acknowledged that the true number remains uncertain due to the absence of a comprehensive database and noted that enforced disappearances occurred on both sides during the conflict. The government reiterated, however, that it opposes international investigative mechanisms, maintaining that accountability should be handled domestically—a position that remains contested in international human rights discussions. [Daily Mirror 1]

In parallel, the government signaled openness to addressing another major legacy of the conflict: long-term displacement. Officials stated that Sri Lanka is prepared to receive refugees who fled during the war and remain in India, particularly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where approximately 89,000 Sri Lankan Tamils still reside, many for decades. Authorities emphasized that returns should be voluntary, while also acknowledging that individuals who have built lives in India may seek citizenship there. Since the end of the war, more than 18,500 refugees have returned to Sri Lanka, including several hundred in recent months, with the government highlighting efforts to facilitate reintegration while cautioning against politicization of the issue. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court finds unlawful arrest under counterterrorism law violated protest leader's rights

(lm) The Supreme Court has ruled that the fundamental rights of Wasantha Mudalige, a student leader and former convener of a nationwide student organization, were violated through his arrest and detention in August 2022 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), Sri Lanka's primary counterterrorism law.

The Court found that the arrest and detention lacked the legally required "reasonable suspicion," and therefore had no sufficient legal basis. It further held that the Officer-in-Charge of the local police station

responsible for the arrest acted unlawfully, and that the application of the PTA in this case failed to meet standards of necessity and proportionality. The judgment also identified deficiencies in the legal basis of the detention order issued by the Ministry of Defence. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: ADB visit and IMF review highlight economic recovery progress

(lm) The President of the Asian Development Bank arrived in Sri Lanka on March 23 for an official visit focused on engaging with government institutions, the private sector, and local stakeholders at what was described as a critical stage in the country's economic transition. The visit comes as international partners assess Sri Lanka's recovery from its 2022 financial crisis, which involved a sovereign debt default, severe foreign exchange shortages, and disruptions to fuel, food, and essential imports. [Daily Mirror 1]

In parallel, the International Monetary Fund confirmed that it will conduct a combined fifth and sixth review of Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility program—a multi-year financial assistance and reform package aimed at stabilizing the economy, restoring debt sustainability, and rebuilding foreign reserves—during a mission scheduled from March 26 to April 9. The IMF noted signs of stabilization, including approximately 5 percent growth in 2025, inflation at around 1.6 percent as of February, improved foreign reserves, and progress in debt restructuring.

However, the IMF cautioned that Sri Lanka remains vulnerable to external shocks, particularly the ongoing Middle East war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, which could affect the economy through multiple channels and will be a key focus of the upcoming review. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Tariff hike request

(lm) The Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), Sri Lanka's state-owned power utility, has requested a 13.56 percent increase in electricity tariffs for April–June, citing a projected revenue shortfall of LKR 15.8 billion (USD 53.7 million). The request was submitted on February 13, prior to the implementation of electricity sector restructuring on March 9, under which the CEB was replaced by multiple state-owned entities. The proposal, currently under review by the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka (PUCSL) as part of the

quarterly tariff adjustment process, estimates total supply costs at LKR 136.5 billion (USD 464.1 million) against expected revenue of LKR 116.9 billion (USD 397.5 million). [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: National carrier bond restructuring approved by over 97 percent of creditors

(lm) Sri Lanka's national airline has secured approval from over 97 percent of bondholders for the restructuring of its USD 175 million government-guaranteed bonds that matured in June 2024, with participation exceeding 99 percent. The agreement, finalized on March 20, provides for a 16 percent reduction in outstanding claims, with investors exchanging holdings for a mix of cash and new U.S. dollar-denominated bonds due in 2028.

The transaction forms part of Sri Lanka's broader external debt restructuring effort, with authorities indicating that agreements now cover approximately 99 percent of public external debt. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Court of Appeal limits use of national security to deny information requests

(lm) The Court of Appeal of Sri Lanka ruled on March 21 that national security cannot be used as a blanket justification to deny access to information, reinforcing transparency requirements under the Right to Information Act. The judgment upheld a prior decision ordering the Sri Lanka Navy to disclose financial details related to a 2022 naval voyage involving a former president.

The Court found that authorities had failed to demonstrate a clear link between the requested financial information and any genuine threat to national security, emphasizing that generalized claims are insufficient under the law. While certain operational details may remain protected, the ruling confirms that financial accountability falls within the scope of disclosure. [Daily Mirror]

United States envoy visits Sri Lanka and Maldives to advance bilateral ties and

Indian Ocean cooperation

(lm) The United States conducted a regional outreach to Sri Lanka and the Maldives between March 19 and March 24, with U.S. Special Representative for South and Central Asia Sergio Gor holding high-level talks focused on bilateral relations and cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, alongside parallel developments reflecting both countries' neutrality policies amid the ongoing Middle East war.

In Sri Lanka, the envoy held discussions with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, focusing on strengthening bilateral ties and expanding cooperation in trade, maritime security, and regional stability. Sri Lankan authorities also briefed the U.S. delegation on the country's position regarding the Middle East war and its economic and security implications. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

At the same time, Sri Lanka underscored its neutrality policy by rejecting military access requests from both sides of the conflict. On March 20, authorities denied permission for two United States fighter jets to land at Mattala airport and for three Iranian naval vessels to conduct a goodwill visit. The decision follows Sri Lanka's recent involvement in maritime incidents linked to the conflict, including the rescue of Iranian sailors from a sunken warship and assistance provided to another Iranian vessel. [Daily Mirror 3]

The visit then continued to the Maldives, where Foreign Minister Abdullah Khaleel met the U.S. envoy in Malé. The engagement coincides with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Maldives and the United States, established in 1966. Discussions covered bilateral cooperation in areas including security, education, and environmental resilience, with further meetings planned to explore economic and security cooperation.

In parallel, the Maldivian government reaffirmed its foreign policy position of non-alignment. President Mohamed Muizzu stated that Maldivian territory, airspace, and waters would not be used for foreign military purposes and confirmed that the country would continue diplomatic engagement with all states except Israel. [The Sun]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights

and National Security in Southeast Asia

Brunei: Domestic stock exchange to be launched by 2027

(dql) Brunei aims to launch its own stock exchange by Q3 2027, contingent on developing the necessary economic ecosystem and market infrastructure, Finance Minister Haji Mohd Amin Liew Abdullah said. Key requirements include auditing systems, qualified brokers, and legal advisory support to ensure effective operations.

The exchange is expected to improve financial literacy among Bruneians and provide local companies—particularly government-linked firms—with opportunities to raise capital through IPOs, facilitating business expansion domestically and abroad.

Officials noted that careful planning is needed given Brunei's small market and structural financial constraints, but the initiative is seen as a step toward broader economic development. [The Star]

Cambodia: Rising fuel costs prompt worker aid, government spending cuts

(dql) The National Council on Minimum Wage approved a temporary USD 2.50 monthly travel allowance for textile, garment, footwear, travel goods, and bag sector workers, effective April 1, supplementing existing employer-provided travel and accommodation support.

The decision follows a March 19 directive from Prime Minister Hun Manet to convene labor and employer representatives to address rising fuel costs linked to the Middle East conflict. [Cambodianess 1]

In addition, the government has directed a 30 percent reduction in fuel and lubricant allowances for most ministries and government institutions to preserve reserves for contingencies and strategic tasks, excluding the public security sector. A March 20 circular from the Ministry of Economy and Finance covers domestic and overseas travel, urging online participation where possible and prioritizing essential or strategic overseas meetings.

Exemptions include the Ministries of Defence and Interior, key administrative bodies, and certain health and education units, though all are encouraged to minimize non-essential usage. [The Phnom Penh Post]

The moves come as Cambodia faces mounting economic pressures as rising fuel prices drive inflation, raising costs for consumers and businesses. Finance Minister Aun Pornmoniroth highlighted the economy's exposure to global shocks—including trade shifts, geopolitical uncertainty, and rising energy costs—warning that emerging financial sector vulnerabilities could undermine resilience, diversification, and job creation.

During talks with World Bank Vice President Carlos Felipe Jaramillo, Cambodia outlined its priorities under Vision 2050, emphasizing skills development, support for SMEs and microbusinesses, and improved access to finance to stimulate domestic employment and absorb returning migrant workers.

The World Bank reaffirmed its commitment under the 2025–2029 Country Partnership Framework, pledging financial support through the IDA and technical assistance in education, transport, investment climate reforms, and trade facilitation.

The World Bank projects Cambodia's GDP growth will slow to 4.8 percent in 2025 from 6 percent in 2024, citing external shocks, a weakening property market, border disruptions, and tighter trade conditions that could affect construction, tourism, and labor markets. [Cambodianess 2]

Indonesia: Current President Prabowo and former President Megawati hold rare closed-door talks on geopolitics

(ms) Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto met former president Megawati Soekarnoputri, chairwoman of the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), in a closed-door meeting at

the State Palace in Jakarta on March 19, in a rare high-level encounter amid rising geopolitical tensions.

Megawati was among others accompanied by her daughter Puan Maharani, who serves as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Several senior political figures were also present, including Deputy House Speaker Sufmi Dasco Ahmad and Prabowo's son Ragowo "Didit" Hediprasetyo.

PDI-P secretary-general Hasto Kristiyanto said the discussions focused on strategic national issues, particularly global geopolitical developments amid escalating tensions linked to the conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran. He added that Megawati's experience as Indonesia's fifth president, especially her emphasis on decisive and priority-driven policymaking, was a key reference point in the exchange.

The meeting is politically significant as it marks one of the few direct engagements between Prabowo and Megawati since his inauguration on October 20, 2024. Although Prabowo leads a broad governing coalition, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) has remained outside the ruling bloc, positioning Megawati as one of the country's most influential opposition figures. Her absence from earlier gatherings with former presidents had underscored political distance, making this meeting a notable shift.

Analysts say the meeting may signal an effort to maintain domestic political stability by easing tensions between the government and the opposition, particularly at a time of increasing global uncertainty.

The talks also touched on Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy doctrine, which emphasizes non-alignment while maintaining an active role in international affairs. Megawati referenced Indonesia's historical involvement in the Asia-Africa Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, framing them as guiding principles for navigating current geopolitical tensions, aligning with Prabowo's approach. [Jakarta Globe] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Soldiers detained over acid attack on well-known rights activist

(ms) Indonesian military authorities have detained four soldiers suspected of carrying out an acid attack on a human rights activist, a case that has intensified scrutiny of the military's role in civilian affairs and raised concerns about accountability.

The suspects, identified by their initials and ranks as members of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), are being held by military police following the March 12, attack on Andrie Yunus, a prominent activist with the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (KontraS). He suffered severe burns to his face, chest and arms after assailants on a motorcycle threw acid at him after he attended a public discussion in Jakarta .

Authorities said the four suspects could face charges of premeditated assault, which carries a maximum sentence of up to seven years in prison. Investigators are continuing to examine the motive behind the attack, including whether the perpetrators acted on orders from higher-ranking officials. Police have also indicated that additional suspects may be involved, suggesting a broader network behind the incident .

The case has drawn significant public attention due to its political context. Yunus had recently spoken about the expanding role of the military in civilian governance, an issue that has become increasingly sensitive since President Prabowo Subianto, a former general, took office in October 2024. Rights groups and student organizations have warned that growing military involvement in non-defense sectors risks undermining democratic reforms.

Civil society organizations have called for the case to be tried in a civilian court rather than within the military justice system, arguing that internal proceedings lack transparency and have historically shielded senior figures from accountability. A coalition of advocacy groups said limiting the investigation to lower-ranking personnel could obscure potential command responsibility and perpetuate a culture of impunity .

The broader political climate surrounding the case has further heightened concern. Several civil society groups have criticized recent remarks by President Prabowo describing some government critics as “not patriotic,” arguing that such language risks delegitimizing dissent and discouraging open debate. Analysts and activists said the comments, made shortly after the acid attack, were ill-timed and could contribute to a chilling effect on public criticism, particularly among researchers, legal experts and rights advocates. They warned that framing criticism as disloyal may narrow democratic space at a moment when scrutiny of state institutions—especially the military—is increasingly important . [Jakarta Globe] [Reuters] [The Jakarta Post 1] [The Jakarta Post 2] [The Jakarta Post 3]

Indonesia: Government may expand under-16 restrictions to more digital platforms

(ms) Indonesia is considering expanding restrictions on social media and online platforms for users under the age of 16, as part of a broader effort to strengthen child protection in the digital space.

The Communications and Digital Ministry said on March 18, that additional platforms—including messaging services such as WhatsApp—could be required to raise their minimum user age, depending on the outcome of ongoing risk assessments. The move follows a new regulation aimed at limiting children's exposure to harmful online content.

Under current rules, eight major platforms have already been classified as "high-risk" and are required to implement age restrictions. These include YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Threads, TikTok, X, Roblox and Bigo Live, all of which are widely used in Indonesia .

Officials said other digital service providers must now conduct self-assessments to evaluate potential risks to minors, including exposure to pornography, cyberbullying, fraud, addiction and exploitation. Platforms deemed to pose similar risks could face the same restrictions once the regulation takes effect on March 28.

The policy reflects growing concern among Indonesian authorities about the impact of digital platforms on children, particularly as internet penetration and smartphone use continue to rise rapidly in the country. Indonesia is one of Southeast Asia's largest online markets, with millions of young users accessing social media daily. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Police hunt former bank official over USD 1.65 million church fraud

(ms) Indonesian police are searching for a former local bank official suspected of defrauding a church of billions of rupiah through a fictitious investment scheme, in a case that has raised concerns about oversight in regional banking operations.

Authorities in North Sumatra said on March 21, 2026, that Andi Hakim Febriansyah, a former sub-branch head of state-owned lender Bank Negara Indonesia

(BNI), had been named a suspect in an alleged fraud involving Rp 28 billion (USD 1.65 million) belonging to a Catholic parish in Aek Nabara. Investigators said the suspect fled Indonesia before he could be questioned and is believed to be in Australia .

Police have requested an Interpol Red Notice and are coordinating with international law enforcement agencies, including the Australian Federal Police, to locate and arrest him. Officials said they had gathered sufficient evidence to support the charges.

According to investigators, the scheme began in 2019 when Andi offered the church a product called "BNI Investment Deposit," promising annual returns of 8 percent—more than double the typical rate for standard deposits at the time. Authorities allege the product did not exist and was used to mislead the church into transferring funds. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Court orders disclosure of environmental impact studies for new capital projects

(jn) Indonesia's Supreme Court has ordered the government to release environmental impact assessments related to two water infrastructure projects at the Nusantara new capital site in East Kalimantan. The ruling followed a legal challenge by civil society group Jatam after authorities had previously refused to disclose the documents.

The decision requires the Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing to publish assessments for the Sepaku Semoi Dam and Sepaku River intake projects, which are part of the capital's water supply system and have reportedly affected local Indigenous communities.

The ruling is final and cannot be appealed, marking a transparency decision related to the development of Indonesia's new capital. [Mongabay]

Indonesia: Minister warns of rising Chinese dominance in digital marketplaces

(ms) Indonesia is weighing new policy measures to curb the growing influence of Chinese technology firms and products in its e-commerce sector, following the integration of local platform Tokopedia with TikTok Shop.

Finance Minister Purbaya Yudhi Sadewa said on March 21, that the government is assessing regulatory steps to prevent domestic platforms from being overtaken by foreign ownership, particularly by companies linked to China. “If this continues without intervention, it would be as if we are handing over our domestic market directly to China,” he said after Eid prayers in Jakarta.

Concerns have intensified since Chinese tech giant ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, acquired a 75 percent stake in Tokopedia in 2023 in a deal valued at more than USD 1.5 billion. The subsequent integration of Tokopedia with TikTok Shop marked a major shift in Indonesia’s e-commerce ecosystem, especially after TikTok Shop had previously faced a government ban for operating beyond its social media license.

Officials say the issue extends beyond ownership to market dynamics, with a surge of low-cost imported goods—many from China—flooding domestic platforms. Authorities have received increasing complaints from local businesses struggling to compete on price and visibility, raising concerns about long-term impacts on Indonesia’s small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The government is now exploring ways to ensure a more balanced digital trade environment, including potential regulatory safeguards to promote fair competition and protect domestic economic interests. Purbaya emphasized the need to strengthen local businesses so Indonesian products can remain competitive in their own market. [The Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Government targets 8 percent economic growth through job creation programs

(jn) President Prabowo Subianto said the government is targeting economic growth of at least 8 percent through a series of national programs focused on job creation, including free meal initiatives, housing construction and rural development schemes.

The Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program is expected to generate employment by establishing around 30,000 kitchens, potentially employing 1.5 million workers directly and supporting an additional 1.5 million through supply chains.

Other initiatives include the Red and White Village Cooperatives program, which aims to create

approximately 1.4 million jobs, and the development of fishing villages to improve productivity in the maritime sector. A large-scale housing program targeting one million homes is also expected to generate up to five million jobs. [Antara] [Tempo]

Indonesia: Government to raise coal output in 2026 amid price surge

(ms) Indonesia plans to increase coal production in 2026, reversing earlier efforts to curb output, as the government seeks to capitalize on rising global prices driven by geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

Coordinating Economic Affairs Minister Airlangga Hartarto said on March 20, that President Prabowo Subianto had instructed officials to revise miners' production quotas under the 2026 Work Plan and Budget (RKAB). The move signals a shift in policy after authorities had previously lowered output targets in response to weaker global prices.

Indonesia produced around 790 million tons of coal in 2025, with roughly 43 percent exported. Earlier, the government had set a lower 2026 production target of about 600 million tons to stabilize prices. However, miners are allowed to revise their annual plans mid-year, giving room for higher output following the president's directive.

The policy shift comes as coal demand strengthens across Asia, with several countries increasing reliance on coal-fired power due to elevated oil and gas prices linked to ongoing geopolitical tensions. President Prabowo has also defended coal as a necessary and affordable energy source during crises, despite environmental concerns.

At the same time, the government is seeking to maximize state revenue from the sector. Officials are reviewing potential export taxes on coal to capture windfall profits from rising prices, while ensuring that increased state income does not undermine industry competitiveness.

The measures form part of a broader strategy to safeguard fiscal stability, offset rising energy subsidy costs and keep the budget deficit below the legal ceiling of 3 percent. [Antara] [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Government launches "war on waste" campaign focused on clean-ups

and waste-to-energy

(jn) President Prabowo Subianto has launched a national “war on waste” campaign, instructing regional authorities to intensify environmental clean-up efforts and mobilise communities, including schools and civil servants, to address pollution. The initiative frames waste management as a national priority and links environmental conditions to tourism and public health.

The government’s approach emphasises large-scale clean-up activities and social mobilisation, alongside plans to develop waste-to-energy facilities in multiple cities to manage rising waste volumes.

Analysts note that the policy builds on earlier sanitation and clean-up campaigns, focusing primarily on downstream waste management rather than addressing structural drivers such as production systems, consumption patterns and waste infrastructure limitations. [New Mandala]

Indonesia: Government orders accelerated shift from diesel to solar power plants

(jn) President Prabowo Subianto has instructed an transition from diesel-powered power plants (PLTD) to solar power plants (PLTS), citing high global oil prices as the main driver behind the policy shift. Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto stated that the government has been directed to immediately assess and implement the conversion.

The transition is part of broader efforts to reduce reliance on costly diesel-based energy and improve efficiency in electricity subsidies. Authorities highlighted that diesel plants remain widely used across Indonesia but are increasingly seen as economically and environmentally unsustainable compared to renewable alternatives.

To support implementation, Indonesia’s sovereign wealth fund Danantara has been tasked with handling issues related to diesel power plants, while Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Bahlil Lahadalia has been appointed to lead a dedicated Energy Transition Acceleration Task Force. The government is also advancing a large-scale solar energy program, including plans for up to 100 gigawatts of capacity and expanded deployment in schools, villages, and remote areas.

Officials stated that the shift to solar power is expected to enhance energy access in rural and island regions, reduce subsidy burdens, and support the broader adoption of clean energy technologies. [Antara] [Business Today]

Laos: National Assembly opens new term with focus on leadership and economic planning

(ms) Laos's National Assembly has opened the inaugural session of its 10th legislature, marking the start of a new political term in the one-party state and setting the stage for key leadership appointments and policy decisions.

The session began on March 23, 2026, in Vientiane and will run for five days. It brings together top officials of the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which dominates the country's political system, along with elected representatives from across the country.

A central focus of the session is the formal appointment of senior state leadership. Incumbent President Thongloun Sisoulith is expected to remain head of state, following his continued role as general secretary of the LPRP after the party's congress earlier this year. Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone is also widely expected to retain his position, alongside National Assembly President Xaysomphone Phomvihane.

Lawmakers will also approve deputy prime ministers and cabinet members, as well as leadership positions within the National Assembly, including its vice presidents and standing committee members. Key judicial and oversight roles—including the president of the Supreme People's Court, the state prosecutor general and heads of audit and inspection bodies—are also set to be confirmed.

The session follows recent personnel changes within the political system, including the appointment of Phongsamouth Anlavan as head of the Presidential Office.

Beyond leadership decisions, the Assembly is expected to review major policy frameworks, including the 10th National Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2026–2030, which will guide Laos's economic strategy in areas such as infrastructure, fiscal stability and growth.

Lawmakers will also consider specific infrastructure projects, including a proposed railway link connecting

Khammouane province to Vietnam, aimed at improving regional connectivity and trade.

In Laos's political system, where the ruling party sets the overall direction, the National Assembly plays a key role in formalizing leadership decisions and policy priorities. The session is expected to adopt multiple resolutions outlining the government's agenda for the new term. [Lao News Agency 1] [The Lao News Agency 2] [The Lao News Agency 3]

Laos: School week cut amid fuel shortages

(ms) Laos has reduced the school week to three days and announced scheduled power outages in parts of the capital, underscoring mounting pressure on infrastructure amid an ongoing fuel shortage.

The Prime Minister's Office approved the temporary education measure on March 19, requiring schools nationwide to shift from five to three in-person teaching days per week. The policy applies to public and private institutions, including universities, and will remain in effect until further notice.

Authorities said the move is intended to ease pressure on transport systems and reduce fuel consumption. Schools must still complete the full curriculum, with academic calendars extended if necessary. If fuel shortages worsen, institutions may shift to online learning, although limited internet access could disrupt implementation. [The Laotian Times 1] [The Laotian Times 2]

Laos: Government targets university reform amid falling enrollment

(ms) Laos is launching a new round of higher education reforms aimed at improving university quality and aligning graduates' skills with labor market needs, as declining enrollment raises concerns about the system's effectiveness.

The Ministry of Education and Sports announced on March 19, that it will upgrade infrastructure, modernize curricula and introduce new subjects such as artificial intelligence. The reforms also aim to strengthen partnerships with foreign universities.

However, the changes come amid structural challenges. In 2025, Laos had 29 higher education institutions with 39,780 students enrolled, up 2.4

percent year-on-year, but only 8,797 graduates, a drop of 19 percent. The number of students taking university entrance exams fell sharply from 11,976 in 2022–2023 to 7,441 in 2023–2024. In the 2023–2024 academic year, just 3,680 students enrolled out of more than 10,000 available places.

Authorities also reported a decline in students sitting university entrance exams and a shortage of qualified teaching staff.

The reforms are part of a broader effort to modernize Laos's education system and support economic development. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government phases out family books in shift to digital population system

(ms) Laos is phasing out traditional household registration "family books" as part of a broader shift toward digital governance and centralized population management.

Authorities said on March 19, that hard-copy family books will no longer be issued. Instead, citizens will use a digital Certificate of Household Information as the primary document for administrative procedures. Existing family books will remain valid until they expire.

The reform aims to simplify access to public services, reduce paperwork and improve the accuracy of population data. Officials said the new system will allow faster verification and better coordination across government agencies.

The transition builds on Laos's rollout of digital national ID cards, which has been expanding nationwide since late 2025. These IDs include biometric data and security features such as chips and QR codes.

Authorities said the changes are intended to modernize administration and support more efficient management of personal data across the country. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Prime minister rejects politicization of global rising oil prices

(bo/dql) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has decried opposition parties for taking advantage of rising oil prices as a contention point for the purpose of

spinning narratives of government incapability, stressing the global nature of the rising prices and the numerous and effectively stabilizing efforts made by the government in countering the situation.

Anwar emphasized that the rising oil prices are a result of geopolitical tensions in West Asia, and that directing criticism to the government is unreasonable, given the work put in by the government to ensure a stable oil supply. He stressed that his government has maintained fuel prices at a controlled level, held special meetings focusing on solutions to address economic and security impacts, held discussions with several world leaders on efforts to ease tensions, and discussions being made with state oil supplier Petronas on sustaining the oil and gas supply.

Anwar said the issue of rising oil prices should be a cause for all parties to jointly rectify instead of being utilized as a point of political competition. [Bernama]

At the same time, Anwar defended rising domestic fuel prices, emphasizing that Malaysia remains a net oil importer and is therefore vulnerable to global shocks following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz amid the Iran conflict.

Anwar noted that around half of Malaysia's oil supply transits the chokepoint, linking the recent surge in crude prices—triggered by the disruption—to higher local costs. To cushion the impact, the government has sharply increased fuel subsidies from MYR 700 million (USD 149 million) to MYR 3.2 billion (USD 681 million) per month.

Despite these interventions, fuel prices have still risen, including significant hikes in RON97 petrol and diesel in Peninsular Malaysia, alongside a smaller increase in non-subsidised RON95. Authorities expect subsidy spending to remain elevated, with the bulk allocated to widely used fuels. [Free Malaysia] [South China Morning Post]

Against this backdrop, Ahmad Samsuri Mokhtar, chairman of the opposition coalition Perikatan Nasional (PN), has warned of potential mass layoffs in Malaysia's SME sector as the economic fallout from the US–Israel conflict with Iran drives up costs and disrupts supply chains.

He cautioned that rising energy prices—linked to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz—are already pushing up prices for basic goods, transport, and utilities, placing acute pressure on businesses, particularly in manufacturing, logistics, and small enterprises reliant on imported inputs. [The Straits Times] [The Star]

To mitigate the impact, Samsuri called for a non-partisan national consultation and intervention council bringing together the government, opposition, industry, academics, and civil society to coordinate policy responses. [Scoop]

Malaysia: Malaysian United Democratic Alliance chief pushes term limits to curb power concentration

(dql) Newly elected Malaysian United Democratic Alliance (MUDA) president Amira Aisya Abdul Aziz has pledged internal reforms including a two-term limit for the party's top leadership, aiming to prevent the concentration and abuse of power.

Amira, elected last week, said the move reflects her view that political reform must begin within parties before being applied nationally. The proposal formed part of her campaign platform in MUDA's first internal elections, where she was appointed president after securing strong backing within the newly elected central executive committee. She had served as acting leader since 2023 following the resignation of Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman.

She also signaled a break from dual office-holding by declining to take on the treasurer role, citing concerns over conflicting responsibilities. On electoral strategy, Amira indicated she is likely to defend her Johor state seat, while stressing that decisions on candidacies or potential alliances will be made collectively, with no immediate plans for political cooperation. [Free Malaysia Today] [Sinar Daily]

Founded in 2020, MUDA is a small, youth-driven, reformist party that positions itself in the centrist to center-left space, advocating institutional reform, anti-corruption, and multi-ethnic politics. It remains outside Malaysia's three main coalitions—Pakatan Harapan, Barisan Nasional, and Perikatan Nasional—though it has loosely aligned with reformist forces in the past.

Its proposal to introduce a two-term limit for party leadership stands out in Malaysia's political party landscape context, where such internal limits are uncommon. It reinforces MUDA's reformist credentials and differentiates it from more established parties, though its overall political impact remains constrained by its size and lack of coalition backing.

Malaysia: Sarawak prepare to defend claims to gas distribution rights

(bo) Malaysia's highest court has permitted state-owned national oil and gas company Petronas to pursue a legal bid to challenge several laws passed by the state of Sarawak concerning disagreements over gas distribution rights, to which Sarawak has responded with equal determination to defend state firm Petros.

Sarawak holds more than 60 percent of Malaysia's gas reserves and has long sought greater autonomy in several areas, particularly its natural resources, previously using the Malaysia Agreement 1963 (MA63) —the treaty that formally created the Federation of Malaysia—as the basis of their claim to special status and autonomy rights. In recent year, the state passed laws and appointed its own firm Petros to take over all logistics and supply of natural gas in the state.

This conflicting takeover of Petros led to state-owned gas supplier Petronas applying to the Federal Court seeking clarification on the regulatory framework regarding its operations in Sarawak (see AiR No. 11, March/2026, 3).

Petronas labelled Sarawak's passing of new state legislature to permit the Sarawak firm to takeover gas distribution as an overreach of their rights and over-reliant on MA63 to further encroach beyond the boundary of its jurisdiction. Petronas also said that Sarawak state laws had also violated federal laws on oil exploration. [Reuters]

Sarawak's legal team responded to these allegations with a simple objection, claiming that enacting laws on gas distribution lays within its legislative rights. At the approval of Petronas' legal bid, Deputy Minister in the Sarawak Premier's Department said that the Sarawak government is ready to file its own petition regarding the regulatory framework of Petros as well, insisting on protecting Sarawak's rights and defend interests of its people. [The Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Sanctioned former general appointed Speaker of Upper House

(su) Myanmar's military administration moved to consolidate its post-coup political structure on March 18 by appointing former general Aung Lin Dwe as Speaker of the Amyotha Hluttaw, the Upper House of parliament, during a session in Naypyitaw. He was the

sole nominee and was formally declared elected by acting chairperson Daw Dwe Bu. Aung Lin Dwe previously served as secretary of the State Administration Council following the 2021 coup and currently holds positions as a junta member and chief executive of the National Defence and Security Council.

Before the coup, he served as Judge Advocate General. Owing to his role in the junta's senior leadership, he is under personal sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom, the European Union, Canada, and the United States. During the same session, junta minister Jeng Phang Naw Taung was elected vice speaker of the Upper House.

The appointment followed the March 16 election of Union Solidarity and Development Party chair U Khin Yi as speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw, the Lower House, with Information Minister U Maung Maung Ohn named vice speaker.

The National Unity Government condemned the military-organized election and the resulting parliament as an attempt to entrench junta rule, warning that institutions lacking public legitimacy would not receive international recognition. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: New passport law raises concerns over surveillance and arbitrary restrictions

(su) A new passport law has been enacted requiring all existing passports to be upgraded to biometric e-passports, reportedly from next year, in line with digital identification cards introduced in 2024. The law also creates a 10-member Issuance Board, chaired by the deputy home affairs minister, with authority to approve or reject passport applications.

Particular concern has focused on provisions allowing the board to cancel existing passports or blacklist applicants upon notification from "relevant ministries," as well as deny passports to anyone considered to be engaged in activities deemed harmful to national security or the national interest.

Critics say the measure goes beyond administrative reform and could expand state surveillance in the absence of meaningful data protection safeguards. Legal and digital rights observers argue that the wording is overly broad and gives officials wide discretion to target dissidents, including members of the Civil Disobedience Movement and others seen as opposed to military rule. They warn that the law could

be used not only to monitor citizens more closely but also to restrict the ability of critics abroad to renew travel documents or leave the country lawfully. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Rotating power cuts introduced amid widening electricity shortfall

(su) Myanmar's military administration announced last week that rotating power cuts will be imposed nationwide from March 18 through at least June, citing the need to manage rising electricity demand during the summer. According to the Ministry of Electric Power, daily demand currently stands at 4,664 megawatts, while available generation and distribution capacity is only around 3,600 megawatts. The authorities added the outages are intended to balance the load, though they did not specify which areas would be affected or how the schedule would be implemented.

The measure comes as the country's energy crisis appears to be deepening beyond the usual seasonal strain. Local reporting linked the deterioration partly to global fuel market pressures following escalating conflict in the Middle East, with residents expressing concern that shortages and higher prices could undermine access to generator fuel during blackouts.

While the ministry said liquefied natural gas-powered plants supplying industrial zones would continue operating without interruption, residents in Yangon and Mandalay reported uncertainty over household supply and suggested electricity provision had briefly improved before the recent election, only to worsen again afterward.

The renewed rationing follows similar power-sharing measures imposed during the summer of 2025, when scheduled outages were accompanied by voltage instability and occasional fires after supply was restored. Residents now expect demand for solar panels, backup systems, and other alternative energy equipment to rise further as households and small businesses seek to cope with longer and less predictable cuts. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: NUG acting president welcomes talks between rival anti-junta groups after ceasefire

(su) National Unity Government Acting President Duwa Lashi La has welcomed efforts to defuse an intra-resistance conflict, as talks begin between the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) following recent fighting in northern Shan State.

In a statement released on March 17, he said he was relieved that the two "brotherly alliances" had turned to negotiations after a period of intense confrontation and expressed confidence that their leaders would conduct talks without undermining the broader revolutionary cause.

The conflict began with a territorial dispute in the town of Kutkai on February 13 and escalated sharply on March 14, when the MNDAA launched an offensive into TNLA-controlled areas. After three days of fighting, both sides reached an initial ceasefire on the night of March 16. The clash marked a serious rupture within the anti-junta camp in northern Shan State, raising concerns about fragmentation among resistance forces.

Leaders of both groups are now meeting in Laukkai to discuss a broader resolution to the dispute. Questions remain over whether the National Unity Government will play any role in facilitating an arrangement acceptable to both sides, with no clear indication so far of its direct involvement. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Military claims surrender of 500 resistance fighters in Mandalay

(su) Myanmar's military sought to project momentum against anti-junta forces, announcing on March 19 that 506 resistance fighters had surrendered and re-entered the "legal fold" at a ceremony held inside Mandalay's Royal Palace compound. AFP journalists present saw hundreds of men and women assembled in mixed uniforms before a display of seized weapons.

The event appeared aimed at signaling weakening morale among the People's Defense Forces (PDFs), which emerged after the 2021 coup and have fought alongside ethnic armed organizations against the junta. Many participants wore uniforms bearing Mandalay PDF insignia, and the military allowed selected individuals to speak to the press, including one man who said he had become disillusioned with the resistance leadership and returned with his family.

Resistance sources, however, rejected the junta's account as propaganda. A Mandalay PDF

spokesperson said there had been no surrender on the claimed scale, noting that while defections occur, it would be unusual for fighters to appear in full unit uniforms. He also pointed to inconsistencies in participants' dress, suggesting the event was staged to project regime strength.

The display comes as anti-junta forces around Mandalay face increased pressure, following China-backed ceasefires with key ethnic armed groups that have weakened coordination on the battlefield. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta attacks on villages and civilian sites in Magway and Sagaing regions

(su) The military has carried out attacks on civilian areas across central and northern regions, combining artillery shelling from defense factory bases in Magway with airstrikes on villages, monasteries, and schools in Sagaing.

Junta shelling from defense factory base in Aunglan

Junta troops stationed at Defence Industry 15 (KaPaSa 15) in Aunglan Township in central Magway Region, shelled villages in the township's southwest on March 17, with artillery fire striking Intawthar village and causing multiple explosions. According to local reports, the shelling ignited a large fire in the northern part of the village, which spread southward as residents had already fled and were unable to contain the blaze. A village near the gate of the weapons facility was also reportedly targeted.

The attack is part of sustained shelling by junta forces based at the factory since early March, at times in conjunction with drone strikes. Artillery rounds also hit Aunglan's Intawthar village on March 16, killing livestock but causing no reported human casualties. Earlier, on March 1, shelling destroyed homes in Darsan village.

The continued attacks have displaced residents from Intawthar and surrounding villages, many of whom have fled to Aunglan town or to less exposed areas. [Mizzima]

Airstrikes in Sagaing

Separately, the military carried out multiple airstrikes on civilian targets in northwestern Sagaing Region over

the recent days, despite severe fuel shortages linked to the Middle East conflict.

On March 21, a monastery sheltering internally displaced persons in Katha town was bombed, killing dozens, including monks, amid renewed clashes with the Kachin Independence Army and allied resistance forces. On March 22, eight fighter jets struck a monastery and school in Sule Kone Village, Kani Township, destroying the buildings and killing civilians, with rescue efforts hindered by the risk of follow-up strikes.

Additional strikes on March 23–24 in Ayadaw and Myaung townships killed at least 10 civilians in areas with no reported ground fighting. Local sources described the targets as civilian, while junta media claimed they were bases for resistance forces. [The Irrawaddy]

Philippines: Emergency fuel measures implemented as oil price surges

(ab/ms) The Philippines has introduced a series of emergency energy measures as fuel prices rise sharply following disruptions to global oil supply linked to the ongoing war in the Middle East, exposing structural vulnerabilities in the country's energy system and prompting growing public backlash.

The Department of Energy (DOE) has authorized the temporary use and importation of Euro II petroleum products to help maintain supply. The Philippines has required the cleaner Euro IV standard since 2016, but Euro II fuels—containing up to 10 times more sulfur—will now be permitted for specific sectors, including vehicles manufactured before 2016, traditional jeepneys, industrial users such as generators and power plants, and marine transport.

According to the DOE, the measure is temporary and subject to quality and usage controls. Officials said the policy is intended to ensure sufficient fuel availability during a period of global supply disruption. [The Diplomat]

The move follows a series of sharp price increases in March. Diesel prices rose by between PHP 16.80 and PHP 18 (approximately USD 0.30–USD 0.32) per liter in a single adjustment, while kerosene increased by around PHP 20 to PHP 21 (USD 0.36–USD 0.38) and gasoline by roughly PHP 9 to PHP 10 (USD 0.16–USD 0.18) per liter. Earlier projections indicated further

increases of about PHP 11.88 (USD 0.21) for diesel and PHP 13.66 (USD 0.24) for kerosene.

Fuel prices in some areas have exceeded PHP 90 per liter (around USD 1.66), reflecting one of the steepest increases in recent years. The surge has been driven by disruptions to global oil flows, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz, a key transit route for roughly 20 percent of global oil shipments.

Despite these increases, the government has stated that domestic supply remains stable. Officials estimate that current inventories are sufficient for several weeks under normal consumption levels and have described the situation as a "price disruption" rather than a supply shortage. [ABS-CBN] [Philippines News Agency] [PhilStar 1]

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has ordered the creation of a crisis committee to coordinate the government's response, focusing on maintaining supply, monitoring prices and implementing mitigation measures. Additional measures include expanding fuel subsidies for public utility vehicle drivers and preparing for a potential suspension or reduction of fuel excise taxes if global oil prices remain above USD 80 per barrel for an extended period. [PhilStar 2]

Authorities are also promoting demand-side measures. Government agencies have been instructed to reduce fuel and electricity consumption by up to 20 percent, while discussions are underway on expanding remote work arrangements, online schooling and other energy-saving initiatives. [Phil Star 3]

The impact of rising fuel prices is already visible across the economy. Transport operators have reported declining earnings, airlines have reduced some routes to conserve fuel, and infrastructure projects are facing higher costs. The Department of Public Works and Highways has issued temporary guidelines allowing the use of updated supplier-based pricing for construction materials, citing increased delivery and equipment costs linked to fuel price volatility.

At the same time, rising costs have triggered growing public protests. A coalition of transport and labor groups has announced a nationwide two-day strike scheduled for March 26–27. The coalition is calling for stronger government intervention, including the removal of excise and value-added taxes on fuel, the repeal of the Oil Deregulation Law and measures to reduce retail prices. [Inquirer]

The government has responded by expanding financial assistance programs. Beginning April 6, authorities

plan to distribute around PHP 5,000 (approximately USD 83.39) in cash aid per driver, alongside additional fuel subsidies of roughly USD 83.39 for traditional jeepneys or up to USD 166.79 for modern jeepneys. Complementary measures include free public transport services and discounted rail fares in major urban areas.

In parallel, the government has also extended support to the agricultural sector. The Department of Agriculture has begun distributing fuel subsidies to around 9,500 farmers who rely on mechanized equipment, with each beneficiary receiving approximately USD 82.99. Officials said the program was triggered after global oil prices exceeded USD 80 per barrel and is intended to offset rising diesel costs during key planting and harvesting periods. Authorities acknowledged that the current program is limited in scope and may require additional funding to expand coverage to more farmers and potentially other sectors such as fisheries. [PhilStar 3]

The current situation has also renewed attention to structural features of the Philippines' energy system. The country relies heavily on imported fuel and has limited refining capacity, making it highly sensitive to global price movements. In addition, the Oil Deregulation Law of 1998 means that retail fuel prices are largely determined by market forces, limiting the government's ability to directly intervene.

Longer-term discussions have also resurfaced around the creation of a strategic petroleum reserve. Estimates suggest that establishing a 90-day reserve could cost around PHP 176 billion (approximately USD 3.1 billion), highlighting the scale of investment required.

Philippines: Anti-corruption probe moves to Department of Justice

(ms) The Philippines' Independent Commission for Infrastructure (ICI), a government body established in 2025 to investigate alleged irregularities in public infrastructure projects, has formally transferred the results of its flood control probe to the Department of Justice (DOJ), marking a transition to the legal review phase of the case.

The handover took place on March 23, when ICI chair Andres Reyes Jr., a retired Supreme Court associate justice, submitted a comprehensive report to Justice Secretary Fredderick Vida. The report summarizes findings from a months-long investigation into projects

suspected of involving defective or non-existent infrastructure.

The commission previously referred nine cases involving 65 individuals to the Office of the Ombudsman, recommending prosecution or further investigation. The DOJ is now expected to assess whether additional legal action is warranted, including possible referrals to investigative agencies.

The transfer comes as the ICI prepares to cease operations on March 31, following the completion of its mandate. The commission was created by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. after authorities identified billions of pesos in allegedly anomalous flood control spending.

Political attention has focused on reports that the ICI's findings may have cleared former House Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, a cousin of the president, of involvement in the projects. The presidential palace has declined to confirm these claims, stating that it is up to the Ombudsman and the commission itself to disclose official findings.

At the same time, criticism has emerged from civil society groups, which have questioned the scope and impartiality of the investigation. Some groups argue that the probe may not have sufficiently addressed the role of senior political figures, pointing to broader concerns about accountability in large-scale infrastructure spending.

Separate legal proceedings linked to the wider investigation are ongoing. Prosecutors have indicated that trials related to specific projects, including cases involving former officials and contractors, are continuing, with key witnesses expected to testify.

The ICI's remaining budget—reported at PHP 41 million (USD 730,000)—will be used for winding-down activities, with unused funds to be returned to the national treasury.

While the commission's work has concluded, responsibility for further action now shifts to permanent institutions. The Ombudsman is expected to determine accountability and potential charges, while the DOJ will review jurisdictional aspects of the case.

The outcome of the investigation will depend on how these agencies assess the evidence and whether they pursue prosecutions. The case has drawn attention due to both the scale of the alleged irregularities and its political sensitivity, particularly given the

involvement of high-profile figures and the broader implications for public infrastructure governance. [ABS-CBN] [Inquirer] [PhilStar 1] [PhilStar 2] [PhilStar 3]

Philippines: Impeachment proceedings against Vice President Duterte advance in House

(ms) Impeachment proceedings against Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte are moving forward in the House of Representatives, marking a significant development in the country's domestic political landscape.

The House Committee on Justice, which is responsible for evaluating impeachment complaints, is set to resume hearings on March 25 to examine the substance of allegations filed against Duterte. Lawmakers have already determined that the complaints meet the formal and legal requirements to proceed, allowing the process to enter a more detailed review stage.

At this stage, often described as similar to a preliminary investigation, the committee will assess evidence and determine whether there is "probable cause" to elevate the case to the full House. A majority vote in the committee would allow the case to proceed to the plenary, where at least one-third of lawmakers must support the articles of impeachment for the case to be transmitted to the Senate for trial.

Lawmakers have emphasized that Duterte's participation could influence the outcome of this stage. Officials warned that if she does not respond directly to the allegations, evidence presented by complainants may go unchallenged, potentially increasing the likelihood that the case advances.

As of March 24, there has been no confirmation from Duterte's camp on whether she will attend the hearings. Some lawmakers have described the proceedings as an opportunity for her to address the accusations and present counter-evidence, noting that the House process is not a trial but a constitutional mechanism to determine whether a case should proceed further.

The impeachment complaints reportedly include allegations such as misuse of public funds and other potential violations of the constitution. Duterte has previously submitted a response, although some lawmakers have characterized it as insufficient in addressing the substance of the claims.

The case has also drawn broader public and political attention. Civil society groups have proposed parallel initiatives, including a so-called “people’s court,” aimed at independently reviewing evidence and increasing public scrutiny of the process.

If the House ultimately approves the articles of impeachment, the case will move to the Senate, where a formal trial would determine whether Duterte remains in office. [GMA News] [Inquirer] [PhilStar 1] [PhilStar 2] [PhilStar 3]

Philippines: Anti-dynasty bill faces criticism from lawmakers over watered-down provisions

(ms) A proposed law aimed at limiting political dynasties in the Philippines is facing criticism from several lawmakers, who argue that the current version of the bill does not fully meet the constitutional requirement to prohibit dynastic politics.

The measure, approved at the committee level in the House of Representatives, seeks to define and regulate political dynasties under a long-standing provision of the 1987 Constitution. However, some legislators have withdrawn their support, stating that the bill’s provisions are too limited in scope.

Critics have focused on the bill’s definition of political dynasties, which reportedly restricts coverage to relatives within the second degree of consanguinity and affinity. They argue that this narrower definition could allow extended family members to continue holding multiple political positions simultaneously, potentially preserving existing political structures rather than limiting them.

Members of the Makabayan bloc and other opposition lawmakers said the proposal risks “regulating” rather than prohibiting political dynasties, which they contend falls short of the Constitution’s intent. Some have warned that the bill, if passed in its current form, could even formalize existing practices instead of reducing them.

The legislation is being advanced by House leaders, including Speaker Faustino Dy III and Majority Leader Ferdinand Alexander “Sandro” Marcos, and remains part of the broader legislative agenda coordinated through the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC).

Supporters of the bill maintain that it represents a pragmatic and legally viable approach, emphasizing the need for a definition that can withstand constitutional scrutiny and be implemented in practice.

The measure is expected to proceed to further deliberation in the House plenary. Its final form will determine whether it can secure sufficient support among lawmakers and align with the constitutional directive, which has remained unimplemented for nearly four decades.

The debate highlights ongoing differences within Congress over how to translate the constitutional ban on political dynasties into enforceable legislation. [Inquirer] [Philippine News Agency] [Philstar]

Philippines: New complaints filed over claims linked to Duterte ICC probe

(ms) Former Philippine senator Antonio Trillanes IV has filed a new set of cyberlibel complaints, escalating a legal dispute tied to allegations surrounding the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into former president Rodrigo Duterte.

The complaints, filed with the Department of Justice on March 23, target a group of 18 alleged former Marines who accused Trillanes in media interviews of receiving millions of US dollars to facilitate the ICC probe. Trillanes has denied the claims, describing them as false and defamatory.

The case stems from a joint affidavit submitted by the group in February, in which they alleged they had acted as intermediaries in delivering funds linked to supposed kickbacks from government infrastructure projects. The accusations named several public figures, including Trillanes and other officials.

This is the second round of legal action initiated by Trillanes. Earlier in March, he filed complaints for perjury and cyberlibel against the same group, their lawyer, and several individuals who repeated the allegations publicly. The latest complaints expand the case to include additional statements made in subsequent interviews, as well as media personalities from Sonshine Media Network International (SMNI), whom Trillanes accused of amplifying the claims.

Authorities have begun examining the allegations. The National Bureau of Investigation has conducted interviews with the individuals involved, although only six of the 18 witnesses formally signed their

statements, which may affect how the evidence is assessed.

Separate complaints have also been filed by other individuals named in the affidavit, indicating that the dispute has developed into multiple parallel legal proceedings. [Inquirer] [PhilStar]

Philippines lifts partial suspension on people's initiative process

(ms) The Philippines' Commission on Elections (Comelec) has partially lifted the suspension on people's initiative proceedings, allowing citizens to resume collecting signatures for proposed national and local legislation.

The decision, formalized in a March 18 resolution, ends a suspension that had been in place since January 2024. However, Comelec clarified that initiatives aimed at amending the Constitution remain suspended, meaning no new petitions for constitutional changes will be accepted at this stage.

The move reopens a legal mechanism that allows citizens to directly propose laws, provided they gather sufficient public support through verified signatures. Election officials said civil society groups can now use this process to advance legislative proposals, including measures such as an anti-political dynasty law.

The development comes amid broader discussions on political reform in the Philippines. Data from the House of Representatives' research arm indicates that political families continue to dominate local politics, with about 54 percent of provincial, district and municipal positions held by individuals linked to dynasties.

Officials said lifting the suspension for legislative initiatives aims to enable public participation in lawmaking, while maintaining restrictions on constitutional amendments pending further review of procedures and safeguards. [PhilStar]

Philippines: President Marcos approves shift to three-term school calendar amid reform push

(ms) The Philippine government has approved a shift from a four-quarter to a three-term academic calendar

for public schools starting in the 2026–2027 school year, as part of broader efforts to address structural challenges in the education system.

The reform, endorsed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. following recommendations from economic advisers, will divide the 201-day school year into three terms with longer instructional periods and scheduled assessment breaks. Officials say the change aims to reduce lesson fragmentation and improve learning continuity, particularly as schools lose significant teaching time to disruptions such as extreme weather and administrative activities.

Authorities estimate that up to 53 teaching days were lost in the 2023–2024 school year. However, critics, including teachers' groups, have raised concerns about the lack of pilot testing and argue that deeper systemic issues—such as classroom shortages and resource constraints—remain unaddressed. [Inquirer] [PhilStar]

Philippine: Police to consider raising women recruitment quota to 20 percent

(ms) The Philippine National Police (PNP) is considering increasing its recruitment quota for women from 10 percent to 20 percent, as part of broader efforts to expand female participation in law enforcement.

PNP chief General Jose Melencio Nartatez Jr. said the proposal aims to ensure a steady pipeline of female officers and reflect their growing role within the organization. As of February 2026, women make up 52,223 of the PNP's 236,493 personnel, or 22.08 percent of the total force.

The proposed quota would formalize this trend by requiring a higher share of new recruits to be women. The initiative aligns with existing legislative efforts in Congress, where several bills seek to gradually raise the recruitment quota to 20 percent over time.

Police officials say female officers are increasingly taking on operational and leadership roles, including in field assignments and senior command positions. The PNP also cited their contribution to handling sensitive cases and community engagement. [Inquirer] [PhilStar]

Philippines: Economists warn Inflation breaching 4 percent amid surge in global oil prices

(ms) Inflation in the Philippines is expected to accelerate beyond the central bank's target range in 2026, driven by rising global oil prices linked to ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

An economist forecasts that inflation could exceed the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) target band of 2 to 4 percent, as crude oil prices approach USD 100 per barrel. Higher fuel costs are likely to feed into transport fares, wages and broader consumer prices, creating second-round inflationary effects.

Recent data show inflation had remained relatively contained before the latest oil price shock. It stood at 2 percent in January and rose to 2.4 percent in February, still within the BSP's target range. However, analysts now expect faster price increases, similar to patterns observed during earlier global energy shocks.

Fuel price adjustments are expected to reflect these pressures. Diesel prices could rise by around PHP 16.60 to PHP 17.50 per liter (approximately USD 0.29 to USD 0.31), while gasoline prices may increase by PHP 7.50 to PHP 8.50 per liter (around USD 0.13 to USD 0.15) in the near term.

Government measures, particularly targeted subsidy programs, are expected to help mitigate the impact on vulnerable sectors. Economists note that such subsidies can reduce the pass-through of higher fuel costs while limiting the need for increased borrowing.

At the same time, monetary policy remains a key factor. The BSP's benchmark rate currently stands at 4.25 percent, and further adjustments may be considered if inflation continues to rise. [Inquirer] [Philippines News Agency] [PhilStar]

Singapore: Correction orderd over article on attorney-general, raising debate on media freedom

(ms) Singapore authorities have issued a correction order under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) to the publisher of The Online Citizen (TOC) over an article concerning the reappointment of Attorney-General Lucien Wong, in a move that has renewed debate over the use of the law.

The Ministry of Law said the March 9 article contained several false statements. These included claims that Wong had not recused himself from matters related to the long-running 38 Oxley Road dispute, that opposition Member of Parliament Sylvia Lim had been

prevented from asking follow-up questions in parliament, and that the attorney-general must retire at age 60.

According to the government, these claims were inaccurate. Officials stated that Wong and Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong had recused themselves from issues concerning 38 Oxley Road, that Lim had in fact been allowed to ask follow-up questions, and that constitutional provisions allow an attorney-general to serve beyond age 60 under certain conditions.

TOC and its publisher Terry Xu complied with the order by publishing correction notices across their platforms, but maintained that the statements reflected opinion or interpretation rather than factual inaccuracies.

The Online Citizen is one of the few Singapore-based outlets known for more critical coverage of government policies and political developments, and has previously faced regulatory scrutiny. Its inclusion in this case has added to concerns among some observers about the impact of POFMA on alternative or independent media voices.

POFMA, introduced in 2019, allows authorities to require corrections to content deemed false without mandating removal. The government has defended the law as a necessary tool to ensure accurate public information. However, critics, including international rights groups, argue that its use in politically sensitive cases risks discouraging dissent.

While the specific claims in this case center on verifiable factual disputes, the broader issue reflects an ongoing debate over how Singapore balances misinformation control with media freedom. [Channel News Asia]

Singapore: Core inflation rises to 1.4 percent in February amid higher services and food costs

(st) Singapore's core inflation rose to 1.4 percent year-on-year in February, up from 1.0 percent in January and marking its highest level since December 2024, according to data released on March 23 by the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The increase was driven by higher prices in services, food, and retail goods, partly reflecting seasonal effects linked to the Chinese New Year. On a month-on-month basis, core prices rose by 0.5 percent. In contrast, overall inflation eased to 1.2 percent from 1.4 percent, as lower accommodation

and private transport costs offset the rise in core inflation.

Authorities noted that global energy prices have increased in recent weeks, which may raise Singapore's import cost pressures in the near term. Domestic factors such as rising unit labor costs are also expected to contribute to inflation, although productivity gains may moderate the impact. Core and overall inflation are projected to average between 1.0 and 2.0 percent in 2026, with further guidance expected in the Monetary Authority of Singapore's April policy statement. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Government says energy stockpiles intact, prepares for potential supply disruptions

(st) Singapore has not yet needed to draw on its energy stockpiles and remains prepared for multiple contingency scenarios amid escalating conflict in the Middle East, Minister-in-charge of Energy Tan See Leng said on March 20. Speaking during a visit to the Singapore LNG terminal, Tan noted that recent attacks on energy infrastructure in Iran and Qatar have significantly disrupted global oil and gas supply chains, with potential long-term effects. Despite these risks, Singapore's energy situation remains stable for now, supported by measures such as centralized gas procurement and requirements for companies to maintain reserves.

However, authorities warned that prolonged disruptions could lead to higher electricity prices and broader downstream impacts on products such as fertilizers and helium. Singapore relies heavily on imported natural gas for power generation, with the LNG terminal able to meet current demand if needed. Tan added that the government is closely monitoring developments and stands ready to introduce further measures if necessary, while urging households and businesses to adopt energy conservation practices to mitigate potential shocks. [Channel NewsAsia]

Thailand: Anutin confirmed as prime minister, but legal uncertainty over election keeps looming

(lm/msz) Thailand has installed a new government following the confirmation and royal appointment of Anutin Charnvirakul as prime minister, while coalition

formation advances and legal challenges to the recent election process continue.

Anutin, leader of the Bhumjaithai Party, was elected prime minister by the House of Representatives on March 19 with 293 votes, exceeding the coalition's expected 292-seat base. He defeated Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut of the People's Party, who received 119 votes, while 86 members abstained. The vote was subsequently endorsed by the monarch in accordance with constitutional procedure, formally appointing Anutin as Thailand's 32nd prime minister –the first time in two decades that a Thai prime minister has been re-elected. [Bangkok Post 1]

The governing coalition is anchored by Anutin's Bhumjaithai Party (191 seats) and supported by the Pheu Thai Party (74 seats), alongside smaller partners. The coalition's working majority stands at 292 seats in the 500-member House. Outside the coalition, the Klatham Party (58 seats) has adopted a calibrated stance, abstaining in key votes and signaling willingness to support or join the government if coalition dynamics shift.

The Democrat Party also abstained. Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva stated that the party could not support Anutin due to his alleged links to an ongoing investigation into vote-rigging in the 2024 Senate election, raising concerns about democratic integrity. At the same time, the Democrats declined to back Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, citing an ethics case identified by the National Anti-Corruption Commission involving former lawmakers from the now-dissolved Move Forward Party who supported efforts to amend the royal defamation law. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Cabinet formation is now in its final stage. The cabinet list is expected to be submitted for royal endorsement imminently, with the new administration likely to assume office before the Songkran holiday in mid-April. The government is scheduled to deliver its policy statement to parliament between April 7 and April 9, formally launching its legislative agenda. The cabinet is expected to comprise around 35 ministers, with additional reserve candidates submitted for vetting. [Bangkok Post 4]

Broader cabinet composition remains under negotiation; they include a mix of incumbents from Prime Minister Anutin's first government, coalition-linked figures, and technocrats. Among the names under discussion, Lt Gen Adul Boonthamcharoen, who serves in the first Anutin government as deputy defence minister, is widely reported as a likely

candidate for the defence minister post in the new cabinet. Pol Lt Gen Rutthapon Naowarat, the justice minister in Anutin's first government, is reported as likely to remain at justice. Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, a senior coalition politician who has been associated with the transport portfolio, is also expected to continue in that sector.

The same pattern of continuity is reported in key economic ministries. Sihasak Phuangketkeow is the foreign minister in the first Anutin government and is expected to remain in foreign affairs. Ekniti Nitithanprapas, who serves as deputy prime minister and finance minister, is also expected to remain in charge of finance. Suphajee Suthumpun, the current commerce minister and one of the cabinet's most prominent technocratic appointments, is likewise expected to stay in place.

For senior coordinating roles, Songsak Thongsri, a long-time coalition political figure, is reported as a possible deputy prime minister. Attention has also shifted to Pakorn Nilprapunt, the secretary-general of the Council of State, which is the government's main legal advisory body, after Borwornsak Uwanno, a prominent legal scholar and senior legal adviser who had served in Anutin's first cabinet as a deputy prime minister overseeing legal affairs, reportedly declined a return to cabinet because of his age. [Bangkok Post 5]

Meanwhile, the Pheu Thai Party has also finalized its allocation of eight ministerial positions, including key economic and social portfolios as well as deputy minister roles. Among the confirmed nominees, Yodchanan Wongsawat, the party's prime ministerial candidate and nephew of the party's eminence grise Thaksin Shinawatra, is set to serve as deputy prime minister and minister of higher education, while Suriya Juangroongruangkit, a veteran politician, is nominated as minister of agriculture. Other key appointments include Julapun Amornvivat as labour minister, Prasert Jantararuangtong as education minister, and Sudawan Wangsuphakitkosol, a rising party leader, as minister of social development. [Bangkok Post 6] [Bangkok Post 7]

Policy coordination between coalition partners is underway, with the energy crisis identified as the government's most urgent priority amid rising global fuel costs linked to the Middle East war. The coalition is preparing a joint policy platform combining flagship proposals from Bhumjaithai and Pheu Thai, including a broader economic framework branded "Thailand 10 Plus," focused on inclusive growth, competitiveness, economic stimulus, debt management, and industrial development. Additional legislative priorities include

budget reallocation measures, public service reform, and sectoral restructuring. Pheu Thai has also advanced a package of 47 policy proposals centered on cost-of-living relief, local economic support, and education and human capital development.

The incoming administration faces immediate pressure from rising living costs, high household debt, and external economic shocks, limiting expectations for a prolonged political "honeymoon" period. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 8] [Bangkok Post 9]

At the same time, legal uncertainty surrounding the election process continues to loom as a potentially destabilizing factor. The Election Commission (EC) is under scrutiny over the use of barcodes and QR codes on ballots, which critics argue could compromise ballot secrecy. The Constitutional Court has accepted a petition to examine whether these practices violate constitutional requirements, giving authorities 15 days to submit explanations. If the court finds a violation, the February election could be annulled, potentially triggering a new vote with estimated costs of at least THB 7 billion (USD 203 million). [Bangkok Post 10] [Bangkok Post 11]

The controversy has reinforced broader structural debates over the role and power of independent oversight institutions—including the EC, the National Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Constitutional Court—which have historically played a decisive role in shaping Thailand's political trajectory. Reform-oriented actors, particularly within the People's Party, are using the dispute to advocate for constitutional changes that would redefine the authority and accountability of these bodies, while defenders argue they remain essential safeguards against electoral misconduct. [Bangkok Post 12]

Thailand: Legal scrutiny targets cabinet nominee and prime minister's family amid government formation

(lm) Two separate investigations involving a cabinet nominee and the family of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul have added legal and reputational pressure during Thailand's ongoing government formation process.

A ministerial nominee from the Pheu Thai Party – the second-largest party in the Bhumjaithai Party-led coalition - is facing a land encroachment investigation. Sudawan Wangsuphakitkosol, a deputy party leader and first-term list member of parliament, has been

summoned by the Department of Special Investigation to acknowledge charges linked to a case dating back to 2019. She has been nominated for the post of minister of social development and human security as part of the party's cabinet quota.

The case concerns the alleged unlawful use of public and protected land in Ubon Ratchathani province (in northeastern Thailand), where authorities claim that land designated as communal grazing and reserved forest areas was used to construct water reservoirs supporting a tapioca starch business linked to Sudawan's family. Investigators allege that state officials and private actors may have colluded to issue improper land documents enabling the development. The case also involves her father, a former cabinet minister, and other associated individuals. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Separately, Thai police have forwarded a case involving an alleged unauthorized private airstrip linked to the family of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of the Bhumjaithai, to the National Anti-Corruption Commission. The case concerns a so-called "VIP runway" located on land associated with the Charnvirakul family in Nakhon Ratchasima province.

Complaints filed in 2025 allege that public land, including a road within a local settlement, was converted into a private aircraft landing strip without proper authorization, potentially violating laws governing land use, construction, and air navigation. The site is linked to Rancho Charnvee Resort & Country Club, a property owned by the prime minister's family. Legal representatives have stated that the land holds valid title deeds and that the use of the area as a runway is permitted by the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand.

The investigation was conducted by local police after the Department of Special Investigation declined to classify the case as a special investigation, although evidence was reviewed in coordination with multiple agencies. A separate complaint to the Constitutional Court alleging abuse of authority was dismissed. The case will now be reviewed by the National Anti-Corruption Commission for further action. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Reserve senators urge Election Commission to ensure due process in Senate collusion case

(lm) A group of reserve senators has urged Thailand's Election Commission (EC) not to rush its ruling in a case involving alleged collusion in the 2024 Senate election, warning that an expedited decision could affect ongoing government formation.

The petition, led by Pol Lt Gen Khamrob Panyakaew, follows reports that a subcommittee had cleared all 229 suspects in the case, including 138 current senators and 91 others linked to the Bhumjaithai Party of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul. The case concerns allegations of coordinated vote-rigging to secure seats in the 200-member Senate. The case file is now before the EC's seven-member board, which has 90 days to decide whether to endorse the subcommittee's findings [see AiR No. 11, March/2026, 3].

Against this backdrop, the reserve senators raised concerns over the timing of the review, noting that the case had already exceeded the EC's one-year adjudication deadline but was now being accelerated. They also questioned the appointment and neutrality of the subcommittee reviewing the case, as well as the EC's handling of evidence from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI), a government agency responsible for complex criminal cases, which is conducting a parallel probe into alleged money laundering linked to the case. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Activist challenges deputy prime minister's role in fuel task force over conflict-of-interest concerns

(lm) A dispute has emerged over the composition of Thailand's emergency fuel management structure as an activist called for the removal of a senior government official overseeing the response to the ongoing fuel supply crisis.

Srisuwan Janya—a political activist known for filing legal petitions against public officials and leader of the Rak Chart Rak Phaendin (Love Nation, Love the Land) group—has formally requested that Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul remove Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, the deputy prime minister and transport minister, from the government's oil supply task force.

Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, a senior member of the ruling Bhumjaithai Party and currently serving as both deputy prime minister and transport minister, has been appointed to lead the Joint Management and Monitoring Centre for the Situation in the Middle East,

a government body coordinating Thailand's response to fuel supply disruptions linked to the war.

Srisuwan argues that Phiphat's previous involvement in the fuel retail business—through family-owned petrol station and transport operations—creates a potential conflict of interest, as the task force oversees fuel traders and distribution. He claims the appointment could violate provisions of the 2017 constitution and anti-corruption laws, and has also called for the removal of other members of the task force, including the energy minister and the president of PTT Plc, Thailand's state-controlled oil and gas company, citing concerns over industry influence.

Phiphat has rejected the allegations, stating that he withdrew from all management roles in his family's fuel business more than two decades ago and holds no shares in PTT. He has argued that his appointment reflects relevant industry experience rather than a conflict of interest. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Senate panel reviews Cambodia MoU while border fence construction moves forward

(lm) A Senate-appointed committee was scheduled to vote on March 24 on whether to recommend revoking a 2000 memorandum of understanding governing land boundary demarcation between Thailand and Cambodia. The move follows an earlier recommendation by the same committee to cancel a separate 2001 memorandum covering maritime and offshore areas. The committee cited recent border clashes and ongoing disputes in its review.

According to the committee, briefings from military units and site visits to affected provinces indicate that Thailand has reasserted control over most disputed areas previously held by Cambodia. Members stated that the existing agreements have not prevented tensions and that previously contested areas should not be renegotiated under current bilateral arrangements. If approved, the recommendation will be submitted to the full Senate and then forwarded to the cabinet for consideration.

The agreements currently form part of the framework for bilateral boundary management, alongside mechanisms such as the Joint Boundary Commission, the General Border Committee, and the Regional Border Committee, which would remain in place if the memoranda are revoked. [Bangkok Post 1]

Separately, Thai authorities confirmed plans to begin constructing a border fence in April along part of the nearly 800-kilometer Thailand–Cambodia frontier. The first phase will cover a 1.3-kilometer section in Chanthaburi province. Officials stated that the area has been cleared of landmines and that the project has received Cambodia's approval.

The initial construction phase is expected to take 45 days and will later be expanded to include permanent barriers and electronic monitoring systems such as sensors and closed-circuit cameras. The project follows military planning after clashes in 2025 and has received financial support from a royal foundation, including more than THB 200 million (USD 5.8 million) in public donations and an additional THB 121 million (USD 3.5 million) for the first phase.

Authorities also reported ongoing mine-clearing operations in border areas in Trat province, where landmines linked to past conflicts remain present. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Ex-prime minister Thaksin included in parole list as petition seeks to block early release

(lm) Former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is expected to be included in a list of approximately 500 inmates eligible for parole, while a separate petition has been filed seeking to block his early release.

According to a source at Klong Prem Central Prison, Thaksin is set to appear on a parole list to be finalized by the end of March following a multi-stage review process involving prison authorities, a department-level committee, and final approval at the ministry level. If approved, his release could take place on May 11. Authorities are currently assessing parole conditions, including supervision arrangements, residence requirements, and the risk of reoffending. [Bangkok Post 1]

Under existing regulations, Thaksin becomes eligible for parole after serving two-thirds of his one-year sentence, which falls on May 9. The sentence relates to convictions for abuse of authority and conflict of interest during his tenure prior to the 2006 military coup. Initially sentenced to eight years after returning from self-imposed exile in August 2023, his term was reduced to one year through royal clemency.

Thaksin has been in custody since September 9, 2025, after the Supreme Court ruled that a prior six-month

stay at Police General Hospital did not count toward time served, a decision that remains central to the current dispute over his eligibility.

In parallel, a petition has been submitted to the Ministry of Justice by Srisuwan Janya, calling for Thaksin to be denied parole and urging authorities to consider additional legal action. The petition, addressed to the justice minister, the ministry's permanent secretary, and the Department of Corrections, argues that the enforcement of Thaksin's sentence has been compromised. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Police prepare gold bribery case involving anti-corruption official for court submission

(lm) Thai anti-corruption police are preparing to forward a case to prosecutors involving an alleged bribe in gold offered to a member of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), with the aim of submitting it to the Central Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases.

The case centers on allegations that 246 baht-weight of gold bars—valued at approximately THB 15 million (USD 435,000)—were offered to influence a case linked to Pol Gen Surachate Hakparn, former deputy national police chief, who had been investigated in 2024 over connections to an online gambling network.

The investigation has been divided into two case files. One concerns the NACC commissioner allegedly involved in offering the bribe, which has already been submitted to parliament and the Supreme Court, where an independent inquiry panel has been established. The second concerns five suspects, including Pol Gen Surachate and four others, among them a NACC subcommittee member and an expert adviser, and is being finalized for submission to prosecutors. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Multiple cases highlight misconduct by former politicians

(lm) Recent legal and anti-corruption proceedings in Thailand have highlighted multiple cases of misconduct involving former members of parliament and a former political party leader, spanning ethical violations and financial crimes.

Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission has found two former lawmakers guilty of serious ethical violations. Chaithip Kamolpantip, a former member of parliament from the Palang Pracharath Party, a military-aligned political party, was found to have engaged in illegal gambling inside his private office in the parliament building during official working hours, constituting a breach of ethical standards and damaging the integrity of the House of Representatives.

In a separate case, Saritpong Kiewkhong, a former member of parliament from the ruling Bhumjaithai Party of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, was found to have unlawfully held and benefited from nearly 600 rai (approximately 0.96 square kilometers) of land designated for agricultural reform within a protected forest area. The land, intended for redistribution to low-income farmers, was used for oil palm cultivation, and he was also found to have underreported his landholdings in official asset declarations. Both cases have been referred to the Supreme Court for further proceedings. [Bangkok Post 1]

Separately, the Saraburi Provincial Court has sentenced Peerawit Ruangluedollaphak, former leader of the Tai Rak Tham Party, a small political party, to five years in prison for embezzlement of political party funds. The case involved the misuse of approximately THB 18.79 million (USD 0.56 million) in state subsidies allocated to the party, along with the submission of false expenditure reports. The investigation was initiated by the Election Commission, Thailand's body responsible for overseeing elections and regulating political parties, which also pursued civil recovery of the funds. Authorities stated that Peerawit fled to Laos before being apprehended with assistance from the Royal Thai Police. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Structural failures identified in audit office collapse as rebuild abandoned and legal action expands

(lm) Thai authorities have identified multiple structural and construction failures behind the collapse of a headquarters building belonging to the State Audit Office, while confirming that the agency will not rebuild on the original site as investigations and legal proceedings continue.

The building, a 30–33-storey structure under construction in Bangkok's Chatuchak district, collapsed on March 28, 2025, following tremors from an earthquake in Myanmar, killing at least 95 people. The

project, initiated in 2018, involved contracts for design, construction, and supervision worth more than THB 2.1 billion (USD 61 million), while the overall construction budget was reported at THB 3.2 billion (USD 96 million).

According to a progress report drawing on studies by multiple Thai engineering institutions, the structure failed to meet required seismic resistance standards. Investigators found that the collapse originated in the lower floors, where structural walls failed under earthquake-induced forces. Concrete used in key load-bearing components was below required strength, construction plans did not comply with applicable regulations, and reinforcement steel at critical joints was insufficiently embedded, weakening the structure. These findings confirm earlier assessments that deficiencies in both design and construction contributed to the collapse.

Legal proceedings are ongoing across several tracks. Prosecutors have filed criminal charges against 23 individuals and companies over alleged substandard design, construction failures, and document falsification. The Department of Special Investigation is pursuing additional cases, including issues related to nominee arrangements and potential foreign business law violations, while corruption-related matters have been referred to the National Anti-Corruption Commission. A separate review is also examining compliance with public procurement regulations.

Compensation paid to victims and their families has reached THB 129,855,093 (USD 3.90 million). The State Audit Office has terminated contracts with construction and supervision firms, is seeking damages from contractors, and has compiled more than 44,000 pages of documentation for investigators. Authorities confirmed that no new construction project is planned at the site, and the allocated budget has been suspended. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Court acquits reformist party lawmaker in royal defamation case

(lm) A Thai court has acquitted Piyarat Chongthep, a lawmaker from the reformist and main opposition People's Party and a former pro-democracy protest activist, of charges under Section 112 of the Criminal Code, Thailand's royal defamation law, in connection with a speech delivered during protests in 2020.

The Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Court ruled that his speech, which addressed the relationship between the

monarchy and the military, did not constitute defamation of the monarchy. The court found that the remarks concerned institutional structures rather than personal criticism of the monarch, and also dismissed related charges under Section 116 of the Criminal Code, which covers sedition, and the Computer Crime Act, a law regulating online content and digital offenses.

The case marks the third acquittal for Chongthep under Section 112, following earlier rulings in 2024 and 2025. Before entering parliament, he was a prominent figure in protest movements against the government of former prime minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, a former military leader who came to power after the 2014 coup.

In a separate but related development, the South Bangkok Criminal Court also acquitted Nawat Liangwattana, a political activist known for delivering speeches at protest events and currently facing multiple lèse-majesté cases, of a Section 112 charge linked to a protest speech in 2023, citing insufficient evidence that the remarks constituted a threat to the monarchy. However, he remains in detention on separate royal defamation charges related to earlier protests in 2020 and 2021. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Fuel disruptions trigger shortages, price increases, and economy-wide pressure

(lm/msz) Over the past days, Thailand experienced a broad energy-related disruption driven by global oil market volatility linked to the intensifying Middle East war, resulting in rising fuel prices, localized shortages, and spillover effects across key economic sectors. The disruption originates from Thailand's structural dependence on imported oil—more than 50 percent of which is sourced from the Middle East—making the country highly exposed to supply shocks and price volatility.

Fuel shortages have been reported across multiple provinces, particularly in northern and northeastern regions such as Phrae, Chiang Mai, and Nakhon Ratchasima. Authorities – confirming that national fuel reserves remain sufficient for up to 101 days when scheduled deliveries are included - attribute these shortages primarily to disruptions in distribution, including reduced supply from major distributors to independent petrol stations, combined with a surge in demand, which increased from approximately 67

million to 84 million liters per day. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3] [Bangkok Post 4]

The interim government has begun gradually increasing retail fuel prices while maintaining subsidies through the Oil Fuel Fund, Thailand's primary price-stabilization mechanism. The fund continues to subsidize diesel at approximately THB 20.36 (USD 0.59) per liter and is currently in deficit by about THB 12 billion (USD 348 million), with a capped loss ceiling of THB 40 billion (USD 1.16 billion). Discounted B20 diesel—diesel blended with 20 percent biodiesel—has been introduced at a reduction of THB 4–5 (USD 0.12–0.15) per liter for transport, agricultural, and industrial users. Additional fiscal measures, including excise tax reductions and expanded borrowing authority for the Oil Fuel Fund, are under preparation but remain constrained by the caretaker government's limited mandate pending the full formation of the new, incoming administration under Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul. [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6]

Sectoral impacts are already significant. In agriculture, diesel shortages have delayed harvesting operations during the peak rice season, with machinery unable to operate due to lack of fuel. In the transport and logistics sector, operators report disrupted delivery schedules, particularly for perishable goods, and rising costs as some are forced to purchase fuel above official prices. In the fisheries sector, where fuel is a primary input, marine diesel prices have risen to approximately THB 39.39 (USD 1.14) per liter, prompting around 40 percent of fishing vessels to suspend operations due to unviable costs. [Bangkok Post 7] [Bangkok Post 8] [Bangkok Post 9] [Bangkok Post 10]

These pressures are feeding into consumer prices. Essential goods—including palm oil, bottled water, vegetables, and meat—have begun to increase in price due to higher transport costs, supply constraints, and rising input costs, including petrochemical-based packaging materials. Manufacturers and distributors indicate that broader price increases are likely from April onward. [Bangkok Post 11] [Bangkok Post 12] [Bangkok Post 13] [Bangkok Post 14]

The government has implemented emergency oversight measures to stabilize the situation, including requiring fuel traders to report daily data on production, stock levels, and sales, and strengthening inspections to prevent hoarding and price manipulation. Authorities are also coordinating internationally to diversify supply, with discussions underway with suppliers in Russia, Brazil, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Angola, and the United States to reduce

reliance on Middle Eastern imports. [Bangkok Post 15] [Bangkok Post 16]

Public concern is rising amid the disruptions. Surveys indicate that 44.28 percent of respondents lack confidence in both the country's oil reserves and the government's ability to secure additional supply, while nearly half report concern about the situation. The crisis is also affecting behavior, with some individuals reconsidering travel plans for the Songkran holiday. [Bangkok Post 17] [Bangkok Post 18]

The situation has generated increasing political pressure. Opposition parties—including the People's Party, the Klatham Party, and the Democrat Party—are preparing parliamentary scrutiny of the government's response. Senators have warned of broader macroeconomic risks, including potential contraction in gross domestic product and rising costs across agriculture and household consumption. Civil society groups have called for measures including fuel tax reductions, electricity tariff cuts, and stricter price controls on essential goods. [Bangkok Post 19] [Bangkok Post 20] [Bangkok Post 21]

Thailand: Electricity tariffs set to rise amid LNG price surge and energy supply adjustments

(lm) Thailand is preparing for a potential increase in electricity tariffs for the May–August 2026 billing period as rising liquefied natural gas (LNG) costs—driven by the ongoing war in the Middle East—place upward pressure on power generation costs.

The Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC), Thailand's independent energy regulator responsible for setting electricity tariffs, is reviewing three pricing scenarios. Under the baseline option, which includes full repayment of approximately THB 36 billion (USD 1.04 billion) in outstanding costs incurred by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT)—the state-owned power producer and grid operator—the tariff could rise to THB 4.59 (USD 0.13) per unit, representing an increase of approximately 18 percent from the current THB 3.88 (USD 0.11).

Alternative scenarios would result in smaller increases. Excluding debt repayment would bring the tariff to THB 4.08 (USD 0.12), an increase of around 5 percent, while applying partial subsidies would reduce the tariff to THB 3.95 (USD 0.11), still about 2 percent above the current level.

The increase is primarily driven by a sharp rise in LNG prices, which have reached approximately USD 25 per million British thermal units, significantly increasing fuel costs in Thailand's power sector, where natural gas remains a dominant input. Maintaining current tariff levels would require additional government subsidies.

To mitigate the impact, authorities are implementing supply-side adjustments. Domestic natural gas production in the Gulf of Thailand has been increased by around 150 million cubic feet per day, bringing total output to approximately 2 billion cubic feet per day. At the same time, Thailand is seeking to diversify LNG imports by negotiating additional supply from the Asia-Pacific region and West Africa.

On the generation side, EGAT has been instructed to increase output from the Mae Moh power plant—a coal-fired facility with lower production costs—to reduce reliance on more expensive gas-based generation. The plant is currently producing about 700 megawatts out of a total capacity of 1,200 megawatts. Authorities are also exploring additional hydropower imports, particularly from Laos, to strengthen supply during the period of elevated fuel prices. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Market sell-off triggers capital outflows and exposes structural risks in Social Security Fund

(lm) Thailand's financial markets have come under sustained pressure in recent days as escalating geopolitical tensions linked to ongoing war in the Middle East have driven a global "risk-off" shift, resulting in significant capital outflows, equity market declines, and emerging stress in major domestic institutional investors.

Foreign investors have withdrawn more than THB 36 billion (USD 1 billion) from Thai government bonds so far in March, putting the market on track for its largest outflow in four years. The sell-off intensified on March 20, when overseas investors pulled THB 43.2 billion (USD 1.2 billion) from Thai bonds—the largest daily outflow since March 2022—while also selling an equivalent amount of Thai equities, marking the largest equity outflow in two years. The shift reflects a broader move by global investors away from emerging markets toward safe-haven assets amid rising oil prices, inflation concerns, and external uncertainty.

At the same time, Thailand's benchmark Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) index fell below the 1,400-

point threshold, closing at 1,398.82, down 2.38 percent in a single session. The decline was broad-based and led by energy stocks, underscoring the sensitivity of Thai markets to global commodity and geopolitical developments. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

The market downturn has had direct implications for domestic institutional investors. Thailand's Social Security Fund—a state-managed fund worth approximately THB 2.9 trillion (USD 84 billion) that provides pensions and welfare benefits to around 25 million beneficiaries—breached its internal risk threshold on March 9, with its value-at-risk exceeding the 8 percent limit. The breach was driven in part by exposure to Thai equities during the market decline, which earlier in the month was severe enough to trigger a temporary trading halt (circuit breaker).

The episode has highlighted structural constraints in the fund's investment strategy. Approximately 69 percent of its portfolio is allocated to low-risk assets, with around 7 percent invested in Thai equities and roughly 60 percent concentrated in domestic markets. This limited diversification has raised concerns about resilience to market shocks and long-term return sustainability, particularly in the context of Thailand's aging population and increasing pension liabilities.

While the Social Security Office has stated that the fund remains financially sound, the market volatility has intensified calls for governance reform and portfolio restructuring. Proposed measures include increasing allocations to higher-yield international assets, improving diversification, and strengthening oversight mechanisms to enhance long-term performance and risk management. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: MP survives armed attack as bomb incidents reported in southern provinces

(lm) Violent incidents were reported in Thailand's southern border region, including an armed attack on a member of parliament and two separate bomb explosions targeting security installations.

On March 20, Kamonsak Leewamoh, a lawmaker from the Prachachat Party - a political party with a support base in Thailand's southern border provinces -, survived an armed ambush in Narathiwat province. Kamonsak, who is also a human rights lawyer, was not injured, but his driver and a police escort accompanying him were seriously wounded. He has been involved in legal advocacy related to the Tak Bai

massacre - a 2004 incident in which 85 detainees died in military custody after a protest in southern Thailand - and in efforts to amend laws governing cases involving civilians and state officials. [Bangkok Post 1]

Separately, two bomb attacks occurred within a 10-hour period between March 17 and March 18 in Pattani province, another southern province affected by a long-running insurgency. The first explosion took place near a police checkpoint in Panare district, injuring five officers. A second device detonated hours later near a paramilitary ranger post in Khok Pho district, damaging a nearby house but causing no additional injuries. [Bangkok Post 2]

Timor-Leste: Higher energy prices strain households and long-term finances

(ms) Rising global oil prices linked to ongoing geopolitical tensions are increasing economic pressure in Timor-Leste, highlighting structural vulnerabilities in the country's economy.

As an import-dependent nation, Timor-Leste is particularly exposed to higher fuel costs. Increases in global oil prices are feeding into domestic transport costs and the prices of basic goods, reducing purchasing power for households, especially in urban areas such as Dili.

At the same time, the country no longer benefits from significant oil production. Government spending is largely financed through withdrawals from the Petroleum Fund, which stood at approximately USD 18.91 billion as of late 2025. While the fund continues to provide a buffer for public finances, it represents a finite resource and is being drawn down in the absence of new revenue streams.

International institutions have warned that current withdrawal levels may not be sustainable over the long term, with projections suggesting the fund could be depleted by the late 2030s if trends continue.

The current situation also reflects broader structural challenges, including limited economic diversification and high reliance on imports. These factors increase exposure to external shocks such as commodity price volatility.

Timor-Leste's recent accession to ASEAN offers potential opportunities for trade and investment, but may also increase exposure to regional competition and price fluctuations.

Overall, while the country is not facing an immediate economic crisis, rising energy costs are intensifying existing pressures and underscoring the need for fiscal discipline and economic diversification. [The Interpreter]

Vietnam: Expansion of domestic measures as oil crisis exposes structural vulnerabilities

(ms) Vietnam has stepped up domestic measures to manage the impact of the global oil supply disruption triggered by the Iran war, as rising prices and supply risks begin to affect its economy.

Authorities have introduced a mix of demand management and supply-side responses. In recent weeks, the government has encouraged companies to adopt work-from-home arrangements to reduce fuel consumption and ease pressure on supply chains. At the same time, officials have sought alternative crude sources, reaching out to suppliers in the Middle East, as well as Japan, South Korea and Angola, to diversify imports.

Vietnam is also accelerating longer-term energy adjustments. These include plans to expand offshore oil exploration by offering incentives to international investors, as well as promoting ethanol-blended fuels, electric vehicles and renewable energy to reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels.

The measures reflect Vietnam's exposure to external shocks. Domestic oil production is projected to decline to between 5.8 and 8.0 million tons annually between 2026 and 2030, down from about 8.6 million tons in recent years. At the same time, imports have been rising, with around 80 percent of crude oil sourced from Kuwait, leaving the country vulnerable to disruptions linked to the Strait of Hormuz.

The economic impact is already visible. Fuel prices have risen by roughly 30 percent for gasoline and 40 percent for diesel since the start of the conflict. Analysts estimate that every USD 10 per barrel increase in oil prices could reduce Vietnam's GDP growth by around 0.2 percentage points while raising inflation by up to 0.4 percentage points.

Beyond direct energy costs, risks are spreading to manufacturing, transportation and food prices. Higher electricity costs, potential fertiliser price increases and disruptions to regional refining capacity could further weigh on growth.

Overall, Vietnam's response highlights both short-term crisis management and longer-term efforts to reduce structural dependence on imported energy. [MUFG] [Reuters] [The Diplomat]

Vietnam: Power consolidation tests new leadership amid energy shock

(hn) Vietnam's ruling Communist Party of Vietnam secured about 97 percent of seats (482 out of 500) in the National Assembly after the March 15 election, maintaining overwhelming control. The election saw high turnout (approximately 99 percent), but was largely procedural, as most candidates were party members and the legislature has limited independence.

The new National Assembly will convene in early April to approve key leadership positions, including the president and prime minister. Party chief To Lam is widely expected to also become president, consolidating power similarly to Xi Jinping in China.

At the same time, the new leadership will face economic pressure from the Middle East conflict, especially disruptions linked to the Strait of Hormuz. This has already driven fuel prices sharply higher in Vietnam and could impact key sectors like manufacturing and transportation due to the country's reliance on imported oil and regional fuel supplies. [Thediplomat] [Straitimes]

According to Thayer - Professor of Politics at The University of New South Wales, if To Lam becomes both General Secretary and President for a full term, it would concentrate significant political power, allowing him to influence a wide range of state and party matters.

As President, he would have formal authority over legislation, key government appointments, and the military. However, in practice, his power would still depend on collective approval - he must secure support from the Politburo, Central Committee, and National Assembly to exercise these powers. [Carl Thayer]

Vietnam: Free annual health check-ups proposed for vulnerable groups starting 2026

(hn) The health ministry has proposed a plan to provide free annual health check-ups and screenings for vulnerable groups starting in 2026, as part of a draft decree currently open for consultation. The policy targets two main groups workers covered by labor safety regulations and those who are not and will be implemented in two phases.

From 2026 to 2027, priority will be given to seniors, people with disabilities, individuals from poor and near-poor households, war veterans, chronic patients, and residents in disadvantaged, remote, or island areas, with the state budget covering all costs regardless of insurance status. From 2028 onward, the program will expand to include all remaining eligible individuals. Check-ups will be conducted at licensed health facilities or through mobile clinics, and local authorities may broaden coverage depending on their financial capacity.

Over time, the health insurance fund will assume payment responsibilities for insured individuals within their coverage limits, with the overall goal of improving early detection and preventive care for high-risk populations. [Tuoitrenews] [Vietnam]

Vietnam: Government pilots domestic crypto exchanges to tighten oversight and curb foreign platform reliance

(hn) Vietnam is launching a pilot program for locally operated cryptocurrency exchanges as part of efforts to regulate its rapidly growing digital asset market and reduce reliance on foreign platforms. Five companies have passed the initial screening, including affiliates of major banks such as Techcombank, VPBank, and LPBank, along with VIX Securities and the Sun Group.

The move follows a government resolution issued in February and could be rolled out as early as March. It is part of a broader strategy to create a controlled domestic crypto ecosystem, allowing authorities to better monitor transactions, manage capital flows, and curb speculative risks associated with trading on overseas platforms.

Vietnam has emerged as one of the world's leading crypto markets, ranking high in global adoption, with an estimated USD 200 billion in transactions over the past year. However, this rapid growth has raised concerns about financial stability, especially given existing limits on cross-border capital movements and the lack of diverse domestic investment channels.

By establishing a legal framework - introduced last year to formally recognize digital assets - the government aims to strike a balance between fostering innovation and maintaining financial oversight, while also addressing broader issues such as gold price volatility and real estate speculation driven by limited investment alternatives. [Coindesk] [Sandmark]

Vietnam: Authorities propose ID verification for social media group admins in cybercrime crackdown

(hn) Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security has proposed a draft decree requiring internet and social media platforms to verify the identities of group administrators as part of efforts to combat cybercrime.

Under the proposal, administrators and moderators would be responsible for managing content and members in compliance with the law, removing violations, and reporting suspicious activities. Service providers would need to monitor groups, apply technical measures to detect violations, verify admin identities, and handle user complaints.

The draft also requires companies to provide data to authorities within 24 hours, or within three hours in urgent cases involving security or safety risks. While tightening oversight, the proposal stresses that enforcement must still respect freedom of expression and privacy rights. [Vietnamnews] [Tuoitrenews]

Vietnam: Silver bullion listing proposed to standardize trading and improve transparency

(hn) Vietnam is considering listing silver bullion on its Mercantile Exchange to standardize trading and improve transparency amid rising demand and volatile global prices.

Currently, most silver transactions are informal and fragmented, lacking centralized pricing and risk management, which increases risks for investors and businesses.

The proposed listing would create a transparent market with unified pricing and hedging tools, aligning Vietnam with international practices. Authorities stress careful evaluation of economic impacts and the need for safeguards against speculation.

A two-phase plan is proposed: first, a domestic pilot with physical trading, followed by potential integration with regional and global exchanges. However, silver supply remains heavily dependent on imports. [Vietnamnews] [Voiceofvietnam]

Vietnam: Stronger measures introduced to boost rice exports and stabilize domestic market

(hn) The Ministry of Industry and Trade has directed stronger measures to boost rice exports while ensuring domestic market stability and food security. The plan emphasizes better coordination among authorities and businesses to balance supply and demand, expand export markets, and reduce reliance on traditional buyers by leveraging trade agreements like the EU and UK FTAs.

Authorities will promote higher-value exports, improve market monitoring, and support businesses in managing risks from geopolitical tensions and logistics disruptions. At the same time, stricter domestic controls will aim to prevent speculation, stabilize prices, and ensure smooth distribution.

Exporters are encouraged to enhance quality, diversify products, strengthen branding, and adopt risk management strategies, while local authorities guide farmers toward high-quality production and better logistics. Overall, the measures seek to maintain competitiveness in rice exports while protecting domestic supply, especially as export volumes rise but values decline due to lower prices. [Vietnamnews] [Voiceofvietnam]

Vietnam: Efforts intensify to curb illegal fishing amid push to lift EU ‘yellow card’ warning

(hn) On March 19, Vietnam reaffirmed its strong commitment to combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing during a visit by a European Commission delegation for its fifth inspection.

Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính emphasized that cooperation with the EU is based on sincerity, transparency, and concrete action, while highlighting the EU as a key partner. He noted growing economic ties, with bilateral trade reaching nearly USD 74 billion in 2025, supported by agreements like the EU–Vietnam

Free Trade Agreement and EU - Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement.

Vietnam has implemented wide-ranging measures to address IUU fishing, including stricter laws, better fleet management, improved traceability, and support for fishermen transitioning livelihoods. The effort reflects both compliance with EU recommendations and Vietnam's broader goal of sustainable fisheries development.

The EU delegation acknowledged Vietnam's significant progress over the past eight years, particularly in monitoring and traceability systems, and expressed confidence that remaining issues can be resolved raising hopes for the removal of the EU's "yellow card" warning on Vietnamese seafood. [Vietnamnews]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Chinese military delegation to hold security talks with EU and NATO amid Iran war

(ms) A delegation from China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is set to hold talks with the European Union and NATO in Brussels, as the ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran reshapes global security priorities.

The EU-China Security and Defense Consultations are scheduled to take place on March 24, according to officials familiar with the arrangements. Meetings between NATO representatives and the PLA's Office for

International Military Cooperation are expected to be held during the same week.

On the EU side, the talks will be chaired by Benedikta von Seherr-Thoss, a senior official in the European External Action Service, which functions as the bloc's diplomatic arm. NATO confirmed that contacts with Chinese military representatives form part of its regular dialogue aimed at improving transparency.

No official agenda has been released. Previous rounds of discussions have focused on regional security issues and broader strategic concerns, including conflict zones and military risk reduction.

The meetings come at a time of heightened geopolitical tension following the escalation of hostilities in the Middle East, which has affected global energy markets and increased security concerns among major powers.

Relations between China and European institutions remain complex, particularly due to differences over the war in Ukraine and broader security issues. These tensions have limited progress in recent years, despite continued diplomatic engagement. The upcoming talks will be the first such exchanges in approximately two years. [Anadolu Ajansi] [South China Morning Post]

Japan navigates Hormuz diplomacy, U.S. alliance and energy security amid Middle East tensions

(dql) Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi secured tacit U.S. understanding during her March 19 summit with Donald Trump, maintaining Japan's cautious position on involvement in the Strait of Hormuz amid the Iran conflict, while avoiding direct friction with Washington. [Prime Minister's Office, Japan]

Takaichi reiterated that Japan's response is constrained by Article 9 of its pacifist constitution, limiting any direct military deployment of the Self-Defense Forces. Although Trump continues to press allies for greater contributions to securing the critical energy route, Tokyo signaled willingness to provide indirect support within legal limits, including increased imports of U.S. energy and potential post-conflict mine-clearing operations, as outlined by Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi.

Like Takaichi, Motegi emphasized the hypothetical nature of such a move, underscoring constitutional constraints on military action while pointing to existing

legal provisions that allow overseas deployment if Japan's survival is at stake. [Reuters]

Beyond Hormuz, the summit produced tangible progress in alliance cooperation. Both sides agreed to expand joint defense production—including AIM-120 missiles and increased output of SM-3 Block IIA interceptors—while advancing collaboration on secure government cloud infrastructure and sustaining U.S. forward military presence in Japan. They also reaffirmed the strategic importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait and the broader Indo-Pacific, implicitly addressing China's growing regional assertiveness, while Tokyo emphasized a calibrated approach toward Beijing.

Economic and technological ties were further deepened, notably through ongoing large-scale Japanese investment commitments in the U.S. and accelerated joint efforts on rare earth resource development linked to Minamitorishima. [The Asahi Shimbun] [The Japan Times]

Minamitorishima (Marcus Island) is a remote Pacific island whose surrounding seabed contains significant rare earth deposits, making it strategically important for Japan's access to critical materials used in advanced technologies. It also expands Japan's exclusive economic zone, positioning it as a key asset in Tokyo's efforts to reduce dependence on China and strengthen long-term resource security.

Iran offers safe passage for Japanese vessels amid Hormuz tensions

Separately, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said in an interview with *Kyodo News* that Tehran is prepared to facilitate the safe passage of Japanese vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, with bilateral discussions ongoing, despite heightened regional tensions following U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran. [Kyodo News 1]

Araghchi, referring to Takaichi's Washington trip, also said he expects Japan to help facilitate an end to the confrontation. He reiterated Iran's demand for a comprehensive end to the conflict—rejecting a temporary ceasefire—and called for international support against what he described as aggression.

The waterway was effectively shut following U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28. The disruption has severely affected maritime traffic, with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps initially threatening to target ships transiting the strait.

Recently, however, Tehran has softened its stance, indicating the route remains open to countries not involved in the attacks. Japan—highly dependent on Middle Eastern oil flows—may soon join a limited group of states, including China, India, and Pakistan, whose vessels have been permitted to pass with Iranian approval.

For Tokyo, which depends on the Middle East for over 90 percent of its crude oil imports, the issue is critical. Japanese officials are pursuing direct engagement with Tehran to ensure maritime access while avoiding friction with Washington. [Al Jareeza]

Following Araghchi's interview, senior ruling Liberal Democratic Party executive Takayuki Kobayashi has called on Takaichi to explore high-level dialogue with Iran. He described the Iranian foreign minister's messaging as unprecedented and urged Tokyo to capitalize on the opening for strategic diplomacy.

Kobayashi suggested engagement could begin at the foreign minister level and potentially escalate to a summit, emphasizing Japan's unique position given its longstanding ties with Iran. [Japan Today 1]

Prior to the interview, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi called on Iran to halt actions threatening navigation in the Strait of Hormuz during phone talks with Araghchi on March 17. Motegi voiced concern over Japanese-linked vessels stranded in the Persian Gulf and urged Tehran to guarantee safe passage for all ships, while also calling for an end to attacks on civilian infrastructure and requesting the release of two detained Japanese nationals. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Japan Today 2]

Government taps oil reserves to cushion shock from Middle East conflict

In the latest development, Takaichi announced on March 24 that Japan will begin releasing crude from state reserves this week, following an earlier drawdown of private-sector stockpiles, in response to surging prices and supply risks stemming from the Middle East conflict.

The move that marks the largest-ever release of strategic oil reserves also includes plans to utilize jointly held reserves from Middle Eastern producers stored in Japan, as Tokyo seeks to stabilize domestic markets amid disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, through which the vast majority of Japan's oil imports transit. [Kyodo News 2] [The Guardian]

The move comes after average gasoline prices last week surged to a record JPY 190.8 (USD 1.20) per liter, marking the fifth consecutive weekly increase and the sharpest jump on record. [Nippon.com]

In response, the government announced to reinstate fuel subsidies, providing JPY 30.2 (USD 0.19) per liter to suppliers to bring prices down toward a target of around JPY 170 (USD 1.07). The move follows the recent phase-out of earlier support measures and comes amid concerns that prices could exceed JPY 200 (USD 1.26), posing renewed inflationary pressure on households and businesses.

Since 2022, the government has already spent more than JPY 8 trillion (USD 50 billion) on fuel subsidies, underscoring the country's structural dependence on imported energy and the fiscal burden of shielding its economy from external shocks. [Kyodo News 3]

Mongolia, EU deepen talks on energy transition, investment cooperation

(fs) Deputy Prime Minister Dorjkhand Togmid took part in the Mongolia-European Union Investors Roundtable in Brussels on March 15, engaging with European policymakers, financial institutions, and investors on advancing Mongolia's energy transition and expanding investment opportunities. The event was held within the framework of the European Union's Global Gateway initiative, a EUR 300 billion+ investment strategy launched in 2021 to boost sustainable, high-quality infrastructure projects worldwide through 2027.

The Mongolian delegation underlined the country's renewable energy potential and its commitment to energy sector reforms, identified as a government priority. Discussions focused on enhancing cooperation in renewable energy, infrastructure, and sustainable finance, alongside the implementation of concrete investment projects.

On the sidelines, Togmid met Speaker of the Chamber of Representatives of the Belgian Federal Parliament Peter De Roover and European Commissioner for International Partnerships of the European Commission Jozef Síkela to discuss expanding cooperation in trade, renewable energy, and digital infrastructure, as well as strengthening energy security through technologies such as battery storage. [Montsame]

Mongolia discusses new transparency law for extractive industries with global transparency body

(fs) Speaker of the Mongolian Parliament Uchral Nyam-Osor met Regional Director of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) Oliana Valigura on March 18 to discuss strengthening transparency in Mongolia's resource sector.

Nyam-Osor emphasized plans to improve the country's ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index by adopting a law on the National Wealth Fund and Extractive Industries Transparency. The proposed legislation would make contracts, licenses, and financial information of mining companies publicly accessible, helping reduce corruption risks. The law would also extend beyond mining to include natural resources such as water, forests, wildlife, and plants.

Valigura expressed readiness to support the legislative process, noting the law's potential to enhance transparency and improve Mongolia's international standing. [Montsame]

The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is a global standard for the open, accountable management of oil, gas, and mineral resources. It requires member countries to disclose information along the extractive value chain, from extraction contracts to revenue payments, to reduce corruption, improve governance, and ensure resources benefit the public.

North Korea vows irreversible nuclear status while keeping conditional opening to U.S. dialogue

(dql) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has reaffirmed his intent to permanently entrench the country as a nuclear-armed state, while maintaining a confrontational stance toward South Korea and a conditional openness toward the United States.

Speaking at the Supreme People's Assembly—North Korea's legislature—on March 23, Kim described Seoul as the "most hostile" actor and signaled Pyongyang's readiness to counter either confrontation or coexistence from Washington. [The Korea Herald]

His remarks echo positions set out at the recent ruling Workers' Party of Korea congress, where Pyongyang rejected denuclearization demands but avoided fully

closing the door to talks with U.S. President Donald Trump (see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 4). At the same time, the regime continues to frame the United States as a source of global instability, linking its rhetoric to broader conflicts such as those in the Middle East.

The parliamentary session also approved constitutional revisions, though details remain undisclosed. Observers had anticipated formalizing South Korea as a permanent adversary, consistent with Kim's 2024 declaration abandoning peaceful reunification.

This shift underscores Pyongyang's recalibration of inter-Korean relations, viewing Seoul less as a diplomatic intermediary and more as an obstacle, while tightening internal controls against South Korean cultural influence.

Kim highlighted recent advances in nuclear and missile capabilities as essential to safeguarding national sovereignty, reinforcing a doctrine centered on deterrence and strategic autonomy. Since the collapse of negotiations following the 2019 Hanoi summit, North Korea has disengaged from substantive diplomacy with both Washington and Seoul. [NBC]

South Korea weighs withdrawal from UN North Korea human rights resolution

South Korea is reviewing whether to withdraw as a co-sponsor of a UN resolution on North Korean human rights ahead of the next United Nations Human Rights Council session. The potential move would depart from last year's policy under the Lee Jae Myung administration, reflecting Seoul's efforts to ease tensions with Pyongyang.

Officials emphasized that the decision seeks to balance diplomatic engagement with human rights concerns. Analysts note that a withdrawal could signal a conciliatory approach, though its effect on inter-Korean relations remains uncertain. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea signs letter of intent with six UN agencies to establish global AI hub

(co) South Korea on March 17 signed a letter of intent with six UN agencies to cooperate on establishing a global artificial intelligence hub in the country.

The agreement, signed in Geneva by South Korean officials from the science ministry and the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Telecommunication Union, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Program and the United Nations Development Program, reflects Seoul's effort to position the hub as a platform linking UN bodies with public and private actors to address global challenges through AI.

Prime Minister Kim Min-seok promoted the initiative during meetings with UN officials on his tour to the United States and Switzerland, emphasizing support for developing countries and vulnerable groups. He called Seoul's effort to establish the AI hub part of Korea's latest push to become the "global top 3 AI powerhouse." [The Korea Herald]

UN agency leaders expressed backing for the project and agreed to continue coordination on its implementation. [Yonhap News Agency]

Taiwan withdraws from WTO ministerial conference over designation dispute

(yl) Taiwan has withdrawn from a World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial conference in Cameroon after visa documents issued by the host country listed its delegation as "Taiwan, Province of China," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) said.

The conference is scheduled to take place from March 26 to 29 in Yaoundé, with Taiwan originally planning to send a delegation led by its chief trade negotiator. MOFA said the designation undermined Taiwan's status as a WTO member and marked the first time since joining the organization in 2001 that Taiwan declined to attend a ministerial meeting.

Taiwan lodged formal protests with both the WTO Secretariat and Cameroon, while the United States, Japan, and other partners had also raised concerns with the host country. Cameroon declined to amend the designation, citing its foreign policy. [Focus Taiwan] [Bloomberg]

India ramps up diplomacy to ease Middle East tensions

(dql) India has ramped up diplomatic efforts to manage the fallout from the Middle East crisis, with a focus on

de-escalation, energy security, and maritime stability.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 19 emphasized the need for calm and dialogue in the Middle East during separate phone discussions with Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, French President Emmanuel Macron, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, and Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

Following his conversation with Sultan Haitham, Modi condemned violations of Oman's sovereignty and reaffirmed support for secure navigation through the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz. In discussions with Macron, Anwar, and King Hamad, he stressed the urgency of de-escalation, the importance of diplomacy, and maintaining freedom of navigation amid attacks on energy and civilian infrastructure, which carry broader implications for global food, fuel, and fertilizer security. [Anadolu Ajansı] [The Tribune 1]

Furthermore, on March 21, Modi held a call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to discuss the deteriorating security situation in West Asia, condemning attacks on critical infrastructure and emphasizing the need to maintain secure and open shipping lanes. The exchange, their second in ten days, also included calls for dialogue and diplomacy to address escalating tensions. [DD News 1]

In parallel, Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar also conducted diplomatic meetings, engaging with Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar and UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation Reem Al Hashimy. The discussions centered on the ongoing conflict and its broader regional and global impact, including measures to ensure the safety of the Indian diaspora. [DD News 2] [Gulf News]

In addition, held discussions with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath on the wider regional repercussions, and met six ambassadors from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, emphasizing India's appreciation for support to its expatriate community amid heightened tensions.

Jaishankar also conferred with German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul, agreeing to maintain close coordination as the situation develops. In these talks, he reaffirmed India's strategic priorities under the "Neighbourhood First" policy and the maritime framework "MAHASAGAR", highlighting the country's focus on regional stability, energy security, and protection of its diaspora. [The Tribune 2]

"MAHASAGAR" is India's strategic framework for maritime cooperation and engagement across the

Indian Ocean region. The term literally means “great ocean” in Hindi, and it reflects India’s focus on maritime security, trade routes, and regional partnerships in the Indian Ocean and surrounding seas.

These engagements as the Trump administration issued a 30-day waiver on sanctions for the purchase of Iranian oil at sea, allowing roughly 140 million barrels to enter global markets. The move is intended to relieve pressure on energy supplies and curb soaring oil prices, which have risen over 50 percent since the U.S.-Israeli military strikes on Iran began on February 28. [Reuters]

They also come amid growing domestic and international calls urging India to assume a more active diplomatic role in addressing the Middle East crisis, leveraging its balanced relations with multiple actors to help mediate tensions and prevent escalation. [Times of India] [Republic World] [ADP]

At the same time, India is intensifying efforts to secure its energy needs through diversified international sourcing, including from Russia, while ensuring uninterrupted domestic supply amid disruptions in global shipping routes and volatile markets. The Ministry of External Affairs said logistical challenges in the Middle East have affected energy shipments, prompting close monitoring through inter-ministerial coordination and daily Petroleum Ministry briefings.

Domestic LPG consumption is being prioritized over commercial demand, with recent tanker arrivals providing partial relief. Officials stressed that India’s procurement strategy is broad-based, continuously drawing supplies from multiple regions to maintain energy security. [The Tribune 3]

In the latest development, the government confirmed on March 23 that two Indian-flagged LPG tankers, Jag Vasant and Pine Gas, carrying a total of 92,613 tons of LPG, have safely crossed the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz and are expected to arrive at Indian ports between March 26–28. The vessels carry 33 and 27 Indian seafarers respectively, all reported safe.

These ships mark the fifth Indian-flagged vessel to successfully navigate the corridor since the outbreak of the West Asia conflict. Currently, 22 Indian-flagged vessels with around 600 seafarers remain in the western Persian Gulf, with ongoing repatriation and safety measures in place. [The Tribune 4]

Indian Navy participates in US-led Sea Dragon exercise in Guam

(dql) The Exercise Sea Dragon 2026 multinational exercise is underway at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam with the Indian Navy joining a US-led anti-submarine warfare (ASW) drill alongside partners including Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.

Indian forces have deployed a P-8I maritime patrol aircraft to participate in complex ASW training designed to detect and track submarines using advanced surveillance platforms.

The exercise which began on March 9 emphasizes maritime cooperation and interoperability among participating navies, enhancing shared operational frameworks critical for maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region. [Times of India]

Plans by India, China to resume border trade through disputed Himalayan pass trigger renewed sovereignty concerns in Nepal

(lm) Plans by India and China to resume seasonal border trade through the Lipulekh Pass, a high-altitude Himalayan route in the disputed Kalapani area near the India–Nepal–China border, have renewed sovereignty concerns in Kathmandu. Indian authorities have indicated that preparations are underway to restart trade for the 2026 season after a six-year suspension.

Nepal has consistently objected to bilateral arrangements between India and China concerning Lipulekh, including in 2015 and 2020, stating that the area is claimed by Nepal but currently administered by India. The claim is based on historical agreements, including the Sugauli Treaty of 1816, and was incorporated into Nepal's official map through a constitutional amendment in 2020.

The issue is expected to test the incoming Rastriya Swatantra Party, with its prime ministerial candidate, Balendra Shah, scheduled to assume office soon. The party has previously opposed trade arrangements through the pass without Nepal's consent.

India has rejected Nepal's claim, stating that trade through Lipulekh has taken place for decades and remains open to dialogue on boundary issues. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan steps up mediation efforts in U.S.-Israel-Iran war while calling for regional de-escalation

(lm) Pakistan has stepped up diplomatic engagement in the ongoing war involving Iran, the United States, and Israel, combining backchannel mediation efforts with coordinated regional positions involving senior political and military leadership.

On March 22, Pakistan's army chief, General Asim Munir—the country's most powerful military figure—held a call with U.S. President Donald Trump. In parallel, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif spoke on March 23 with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, conveying Pakistan's diplomatic outreach and offering to facilitate dialogue. Pakistani channels have also been used to pass messages between Iranian officials and U.S. interlocutors, including figures linked to the Trump administration such as envoy Steve Witkoff. Reports further indicate indirect contacts involving Jared Kushner, a senior political figure in Trump's network.

These engagements place Pakistan alongside other regional intermediaries. Turkiye's foreign minister Hakan Fidan has been in contact with both Iranian officials and U.S. representatives, while Egypt's foreign minister Badr Abdelatty and Qatar's leadership have also engaged in parallel outreach efforts. Oman and Qatar—traditionally key mediators between Washington and Tehran—remain involved, although current efforts appear fragmented and at an early stage. [Financial Times]

In parallel, Pakistan has publicly emphasized de-escalation. On March 19, it joined a group of Arab and Islamic countries in calling on Iran to halt attacks on Gulf states, while Sharif, in direct contact with Iranian leadership, stressed the need for dialogue and diplomacy among regional actors. These calls come amid continued Iranian missile and drone strikes targeting Gulf countries and threats against regional energy and water infrastructure. [Arab News]

Pakistan's positioning reflects its cross-cutting regional ties. It maintains relations with Iran, close security cooperation with Gulf states—including a mutual defense agreement with Saudi Arabia—and working links with the United States. This positioning, combined with its geographic proximity and lack of U.S. military bases on its territory, has supported its role as a potential intermediary.

Pakistan, Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt foreign ministers meet to discuss security coordination

The foreign ministers of Pakistan, Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt met in Riyadh on March 19 on the sidelines of a wider Arab-Islamic ministerial gathering, holding talks on regional security coordination during the ongoing Middle East war. Pakistan was represented by Ishaq Dar, the country's foreign minister and deputy prime minister; the other participants were Hakan Fidan of Turkiye, Faisal bin Farhan of Saudi Arabia, and Badr Abdelatty of Egypt. [Arab News]

The meeting comes against the backdrop of an existing Pakistan–Saudi defense relationship. In September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement, presented as a framework to deepen defense cooperation and strengthen joint deterrence.

Since at least early 2026, reporting has indicated that Turkiye has been pushing to expand this pattern of cooperation into a broader regional security format. In January, Pakistan's minister for defense production told Reuters that a Pakistan–Saudi Arabia–Turkiye defense agreement was already "in the pipeline," that a draft had been prepared after nearly a year of talks, and that it was separate from the bilateral Saudi–Pakistan accord signed in 2025. Reuters also reported that Ankara was seeking wider regional participation, while later reporting indicated efforts to bring Egypt into the arrangement.

Seychelles proposes 7 percent increase in EU tuna fisheries agreement

(lm) The Seychelles government has proposed a 7percent annual increase in financial terms under its tuna fisheries agreement with the European Union, following negotiations to renew the agreement that expired on February 23.

President Patrick Herminie stated that Seychelles had initially sought a 30 percent increase, while the European Union proposed a 3 percent adjustment. The 7percent proposal reflects a negotiated compromise following the latest round of discussions led by Fisheries Minister Jean-François Ferrari.

According to the president, current economic conditions, including pressures linked to the Middle East war, influenced the revised position. He stated that the government sought higher returns in line with inflation over recent years but ultimately adjusted its proposal to facilitate agreement and avoid disruption to the fisheries sector.

The EU–Seychelles fisheries agreement provides access for European vessels to tuna stocks in Seychelles' waters. Under the previous 2020–2026 framework, the agreement allowed up to 40 purse seiners (from France, Spain, and Italy) and eight longliners (from France, Spain, and Portugal) to operate in Seychelles' exclusive economic zone.

The agreement includes an annual EU financial contribution of EUR 5.3 million (approx. USD 5.7 million), comprising EUR 2.5 million for access rights and EUR 2.8 million in sectoral support for Seychelles' fisheries policy. The framework also supports initiatives related to the blue economy, maritime security, port infrastructure in Victoria, and efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. [Seychelles News Agency]

Cambodia-UN partnership targets climate-resilient water and renewable energy

(dql) Cambodia is launching the Water Infrastructure & Smart Energy Joint Programme (WISE JP) to deliver climate-resilient water systems powered by renewable energy, prioritizing children in high-risk areas. Led by the Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology & Innovation (MISTI) with UNICEF and UNCDF, the initiative uses an innovative financing model blending commercial and concessional funding to reduce borrowing costs for private water operators and provide technical support to operators, financial institutions, and the Credit Guarantee Corporation of Cambodia (CGCC).

The program targets over 200,000 people, addressing urgent needs for communities facing floods, droughts, and limited WASH services, and seeks to unlock private investment in solar-powered water systems and digital water management. [Cambodianess]

Vietnam steps in with fuel supply to Laos after Thailand reduces exports

(ms) Vietnam has agreed to supply Laos with 50 million liters of fuel after Thailand reduced exports, stepping in to stabilize supply as the country faces a growing fuel shortage with widespread economic impact.

The agreement was reached on March 20, during talks in Hanoi between Laos's Minister of Industry and Commerce Malaithong Kommasith and Vietnam's Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hong Dien. Vietnam will deliver the fuel through a state-owned company and allow Laos to import additional supplies from third countries via Vietnamese territory, easing immediate supply constraints.

The move follows a disruption in regional fuel flows after Thailand—Laos's primary supplier, accounting for more than 97 percent of refined fuel imports—cut exports by 25 percent to about 5.29 million liters per day amid the Middle East conflict. Although Laos and Myanmar were exempt from a full export suspension, the reduced volumes have significantly tightened supply.

The shortage has already affected daily life and economic activity. As of March 11, 1,068 of Laos's 2,538 petrol stations had shut, according to government data, disrupting transport, logistics and agriculture. In response, authorities introduced emergency measures including reducing the school week for higher education institutions from five to three days and encouraging remote work to limit fuel consumption.

Beyond immediate relief, Laos and Vietnam agreed to deepen energy cooperation, including plans for cross-border electricity infrastructure, fuel storage facilities and pipeline development aimed at reducing transport costs and improving supply security.

The developments underscore Laos's heavy reliance on external fuel supplies and highlight the role of regional partnerships in managing energy shocks and strengthening long-term resilience. [The Laotian Times 1] [The Laotian Times 2]

Nepal signals interest in strengthening ties with new Bangladeshi government

(lm) Nepal has signaled interest in strengthening bilateral ties with Bangladesh following political transitions in both countries. During a March 23 meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal's Vice President Ram Sahaya Prasad Yadav told Bangladesh's ambassador that Nepal wanted to work with Bangladesh's new government to take bilateral relations "to a new

height." The Bangladeshi side responded that the new government in Dhaka was likewise keen to work closely with Nepal's incoming administration, which is still being formed. [Dhaka Tribune]

The exchange is notable because Bangladesh's government changed only recently. Bangladesh's parliamentary election was held on February 12, and Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader Tarique Rahman was sworn in as prime minister on February 17 after his party's landslide victory.

Nepal is also in transition. Following the March 5 election, the anti-establishment Rastriya Swatantra Party emerged as the dominant force, and Balendra Shah, the former mayor of Kathmandu, is widely expected to head the next government once the formation process is completed.

U.S. resolution seeks recognition of atrocities during Bangladesh's independence war as genocide

(lm) A resolution has been introduced in the United States House of Representatives, calling for formal recognition of mass killings carried out by the Pakistani military during Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War as genocide. The proposal has been referred to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the congressional body responsible for reviewing foreign policy legislation before it can proceed.

The resolution outlines the historical background, stating that after Pakistan's 1970 general election, the Awami League, the political party representing East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) that won a parliamentary majority and sought to form the national government, was prevented from taking power. It was led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the central political figure of Bangladesh's independence movement whose blocked electoral victory triggered the crisis. It notes that on March 25, 1971, the Pakistani military launched Operation Searchlight, a large-scale military crackdown aimed at suppressing independence demands through widespread arrests and violence, targeting civilians, political activists, and religious minorities, particularly Hindus.

To support its claims, the proposal cites contemporaneous reporting and official communications. These include messages by Archer Blood, the senior U.S. diplomat stationed in Dhaka in 1971 who reported to Washington that civilians were being systematically targeted and described the events

as a “selective genocide,” as well as findings by Edward Kennedy, a U.S. senator who visited refugee camps during the conflict and publicly documented evidence of large-scale violence against civilians, particularly Hindus. The resolution also refers to a study by the International Commission of Jurists, which found evidence supporting claims of organized violence against the Hindu population.

According to the proposal, estimates of those killed range from 10,000 to several hundred thousand, while more than 200,000 women were subjected to sexual violence. It also calls for accountability regarding the role of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh’s single-largest Islamist political party whose affiliated groups were accused of collaborating with the Pakistani military during the conflict, in supporting military operations during the events. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan-India postal cooperation expands to digital payments and logistics integration

(lm) Bhutan and India have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to strengthen cooperation between Bhutan Post and India Post across postal services, logistics, technology, and capacity building.

A central element of the agreement is the planned introduction of cross-border money transfers by linking India’s Unified Payments Interface (UPI)—a real-time digital payment system—with international postal transfer systems under the Universal Postal Union (UPU), a United Nations agency coordinating global postal networks. The initiative is intended to enable faster and lower-cost remittances between the two countries.

The agreement also includes training programs for Bhutanese postal officials in India, as well as the sharing of digital technologies such as postal platforms and address systems. Additional areas of cooperation include logistics connectivity, knowledge exchange, and cultural engagement through philately. [News on AIR]

First high-level Bhutan-Philippines meeting signals expansion of bilateral ties

(lm) Bhutan and the Philippines have agreed to expand cooperation in tourism, trade, investment, and cultural

exchange following their first-ever leadership meeting, marking an initial step in developing ties after establishing diplomatic relations in October 2025.

On March 19, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay met President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. in Manila on the sidelines of the Asian Development Bank's Asia Pacific Food Systems Forum 2026. The meeting was the first time a Bhutanese leader has been received at the Philippine presidential palace.

Discussions focused on strengthening diplomatic representation, including non-resident ambassadors, and expanding cooperation in post-pandemic tourism, trade, and skills development. Trade between the two countries remains limited but includes Philippine exports such as electronics and machinery, and imports from Bhutan such as wine and agricultural products.

Tourism flows remain modest, with several hundred Bhutanese visitors recorded annually, while Filipinos in Bhutan are mainly employed in the hospitality sector. [Philippine News Agency]

Bhutan and Sri Lanka discuss expanding cooperation in air connectivity and training

(lm) Bhutan and Sri Lanka have held discussions on expanding cooperation in civil aviation, with a focus on developing air connectivity and training opportunities.

On March 24, the Director General of the Bhutan Civil Aviation Authority met counterparts from Sri Lanka's Civil Aviation Authority in Colombo to discuss proposals for launching scheduled passenger flights and increasing access to aviation training programs in Sri Lanka for Bhutanese students.

Sri Lankan authorities requested a formal proposal from Bhutan to facilitate negotiations on an Air Services Agreement—a bilateral framework governing commercial air links—while noting that any decisions would require approval from relevant ministries. [Daily Mirror]

China, Vietnam Navies agree to expand joint drills with live-fire exercises

(ms) China and Vietnam have agreed to include live-fire drills in their joint naval exercises for the first time, marking an expansion of military cooperation between the two countries.

Naval commanders from both sides reached the agreement during a meeting on March 16, in Fangcheng port in southern China's Guangxi region, ahead of their 40th joint patrol and training exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin. Vietnamese frigates *Tran Hung Dao* (015) and *Ly Thai To* (012) arrived to participate alongside vessels from China's People's Liberation Army Navy.

The two sides said the live-fire component, involving light weapons, would be incorporated into anti-piracy training activities. The addition represents a new step in bilateral naval cooperation, which has previously focused on patrol coordination, maritime security and search-and-rescue operations.

The exercises are part of a broader framework of defense engagement, including the Vietnam-China Border Defense Friendship Exchange. Officials from both countries said the joint patrol mechanism has contributed to maintaining order in the Gulf of Tonkin and improving responses to non-traditional security threats such as piracy.

The development follows earlier efforts to deepen military ties. In 2025, China and Vietnam conducted their first joint army exercise, which included live-fire drills involving ground forces.

Vietnamese Communist Party chief To Lam has described relations with China as a "top priority," signaling continued political support for closer cooperation despite longstanding tensions between the two countries over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. [South China Morning Post] [Tuoi Tre News] [Vietnam.net]

US President Trump delays China visit amid Iran conflict

(ms) U.S. President Donald Trump has postponed a planned visit to China, citing the ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran, according to statements from the White House and Chinese officials.

Trump said on March 17, that the trip to Beijing, originally scheduled for March 31 to April 2, would be delayed by several weeks as he focuses on

developments related to the war. He said the visit could take place “in five or six weeks” and added that China had agreed to the postponement.

China’s Foreign Ministry confirmed that both sides remain in communication regarding the visit but did not provide further details on a revised schedule.

The visit would be Trump’s first trip to China since the start of his second term and had been expected to address a range of bilateral issues, including trade, technology and security. The United States and China have maintained a fragile truce following earlier tariff disputes and export restrictions, particularly in sectors such as semiconductors.

U.S. officials have also indicated that preparations for the visit were ongoing in recent weeks, including meetings between senior representatives from both countries in Paris. However, no formal agenda for the summit had been finalized.

The postponement comes as the conflict with Iran continues to affect U.S. foreign policy priorities. The situation has contributed to increased volatility in global energy markets, particularly due to concerns over shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a key route for oil exports.

Trump has called on other countries, including China, to contribute to efforts to secure the waterway, though no commitments have been announced. China has not publicly responded to those requests.

The delay may also affect ongoing discussions between the two countries on economic issues. Previous talks have included potential increases in Chinese purchases of U.S. agricultural products, as well as discussions on export controls and access to critical materials such as rare earth elements. [Associated Press] [CGTV] [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters]

US Senator Daines to visit Hong Kong in first trip since 2019

(ms) U.S. Senator Steve Daines, a Republican and close ally of President Donald Trump, is expected to visit Hong Kong later in March, marking the first trip to the city by a sitting U.S. senator since 2019.

Sources said on March 20, 2026, that Daines plans to meet American business leaders in Hong Kong on March 30 to discuss concerns related to operating in mainland China and the city’s business environment.

Details of his broader itinerary have not been disclosed.

Daines, who represents Montana, has been involved in U.S.-China trade engagement during both of Trump's terms and has previously held meetings with Chinese officials on economic issues.

The visit comes as Washington and Beijing remain in contact over rescheduling a planned summit between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, which has been delayed amid the ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran (see article above).

Hong Kong has been a sensitive issue in U.S.-China relations in recent years, particularly following the introduction of national security legislation by Beijing and changes to the city's political system.

Analysts say the visit may provide an opportunity for U.S. officials to engage directly with the American business community in Hong Kong as geopolitical tensions and regulatory uncertainties continue to affect commercial operations. [South China Morning Post]

China, Netherlands talks signal cautious reset amid Nexperia dispute

(ms) China and the Netherlands have signaled a willingness to stabilize relations despite an ongoing dispute over Nexperia, a Chinese-owned semiconductor company.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a phone call with his Dutch counterpart Tom Berendsen on March 13, marking their first direct exchange since Berendsen took office and the first high-level contact since tensions escalated over Nexperia.

The Netherlands-based company, owned by China's Wingtech Technology, plays a key role in global semiconductor supply chains, including components used in electric vehicles. The dispute began in September 2025, when Dutch authorities intervened in Nexperia's management and removed its Chinese chief executive, citing concerns over potential technology transfers to China.

The move reflected growing pressure from the United States and a broader European strategy to reduce reliance on China in sensitive sectors. Beijing strongly opposed the decision, and the case has since become

a focal point in wider tensions over technology and security.

Despite the unresolved dispute, Wang said China had seen “positive signals” from the Dutch side, suggesting both governments may be seeking a more pragmatic way forward. [South China Morning Post]

Kenya restarts China-backed railway project with new financing model

(ms) Kenya has resumed construction of a major railway extension backed by China after a six-year delay, signaling a shift in how large infrastructure projects are financed between African countries and Beijing.

The project, part of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), had stalled after China reduced lending for overseas infrastructure, leaving the planned line incomplete and more than 350 km short of the Ugandan border. The railway is intended to connect Kenya’s port of Mombasa to inland regions and eventually link with Uganda to boost regional trade.

The new phase will be financed through a revised model that relies partly on securitising revenues from the existing railway, including a development levy expected to generate about USD 270 million annually. Chinese firm China Road and Bridge Corporation remains the main contractor.

The restart reflects broader changes in China’s approach to overseas financing, with a shift away from large state-backed loans toward investment-based and risk-sharing arrangements.

The railway has previously drawn criticism as a symbol of rising debt burdens linked to Chinese-funded infrastructure. Kenyan authorities have since renegotiated loan terms to reduce repayment pressures, while seeking alternative funding mechanisms as public debt constraints limit further borrowing. [Reuters]

Panama rebuffs Hong Kong firm CK Hutchison in escalating canal port dispute

(ms) Panama has rejected claims by a unit of Hong Kong-based conglomerate CK Hutchison that authorities failed to properly engage in arbitration

proceedings, as a dispute over control of key Panama Canal ports continues to escalate.

Officials said on March 19, 2026, that allegations by Panama Ports Company (PPC)—the CK Hutchison subsidiary that had operated the Panama Canal Balboa and Cristobal container terminals—were unfounded. The government denied that it had ignored arbitration requests and said it was acting in accordance with legal procedures following the termination of the concession contracts.

The dispute stems from a January 2026 ruling by Panama's Supreme Court, which annulled long-standing agreements granting PPC the right to operate the two ports. The court found the contracts unconstitutional, effectively ending CK Hutchison's control over facilities located at both entrances of the Panama Canal, one of the world's most important shipping routes connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

CK Hutchison, a major Hong Kong-based infrastructure and logistics group with global port operations, has challenged the decision and is seeking compensation reportedly amounting to at least USD 2 billion. The company argues that Panama failed to respect its contractual rights and did not properly participate in arbitration mechanisms.

Following the ruling, interim operating arrangements were put in place. Balboa, at the Pacific entrance, has been handed to APM Terminals, the port operating arm of Danish shipping company Maersk, while Cristobal, on the Atlantic side, is now managed by a unit of Mediterranean Shipping Company, one of the world's largest container shipping firms.

The case has drawn international attention due to its geopolitical context. U.S. President Donald Trump first raised concerns in December 2024 about Chinese-linked control of infrastructure near the canal, prompting an immediate rejection from Panama. However, sustained pressure from Washington throughout 2025 was followed by concrete policy changes, including the annulment of Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison's port concessions in early 2026. [gCaptain] [Hong Kong Free Press] [Reuters]

The dispute has also begun to affect shipping operations. China's state-owned COSCO Shipping, one of the world's largest shipping companies, recently suspended activity at the Balboa port, instructing customers to redirect empty containers to terminals in Colón. The company did not explain the move, but the timing suggests a strategic decision by the Chinese

Government and its subsidiaries. [see AiR No. 11, March/2026, 3]

India–China trade relations send mixed signals

(dql) Recent developments in India–China trade relations highlight a mixed trajectory, with plans to reopen a Himalayan border route for cross-border commerce alongside proposals to impose anti-dumping duties on Chinese imports.

Border trade via Himalayan route to restart after six-year pause

Cross-border commerce between India and China is set to resume in June along the Lipulekh Pass—the Himalayan route connecting Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district with Tibet—, ending a six-year suspension. The decision follows approvals from India's Ministry of External Affairs, Home Affairs, and Commerce & Industry, with local authorities instructed to coordinate logistics including trade passes, banking, customs, security, medical support, and communication. Chinese officials will be provided contact details to streamline cooperation. [The Tribune]

The route has long facilitated trade with the Tibetan market at Taklakot but was closed after the 1962 India-China War and reopened in 1991. Operations were again suspended in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, although the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra resumed in 2025. Renewed negotiations have cleared the way for commercial activity this year. [News 18]

India steps up anti-dumping action on Chinese chemical imports

India has recommended imposing anti-dumping duties on imports of a key Chinese chemical used in the dye and textile industry, following findings that low-priced shipments were harming domestic producers.

The investigation found preliminary evidence that the chemical—4,4-Diamino Stilbene-2,2-Disulphonic Acid (DASDA)—was being sold below fair value in the Indian market.

Authorities have proposed a reference-price mechanism, under which importers would pay the difference if the landed price falls below USD 3,453 per ton. The chemical is widely used in producing optical brightening agents and dye intermediates for textiles.

The probe, covering April 2023 to June 2024, concluded that such pricing practices caused material injury to domestic manufacturers. India had previously imposed similar duties on the product, though these expired in 2019. The final decision now rests with the finance ministry. [Reuters]

At the same time, New Delhi has initiated an anti-dumping investigation into imports of ethyl chloroformate from China, intensifying scrutiny of low-priced chemical shipments amid concerns over harm to domestic industry.

The probe follows a complaint by a local producer which alleged that Chinese exporters were selling the chemical at unfairly low prices in the Indian market. Ethyl chloroformate is a key intermediate used in pharmaceutical and agrochemical manufacturing. [The Times of India]

India and Maldives formalize framework for free trade agreement negotiations

(lm) India and the Maldives have signed the Terms of Reference for negotiations on a proposed Free Trade Agreement, formally establishing the scope and procedures for upcoming talks. The planned agreement forms part of a broader effort to deepen bilateral engagement, supported by Indian financial assistance, including a USD 565 million Line of Credit for development projects in the Maldives.

The step follows earlier high-level engagement, including discussions during the Maldivian President's visit to India in October 2025. It also comes after a period of strained relations, including tensions linked to the "India Out" campaign—an initiative calling for the removal of Indian military personnel from the Maldives—and diplomatic friction following public remarks by Maldivian officials. Both sides have since taken steps to stabilize ties. [The Sun]

India sharply criticizes Pakistan at UN on religion and water issues

At recent UN events, Indian Ambassador Harish Parvathaneni delivered pointed critiques of Pakistan, using the international platform to challenge Islamabad on multiple fronts.

Speaking at the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, he accused Pakistan of spreading

“imaginative tales” of Islamophobia to malign India, contrasting this with India’s own pluralism, its constitutional principle of “Sarva Dharma Sambhava”, and the inclusion of over 200 million Muslims in democratic processes.

The envoy highlighted issues such as the treatment of Ahmadiyyas—a religious minority within Islam, founded in the late 19th century in what is now Pakistan—, Afghan refugees, and alleged attacks during Ramadan, positioning India as a model of religious coexistence. [WION] [DD News]

During the World Water Day event, Parvathaneni justified India’s decision to place the Indus Waters Treaty—the India-Pakistan water-sharing pact—in abeyance in April 2025 in response to a fatal terror attack in in Jammu and Kashmir, citing decades of hostility, including the three wars between the countries (1947–48, 1965, 1971) and “thousands of terror attacks” originating from Pakistan. He explained that India had entered the 1960 treaty, which allocates water from the Indus river system, in “good faith,” but sustained cooperation had become impossible in the face of continued support for terrorism.

Parvathaneni also highlighted India’s domestic water governance efforts, including the Jal Jeevan Mission, a nationwide initiative to provide safe drinking water to rural households with strong community and women-led participation, underscoring India’s proactive water management record. [The Tribune]

His statements came after Pakistan accused India of an unlawful “weaponization” of water that threatens its agriculture-dependent economy and social stability. Climate Change Minister Musadik Malik stressed that water access underpins a large share of Pakistan’s GDP and employment, framing the issue as both a humanitarian and gender-equality concern. Islamabad also cited a 2025 arbitration ruling affirming the treaty’s continued legal validity and rejected any linkage between water management and terrorism allegations.

Pakistan’s envoy rejected India’s claims, describing the suspension of the treaty as “baseless” and asserting that the agreement is legally binding and cannot be unilaterally suspended. Pakistan also accused India of misusing international platforms to raise bilateral disputes, challenging the legitimacy of New Delhi’s narrative. [The Dawn] [The News]

Canada reassesses India-linked threat claims

(dql) Canada's federal police have signaled a major revision in their view of foreign interference, indicating no current evidence linking Indian government agents to criminal or violent activities on Canadian soil. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) report that ongoing investigations into transnational repression and foreign-linked threats, including harassment, intimidation, and organized crime networks such as the Lawrence Bishnoi gang, have not established clear foreign affiliations.

The shift follows nearly two years of strained Canada-India relations after the 2023 killing of Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar and earlier allegations of Indian involvement, which triggered diplomatic expulsions and suspended high-level engagement.

India confirms consular request from Ukraine for nationals in terror probe

(dql) India has acknowledged receiving Ukraine's request for consular access to six of its citizens detained in a terror-related case, signaling that the request will be handled in line with Indian legal procedures. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) stated that the matter remains under investigation by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and is sub-judice.

The arrests involve six Ukrainians and one American allegedly linked to a cross-border terror plot. Authorities claim the individuals entered India, traveled through the Northeast—including the protected state of Mizoram—and then moved into Myanmar, where they reportedly established ties with insurgent groups and provided drone and weapons training. [The Tribune 1] [The Tribune 2]

Indonesian President Prabowo signals possible exit from Gaza peace initiative amid Iran war

(ms) Indonesia is considering withdrawing from the US-led diplomatic initiative on Gaza, as the conflict in the Middle East is escalating.

President Prabowo Subianto said on March 20, that the ongoing war involving the United States, Israel and Iran

could be a “strong indicator” for Indonesia to leave the so-called “Board of Peace,” a platform established earlier this year to support peace efforts and reconstruction in Gaza. However, he added that Jakarta would first consult with partner countries before making a final decision.

The Board of Peace, led by U.S. President Donald Trump, includes several Muslim-majority countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. Indonesia joined the initiative as part of its broader diplomatic engagement on the Palestinian issue, despite not having formal relations with Israel.

Prabowo said Indonesia would reassess its participation if the initiative no longer benefits Palestinians or aligns with national interests. “If it becomes a waste of time and energy, we will leave,” he said, adding that Indonesia ultimately retains full authority over its decision.

The government has already paused discussions related to the initiative as it focuses on ensuring the safety of Indonesian citizens in the Middle East and assessing the evolving situation. [EuroNews] [Jakarta Globe] [The Diplomat]

Indonesian Government maintains downstreaming policy in US investment cooperation amid evolving trade ties

(jn) Indonesia reaffirmed that investment cooperation with the United States will remain anchored in its downstreaming policy, requiring that raw materials be processed domestically to generate added value within the country.

President Prabowo Subianto stated that foreign investors may participate in Indonesia’s extractive sectors, provided they comply with national regulations, including local processing requirements and market-based pricing for critical minerals.

The government also reiterated its ban on the export of unprocessed raw materials to ensure greater economic returns from strategic commodities.

These positions come amid broader economic engagement between Indonesia and the United States, including a recently concluded trade agreement that expands US access to Indonesia’s critical minerals sector and energy markets.

The deal includes commitments by Indonesia to facilitate US investment across mineral supply chains and increase purchases of American energy products, while granting Indonesian exports improved access to the US market.

However, implementation of the agreement remains uncertain following a US Supreme Court ruling affecting the legal basis of tariff measures.

In parallel, Indonesia is preparing its response to a US trade investigation launched under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, which examines alleged excess production capacity and trade imbalances among several countries, including Indonesia.

The government stated it is compiling evidence and arguments to demonstrate compliance with international trade rules, noting that issues raised in the investigation have already been addressed in the framework of ongoing bilateral trade discussions. [AP News] [Tempo]

Japan, Singapore elevate ties to strategic partnership

(dql) On the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong upgraded bilateral ties to a Strategic Partnership on March 18, committing to expanded cooperation across five key areas. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

The partnership will deepen collaboration in the green and digital economies, supply chain and economic resilience, and broader economic integration, including ASEAN-Japan initiatives such as the ASEAN Power Grid.

They also vowed bilateral cooperation in other areas, including energy, security and digital technology while discussing other issues involving China and North Korea as well as the U.S.-Israel war with Iran. Both leaders highlighted the strategic importance of coordinated action on regional and global developments, including Middle East issues, while reaffirming their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The framework also provides a platform for forward-looking cooperation that could serve as a model for broader regional engagement, reflecting complementary strengths and mutual trust between the two nations. [Channel News Asia] [The Mainichi]

Japan accelerates defense cooperation with Sri Lanka

(dql) Japan moved to deepen defense ties with Sri Lanka following talks in Tokyo on March 18 between Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi and Deputy Defence Minister Aruna Jayasekara, emphasizing the growing importance of bilateral cooperation amid an increasingly volatile security environment. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

Tokyo highlighted Sri Lanka's strategic role in the Indian Ocean for advancing a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," with both sides welcoming ongoing defense exchanges, including recent naval engagements such as a port call by a Japanese destroyer and joint exercises.

They agreed to accelerate cooperation, particularly in maritime security, capacity-building in areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and expanded personnel exchanges, including training and observer programs. [The Morning]

Japan, Germany commit to deepening defense ties

(lr/dql) Japan and Germany agreed to expand bilateral military cooperation while limiting any involvement in securing the Strait of Hormuz to post-conflict scenarios, underscoring a cautious approach amid escalating tensions linked to the Iran conflict. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

The understanding was reached during talks on March 22 in Yokosuka between Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi and visiting German counterpart Boris Pistorius. His visit to Japan was part of a three-country Asia tour that also includes Singapore and Australia, aimed at strengthening defense cooperation with regional partners amid growing concerns over the international order.

Both sides committed to intensifying defense collaboration across operational and industrial domains, including regular consultations on crisis response and exploring a visiting-forces agreement to facilitate reciprocal troop deployments.

Pistorius proposed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) to facilitate mutual troop deployments and reduce legal and administrative barriers, reflecting

Germany's efforts to institutionalize closer defense ties with Japan. Similar agreements already link Japan with partners such as the UK and Australia, reflecting Tokyo's broader push to expand security partnerships amid rising regional tensions. [POLITICO]

On the Middle East, the two countries signaled willingness to contribute to maritime security—such as mine-clearing operations—only after hostilities cease, reflecting legal, political, and risk-related constraints on direct involvement. The position aligns with Japan's constitutional limitations and Europe's broader reluctance to engage militarily in the ongoing conflict, despite U.S. pressure on allies to help secure the vital energy corridor.

The meeting also addressed Indo-Pacific security dynamics and reaffirmed coordination on regional challenges, while Iran indicated openness to ensuring safe passage for Japanese vessels under certain conditions, even as the waterway remains largely disrupted following U.S.-Israeli strikes and Tehran's retaliation. [Anadolu Ajansı] [Japan Today]

Ukraine offers battle-tested military expertise to Japan

(dql) Ukraine is positioning itself as a source of operational knowledge and low-cost military technology for Japan, particularly in drones, air defense, and defense-industrial collaboration, according to Ukrainian Ambassador to Tokyo Yurii Lutovinov.

Drawing on four years of conflict with Russia, Ukraine has developed innovative, cost-effective systems—ranging from strike and reconnaissance drones to mobile interceptor units—to counter mass drone and missile attacks. These include homegrown "Shahed killers" capable of neutralizing incoming drones at a fraction of the cost of traditional missiles, a model now being shared with other regions such as the Middle East.

Ukraine frames its experience as an "innovative laboratory" for next-generation warfare, emphasizing AI, autonomous systems, and networked defenses. Beyond hardware, Kyiv seeks Japan's expertise in infrastructure protection, reconstruction, and economic resilience, signaling ambitions for a broader strategic partnership. Both governments are exploring elevated political and defense ties, including potential reciprocal visits by Takaichi and President Zelenskyy.

Ukraine's drone offer comes as Tokyo is reportedly evaluating the introduction of Ukrainian combat drones into its defense forces, leveraging Kyiv's battlefield-tested expertise against Russia. A bilateral arms transfer agreement could be signed to protect sensitive technologies, enabling exchanges where Japan provides defense equipment while Ukraine shares unmanned aerial systems. [Kyodo News]

The developments align with Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's push to relax Japan's military export restrictions, enabling broader technology transfer and potential co-production. Japan is simultaneously expanding its own drone-based coastal defenses under a JPY 128.7 billion (USD 809 million) "drone shield" initiative, part of its record JPY 9 trillion defense budget, aimed at countering complex regional threats, particularly around the southwestern islands. [The Japan Times]

Meanwhile, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI)—Japan's largest defense contractor— and U.S. defense tech firm Shield AI have finished a series of autonomous flight demonstrations in Japan using Shield AI's Hivemind mission autonomy software integrated into prototype drones known as Affordable Rapid-Prototyping Mitsubishi Drones (ARMD).

The software was incorporated into the ARMD platform in under two months, a faster pace than traditional in-house autonomy development, allowing engineers to concentrate more on mission systems rather than base coding and simulation infrastructure. Two 20 kg UAVs—ARMD-01 and ARMD-02—completed flight tests that showed learning behavior, coordinated movements, and increasingly complex maneuvers as they tracked a virtual aircraft target. [Flight Global]

Ukraine, Japan and UNIDO deepen cooperation on green industrial recovery

Separately, Ukraine, Japan and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) have launched an expanded industrial dialogue aimed at accelerating Ukraine's post-war economic recovery through sustainable, green technology and industrial partnerships. The first Tripartite Industrial Policy Dialogue in Vienna on March 16-17 agreed on preparing joint initiatives with a potential combined value exceeding EUR 100 million (USD 109 million), focusing on grant-backed support for enterprises, green tech development, industrial clusters, energy efficiency, artificial intelligence integration, and SME competitiveness.

This effort builds on a flagship UNIDO Green Industrial Recovery Programme under which 47 Japanese firms have already signed grants to test and introduce advanced technologies in Ukraine, boosting upskilling, local production modernization, and job creation. [The Odessa Journal]

Laos signs MOU with China for aluminum industrial park

(ms) Laos has signed a memorandum of understanding with Chinese and regional partners to develop an aluminum industrial park in Oudomxay province, according to officials.

The agreement, signed on March 17, 2026, involves Krittaphong Group, CGN Energy Technology (Lao) and Guangxi Investment Group. The project will cover approximately 6,279 hectares and is planned to include an annual production capacity of 500,000 tons of aluminum, supported by around 2,000 megawatts of power.

Officials said the project will be powered by clean energy and may expand to include full-cycle aluminum processing. CGN Lao is expected to lead development of the energy system, while Guangxi Investment Group will contribute industrial and technical expertise.

The project is also expected to connect to the Laos-China power transmission network.

Authorities said the development is part of broader efforts to expand industrial capacity and utilize domestic energy resources. [Lao News Agency]

Irregular migration persists amid rising Malaysia–Indonesia cross-border flows

(bo) Indonesia's consul general in Kuching, Abdullah Zulkifli, has warned that increasing cross-border movement between Sarawak and Indonesia is exacerbating challenges linked to irregular migration and undocumented workers, despite growing economic exchange.

While connectivity has improved through additional land crossings and air links, facilitating travel for work and tourism, authorities face mounting difficulties in monitoring labor flows. Around 150,000 Indonesians are legally employed in Sarawak, but the number of undocumented workers is unknown and likely

significantly higher. Key issues include misuse of social visit passes for employment, visa overstays, and workers moving between employers without proper authorization, alongside a smaller number of illegal entries.

Deportation figures illustrate the scale of the problem, with approximately 5,000 Indonesians repatriated last year and nearly 500 more in the first quarter of 2026. Economic incentives remain the primary driver, with workers drawn by better job opportunities and existing family networks. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia, Pakistan Prime discuss Middle East tensions, Pakistan-Afghanistan ceasefire

(bo) Malaysia Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif spoke on a phone call, extending Aidilfitri greetings to each other and expressing commitment in reinforcing Malaysia-Pakistan relations.

Both agreed on the urgent need to defuse the geopolitical tensions and manage its impact on West Asia, as well as the importance of collaborative diplomatic efforts.

Anwar also expressed appreciation for the temporary ceasefire between Pakistan and Afghanistan in tandem with Aidilfitri celebrations. [Bernama]

Malaysia downplays US warship port call amid neutrality concerns

(dql) Defense Minister Khaled Nordin has dismissed concerns over the presence of two US naval vessels—the USS Santa Barbara and USS Tulsa—at a Penang port, describing the visit as a routine logistical stop within longstanding defense engagement practices.

The ships docked at the North Butterworth container terminal from March 14–16 for resupply and maintenance before continuing their deployment. [USNI]

Khaled stressed that such port calls are part of Malaysia's defense diplomacy, conducted under established procedures and subject to government approval, and are not unusual in the context of international maritime operations.

The clarification follows criticism from the opposition, including the Perikatan Nasional coalition, which questioned whether hosting US vessels—reportedly configured for minesweeping and previously deployed in the Middle East—undermines Malaysia's neutral stance amid the Iran conflict.

Khaled noted that Malaysia hosted 75 naval port calls from 14 countries last year, reflecting regular military-to-military engagement, including joint exercises and cooperation in safeguarding key sea lanes such as the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. [Free Malaysia Today] [South China Morning Post]

China, Mongolia reaffirm strategic partnership

(fs) Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China Zhao Leji met Uchral Nyam-Osor, chairman of Mongolia's Parliament and the ruling Mongolian People's Party, in Beijing to discuss bilateral relations.

Zhao stated that China is willing to deepen ties by strengthening legislative exchanges, enhancing strategic trust, and expanding mutually beneficial cooperation, while respecting each other's core interests. Nyam-Osor reaffirmed Mongolia's commitment to stable and long-term relations with China, highlighting the importance of parliamentary cooperation. He added that the Mongolian Parliament is ready to further promote practical cooperation and strengthen bilateral engagement across multiple areas. [Xinhua]

Mongolia , Kazakhstan explore reciprocal trade offices, expanded economic cooperation

(fs) Kazakhstan is considering strengthening its presence in Mongolia through the possible opening of a trade office in Ulaanbaatar. The initiative, discussed during the Kazakhstan-Mongolia Trade and Investment Day, aims to promote Kazakh products and facilitate direct engagement with local businesses. Mongolia has expressed parallel interest in expanding access to the Kazakh market, with both sides exploring reciprocal trade offices in Ulaanbaatar and Almaty.

During the Trade and Investment Day, the parties agreed to deepen cooperation in agriculture and the

food industry, particularly in grain and processed goods. Kazakhstan is assessing increased exports of barley, flour, oil and fat products, rice, and confectionery. Bilateral trade exceeded USD 133 million in 2025, with both sides noting potential to reach USD 500 million. [Trend News]

Meanwhile, Mongolian Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources G.Damdinnyam met First Deputy Minister of Trade and Integration of Kazakhstan Bizhanova Aizhan Adilovna to discuss cooperation in energy, mining, and refining. [GoGo]

Mongolia, Russia advance central railway corridor under economic corridor program

(fs) Mongolia's Minister of Road and Transport Delgersaikhan Borkhuu held a virtual meeting with Russian counterpart Dmitry Zverev, during which the two sides agreed to finalize documentation related to the Mongolia-Russia-China Economic Corridor Program and the Bagakhangai-Khushig Valley branch railway project. Both sides also discussed restoring direct flights between Ulaanbaatar and Moscow and intensifying preparatory efforts.

The planned central corridor will span 5,975 km. China has completed a feasibility study for the 328 km Jining–Erenhot section, while Russia has prepared studies for the 254 km Naushki–Ulaan-Ude segment. Mongolia's contribution includes plans for a 1,087 km second railway line between Sukhbaatar and Zamiin-Uud.

Discussions to consolidate feasibility studies for the central railway corridor under the Mongolia-Russia-China Economic Corridor Program are set to culminate in a document expected to be signed at the International Transport and Logistics Forum in Saint Petersburg in April. The initiative forms part of the trilateral framework established in 2016. [Montsame]

The Mongolia-Russia-China Economic Corridor is a major trilateral initiative launched in 2016 to improve transport, trade, and infrastructure connectivity between the three nations.

Mongolia, South Korea revive healthcare cooperation with new agreements on patient care and training

(fs) Mongolia and South Korea have agreed to restore bilateral cooperation in healthcare, previously suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on patient transfers and medical training. The agreement was reached during a meeting between Minister of Health of Mongolia Chimburen Jigjidpurev and South Korean counterpart Jeong Eun-kyung on the sidelines of the Medical Korea 2026 conference on March 20.

The ministers signed three agreements covering patient transfers funded by the Mongolian government, the provision of medical services, and the implementation of physician training programs. Jigjidpurev emphasized that these areas form the core of bilateral cooperation and noted that enhanced access to advanced Korean technologies would improve Mongolia's healthcare system.

Eun-kyung highlighted plans to expand collaboration into oncology, pharmaceuticals, and medical technologies and underlined the intention to establish a permanent bilateral cooperation body and expand joint initiatives.

The new framework also includes a trilateral agreement involving 24 Korean medical institutions, Mongolia's Center for Health Development, and the Korean Health Industry Development Institute to facilitate access to care. [Open.kg]

Mongolia, United States hold annual consultations, expand strategic partnership

(fs) The 17th Annual Bilateral Consultation between Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. Department of State was held on March 17 in Ulaanbaatar, focusing on advancing the Mongolia-U.S. Strategic Partnership.

The dialogue was co-chaired by State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia Munkhtushig Lkhanaajav and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Michael G. DeSombre. Participants reviewed progress in ongoing projects and discussed expanding cooperation in sectors including trade, investment, energy, artificial intelligence, education, and culture. [Montsame]

Meanwhile, Mongolian Prime Minister Gombojav Zandanshatar met DeSombre on the sidelines, reaffirming Mongolia's commitment to strengthening bilateral ties and promoting private-sector

partnerships. Zandanshatar emphasized expanding cooperation in trade, mining, and investment. [Open.kg]

Mongolia, France discuss expanding cooperation in urban development

(fs) Mayor of Ulaanbaatar Nyambaatar Khishgee met with Ambassador of France to Mongolia Corinne Pereira Da Silva to discuss expanding cooperation between Mongolia and France in urban planning and sustainable city development.

During the meeting, Khishgee highlighted France's role as a key European partner and noted efforts to elevate cooperation with Paris and other French cities. Khishgee referred to recent meetings held in Paris and Lyon in January, which focused on major infrastructure initiatives, including metro and cable car transport projects in Ulaanbaatar.

Pereira Da Silva expressed France's readiness to support further development of bilateral cooperation, emphasizing continued collaboration in urban infrastructure and sustainable development. [Akipress]

Mongolia, Hungary reaffirm parliamentary cooperation

(fs) Chair of the Mongolia-Hungary Parliamentary Group Batsumberel Natsagdorj met Deputy Speaker of Hungary's National Assembly Lajos Oláh on March 19 to discuss strengthening bilateral relations.

Oláh underscored the importance of enhancing cooperation amid global geopolitical and environmental challenges, emphasizing opportunities in trade and investment.

Both sides agreed that parliamentary dialogue plays a central role in expanding bilateral relations and discussed further cooperation in science, culture, economy, and trade. [Open.kg]

Thailand engages Myanmar on parliamentary diplomacy, border security, and cross-border crime

(su) Thailand has stepped up high-level engagement with Myanmar's recently convened junta-led government, including meetings with the new Lower House speaker and senior military leaders. Discussions ranged from bilateral trade and investment to border stability, coordinated enforcement against transnational crime, and the management of online scam networks along the Thai–Myanmar border.

Thai foreign minister's adviser meets new Lower House speaker, deputy foreign minister

Kallayana Vipattipumiprates, an adviser to Thailand's foreign minister, met Myanmar's newly elected Lower House speaker U Khin Yi in Naypyitaw on March 19, marking the first known meeting between the speaker and a foreign representative since his election on March 16. According to local reporting, the meeting took place at the Lower House office, but no details were disclosed on the substance of the talks. The engagement became public only after Khin Yi shared photographs on social media.

Myanmar state media did not report the meeting with Khin Yi, but did cover Kallayana's separate talks with Deputy Foreign Minister U Ko Ko Kyaw. According to those reports, discussions focused on strengthening bilateral cooperation, expanding trade and investment, enhancing border stability, and promoting closer collaboration on regional and international issues. [The Irrawaddy 1]

Thai armed forces chief meets junta leaders

Separately, Thai Chief of Defense Forces General Ukris Boontanondha met Myanmar junta leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyitaw on March 18, in a visit that also included Deputy Senior General Soe Win, newly appointed army chief Ye Win Oo, and Chief of General Staff Kyaw Swar Lin.

The talks covered border stability, preparations for the next round of high-level military discussions, efforts to curb illegal trade and narcotics trafficking, cross-border haze pollution, and cooperation against online scam-center networks operating along the Thai–Myanmar border. The meeting comes amid growing international attention to criminal compounds in Myanmar border areas, especially around Karen State.

The visit also took place as authorities in Thailand and Myanmar have stepped up engagement on cross-border enforcement and trade-related issues. Reporting suggests Bangkok is seeking progress on joint action against scam centers while also looking to reopen border gates near Myawaddy that have

remained disrupted by fighting between junta forces and Karen armed groups. Thai officials have intensified contacts with Myanmar's military leadership in recent weeks, with Thailand's air force chief, ambassador, senior army officials, and foreign minister all separately meeting junta representatives, pointing to a broader effort to stabilize border management and restore commercial flows.

While local reporting linked the meeting to wider regional concern over scam-center activity and to speculation about internal jockeying within Myanmar's military leadership, the confirmed substance of the talks centered on security cooperation, border management, and bilateral coordination on transnational crime. [The Irrawaddy 2]

The latest meetings unfolded against a shifting political backdrop in both countries, as Thailand and Myanmar recently convened new parliaments following elections.

Tripartite talks between Nepal, UK, Gurkha veterans end without agreement

(lm) A new round of tripartite talks between the governments of Nepal and the United Kingdom and representatives of Gurkha veterans—Nepali citizens recruited into the British Army under longstanding bilateral arrangements—was held in London on March 17, focusing on long-standing demands related to pensions and welfare benefits.

The discussions did not produce a concrete outcome. Representatives of the UK indicated that a formal proposal addressing the veterans' demands may be presented within approximately 15 days. Gurkha representatives reiterated their 11-point demand, which includes calls for pension parity with British soldiers and the implementation of provisions linked to the 1947 tripartite agreement governing Gurkha recruitment.

The British side maintained its position that full pension parity cannot be granted but indicated willingness to expand support through welfare measures. Nepali representatives and veterans' groups expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of a defined proposal and signaled the possibility of renewed protests if progress is not made within the indicated timeframe.

Ahead of the talks, 19 members of the British Parliament submitted a joint letter urging their

government to address the Gurkha veterans' demands and to use Nepal's ongoing political transition, including the formation of a new government, as an opportunity to advance discussions. [The Kathmandu Post]

North Korea rebuffs Japan's summit overture

(dql) Kim Yo Jong has dismissed prospects for a summit between her brother, Kim Jong Un, and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, warning talks are impossible unless Tokyo abandons what she called "anachronistic" policies.

The statement follows Takaichi's recent outreach—raised during talks with U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington last week (see article in this edition)—seeking direct engagement with Pyongyang. While Kim Yo Jong did not specify the policies in question, prior North Korean messaging suggests demands that Japan accept its nuclear status and set aside the longstanding issue of Japanese citizens abducted in past decades.

By framing the rejection as a "personal position," Kim Yo Jong leaves limited room for maneuver while effectively pressuring Tokyo to make concessions. The stance underscores Pyongyang's negotiating approach of imposing preconditions rather than pursuing reciprocal dialogue. [The Korea Herald] [ABC News]

Pakistan-United States dispute emerges over Islamabad's missile capability assessment

(lm) A disagreement has emerged between Pakistan and the United States following statements by United States Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard that Pakistan could potentially develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the United States homeland.

The remarks were made during the presentation of the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment to the United States Senate Intelligence Committee, which identified Pakistan among several countries, including China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, as developing advanced missile systems with nuclear and conventional payload capabilities. The report also assessed that the global missile threat to the United States could increase

significantly by 2035, with the number of systems projected to rise from over 3,000 to more than 16,000.

Islamabad rejected the assessment, stating that its missile program is defensive in nature and remains below intercontinental range. Officials emphasized that the country's strategic capabilities are based on a doctrine of "credible minimum deterrence," primarily aimed at maintaining balance with India, which possesses longer-range missile systems exceeding 12,000 kilometers.

The Pakistani response further underscored that its nuclear and missile programs are intended for regional deterrence rather than global reach, and called for a more measured and fact-based approach in external assessments. The government has not indicated any change in its current strategic posture.

Separately, Pakistan also rejected remarks by Israel's ambassador to India describing the country as a "rogue state with nuclear weapons," stating that such characterizations were unfounded and reiterating its position on regional security and international law. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan calls for restoration of Indus Waters Treaty amid dispute with India

(lm) Pakistan has called on neighboring India to restore full implementation of the Indus Waters Treaty, a 1960 World Bank-brokered water-sharing agreement governing the Indus river system between the two countries. At a recent United Nations event marking World Water Day, a Pakistani diplomat said New Delhi's decision in April 2025 to place the treaty in abeyance had no legal basis and warned that suspending the accord risked turning shared water resources into a political instrument. [Arab News]

India announced the move after the April 2025 attack in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, saying the treaty would remain in abeyance until Pakistan ended support for cross-border terrorism. Pakistan rejects that accusation. While water flows were not fully stopped, the dispute affected treaty-based cooperation, including data-sharing and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Islamabad position is that the treaty does not permit unilateral suspension. It has also cited the June 2025 supplemental award of the Court of Arbitration in the Kishenganga and Ratle disputes, which held that the treaty does not allow either party to unilaterally hold it

in abeyance and that the arbitration process remains valid. India has rejected both the tribunal and the ruling, maintaining that it is not bound to perform treaty obligations while the accord is in abeyance.

Pakistan-Afghanistan cross-border conflict intensifies into sustained military campaign amid fragile Eid pause

(lm) Pakistan's military campaign against militant groups in Afghanistan has escalated into the most severe phase of cross-border conflict in years since late February, combining sustained airstrikes, drone operations, and ground exchanges along the approximately 2,600-kilometer border.

The current escalation began on February 26, when Afghan forces targeted Pakistani border posts, triggering retaliatory Pakistani strikes on alleged militant infrastructure inside Afghanistan. Since then, Islamabad has conducted a continuous campaign over roughly three weeks, reporting strikes on more than 80 locations and hundreds of militant casualties. Islamabad maintains that operations will continue until the Afghan Taliban government takes verifiable action against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which it accuses of conducting cross-border attacks from Afghan territory. Kabul denies providing such safe havens.

Tensions peaked on March 17, with a major airstrike in Kabul on a drug rehab center. Afghan authorities reported more than 400 deaths, while United Nations reporting on March 18 placed the death toll at 143 and called for an independent investigation. Pakistan rejected allegations of targeting civilian infrastructure, stating that the strike hit militant facilities using precision-guided munitions. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Against this backdrop, China has publicly called for a ceasefire and dialogue, urging both sides on March 18 to de-escalate tensions. Pakistan signaled that it would take Beijing's position into account, but without indicating any shift in its operational approach. Despite similar calls from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Türkiye, no formal negotiation mechanism is currently in place. [Arab News 3]

Yet, Pakistan announced on March 18 a temporary pause in operations from midnight March 18–19 to midnight March 23–24 in connection with Eid al-Fitr. The pause remained conditional, with Islamabad warning that any cross-border or militant attack would

trigger an immediate resumption of operations. [Arab News 4] [Arab News 5]

Despite the ceasefire, incidents have continued. Afghan authorities reported that a Pakistani mortar shell struck Kunar province on March 22, killing one civilian and injuring another, while Pakistan has rejected claims that it violated the pause. [Arab News 6]

At the same time, Army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir, Pakistan's top military commander, underscored the country's willingness to sustain the campaign during a March 21 visit to Kurram district along the Afghan border. He stated that militants operating from Afghan territory would not be allowed to threaten Pakistan's security and pointed to Operation Ghazab-lil-Haq—the ongoing cross-border military campaign—as the framework guiding continued strikes against such targets. [Arab News 7]

The conflict has resulted in significant humanitarian impact. According to United Nations estimates, at least 76 Afghan civilians have been killed since February 26—excluding the Kabul strike—and more than 115,000 people have been displaced.

The cross-border campaign is unfolding alongside continued militant activity inside Pakistan. On March 17, security forces repelled coordinated attacks on checkpoints in Bannu district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—a northwestern province bordering Afghanistan that has seen a sustained rise in militant violence—killing at least one suspected attacker. [Arab News 8]

Philippines, China move to restore joint coast guard committee under updated MOU

(ms) The Philippines and China are working to restore a joint coast guard committee as part of ongoing efforts to update a 2016 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on maritime cooperation, Philippine officials said.

According to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), current discussions between the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the China Coast Guard (CCG) are focused on reestablishing the Joint Coast Guard Committee on Maritime Cooperation. The mechanism was originally created under the 2016 agreement to serve as a formal channel of communication between the two sides.

The committee is intended to facilitate dialogue, information exchange and coordination on non-sensitive maritime matters, including safety and communication at sea. Officials said the proposed amendments to the MOU are procedural and aimed at reactivating this framework after a period of limited engagement.

The DFA emphasized that the scope of the updated MOU remains limited. It stated that the agreement does not include cooperation in sensitive operational areas, particularly joint patrols in contested waters, which have been a key concern in recent public discussions.

The clarification follows reports and statements suggesting that a broader coast guard cooperation agreement between the two countries was nearing completion. Philippine authorities said that, while negotiations are ongoing, the focus remains on communication and confidence-building mechanisms rather than operational coordination.

The talks are taking place against the backdrop of ongoing tensions in the South China Sea, where Philippine and Chinese vessels have been involved in repeated confrontations. Incidents in recent months have included close-range maneuvers, water cannon use and radio challenges.

The DFA said negotiations are being conducted through established diplomatic channels and have been reported to key government officials, including the national security adviser, the foreign affairs secretary and the PCG commandant.

Officials added that the initiative is consistent with the government's approach of maintaining communication with China while continuing to assert the Philippines' sovereignty and maritime rights under international law. [GMA News] [Manila Standard] [Manila Times] [Philippine News Agency]

Seychelles-France joint exercise conducted to strengthen aircraft hostage response capacity

(lm) Seychelles and France conducted a joint simulation exercise to strengthen response capabilities to aircraft hostage situations. The exercise involved 13 officers from the police Quick Response Team, a specialized unit for high-risk incidents. [Seychelles News Agency]

Singapore, Australia leaders agree to strengthen energy supply chains amid Middle East tensions

(st) Singapore and Australia on March 23 agreed to step up efforts to safeguard the trade of key energy supplies, including diesel and liquefied natural gas (LNG), amid growing concerns over disruptions linked to the conflict in the Middle East. In a joint statement following a call, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese highlighted risks to global energy flows, including damage to infrastructure in Gulf states and disruptions to the Strait of Hormuz, a critical transit route for oil and LNG. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining open trade flows and strengthening supply chain resilience.

The two countries also agreed to accelerate negotiations on arrangements covering trade in essential supplies, including mechanisms for consultation and early notification of potential disruptions. Australia is a major LNG producer, while Singapore relies heavily on imported natural gas for electricity generation, making stable supply chains critical for both economies. The initiative builds on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2.0 announced in October 2025 and reflects broader efforts to enhance regional energy security and cooperation. [Channel NewsAsia]

Taiwan renames South Korea in immigration system amid labeling dispute

(co) Taiwan has changed South Korea's designation in its immigration system from "Korea" to "South Korea" in response to Seoul labeling Taiwan as "China (Taiwan)".

The measure was described as a reciprocal step after repeated Taiwanese requests for revision were not addressed. Taipei also signaled further adjustments to its arrival card system while urging South Korea to reconsider its classification.

Seoul has stated it is reviewing the issue, which reflects broader sensitivities linked to Taiwan's status and South Korea's relationship China. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea and Mongolia advance in CEPA negotiations

(co) South Korea and Mongolia have discussed ways to accelerate negotiations for a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to deepen trade and resource cooperation, inlcuding critical minerals.

Talks led by officials from the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Resources and their Mongolian counterparts focused on bridging differences over market access and rules of origin.

Both sides also highlighted critical minerals cooperation as a key pillar of the agreement, given Mongolia's resource potential. [Yonhap News Agency]

Canada, South Korea expand defense and industry cooperation

(co) South Korea's parliamentary National Defense Committee on March 24 approved a resolution supporting expanded defense and industry cooperation with Canada.

The resolution highlights the strategic complementarity of Korea's advanced manufacturing capabilities and Canada's resources and technology, creating synergies and potential for collaboration in defense, industry and technology, supply chain resilience, and job creation.

The resolution is expected to strengthen bilateral defense ties, including technology cooperation and joint industrial projects. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea concludes joint military exercise with US

(co) South Korea and the United States have concluded the Freedom Shield exercise, focused on preparing Seoul to assume wartime operational control of allied forces.

The 11-day drills emphasized joint readiness, rapid response capabilities, and lessons from recent conflicts, reinforcing alliance coordination. 18.000 troops participated, while the number of field exercises was reduced to around 22 from 51 last year,

in alignment with Seoul's engagement politics toward Nprth Korea.

North Korea condemned the Freedom Shield as "rehearsals for invasion" and conducted multiple ballistic missile launches during the period. [Anadolu Ajansı]

The exercise marked a meaningful step toward the transition of wartime operational control, a key objective of the Lee Jae Myung administration. South Korea has not exercised wartime operational control of its forces since the Korean War began in 1950, when authority was transferred to the United Nations Command and later to the ROK/US Combined Forces Command led by a US four-star general.

In 1994 Seoul regained peacetime operational control of its military. However, wartime command authority continues to reside with the United States under the current CFC structure. [Stars and Stripes] [The Korea Herald]

South Korean foreign minister urges Iran to safeguard Gulf shipping

(dql) South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Hyun called Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi on March 23, urging Tehran to protect vessels in the Strait of Hormuz and halt strikes on civilian facilities in Gulf states.

Cho expressed concern over the broader economic impact of the Middle East conflict. South Korea has over 24 vessels and 100 crew stranded in the Gulf, highlighting Seoul's heavy reliance on Middle Eastern oil and LNG supplies. [Reuters]

The call came as South Korea is in active talks with other countries to restore navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Seoul is coordinating to protect citizens and secure energy shipments, joining a joint statement with Japan and several European countries condemning Iran's attacks. []Yonhap News Agency 1]

USD 2 million aid for Lebanon

Separately, South Korea will provide USD 2 million in humanitarian assistance to Lebanon, where Israeli strikes on Iran-linked targets have killed nearly 1,000 people and displaced almost 1 million.

The aid will be delivered via the Korea International Cooperation Agency's emergency program,

supplemented by NGOs and private-sector contributions. Seoul said the support aims to ease civilian suffering and help restore normalcy amid the ongoing conflict. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

India–Sri Lanka talks address impact of intensifying Middle East war

(lm) India and Sri Lanka have discussed the implications of the ongoing Middle East war during an exchange between their foreign ministers, as regional spillovers increasingly affect South Asian economies.

On March 23, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar held talks with Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath, focusing on the repercussions of the conflict.

The discussion comes as the war has begun to disrupt energy supply chains across the region. Sri Lanka—an import-dependent economy for fuel—has been exposed to rising costs and supply risks, with regional reporting indicating that neighboring countries have sought petroleum supplies from India, which is assessing such requests based on its own capacity.

India reiterated its "Neighbourhood First" policy—a framework prioritizing cooperation and support for neighboring countries—and its "Vision MAHASAGAR" initiative, which promotes maritime security, connectivity, and economic cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka agrees with Brazil to raise bilateral trade to USD 1 billion by 2030

(lm) Sri Lanka and Brazil have agreed to expand bilateral trade to USD 1 billion by 2030 following the second round of political consultations held on March 21 in Colombo. The discussions reviewed progress since 2022 and focused on strengthening economic cooperation.

Both sides emphasized accelerating pending agreements across sectors including security cooperation, law enforcement, and traditional medicine, while identifying new areas for collaboration such as agriculture, shipping, and sports. Ongoing technical cooperation projects in dairy and sugar production were also highlighted as part of broader efforts to deepen economic ties.

The consultations further addressed preparations for an upcoming state visit and the expansion of parliamentary exchanges, reflecting a broader push to institutionalize bilateral engagement alongside trade growth. [Daily Mirror]

Taiwan awaiting South Korea response over designation dispute

(yl) Taiwan is awaiting a response from South Korea over a dispute involving the labeling of Taiwan in South Korea's online immigration system.

The dispute began after South Korea listed Taiwan as "China (Taiwan)" in its electronic arrival card system introduced in February 2025. Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has since received complaints from travelers and has requested corrections.

In response, Taiwan has changed the designation of South Korea on government-issued residence permits to "South Korea" instead of its official name, "Republic of Korea," and warned it may apply the same change in its own immigration system if no adjustment is made by March 31. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan rules out Hormuz military deployment amid U.S. calls

(acl) Taiwan has ruled out deploying forces to support military efforts to secure the Strait of Hormuz, with Defense Minister Wellington Koo stating that the armed forces have not considered operations in the region despite U.S. calls for allied support.

Since U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28, Iranian forces have targeted tanker traffic in the strait —through which around one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas supplies transit—driving up energy prices. Several U.S. allies, including Japan and European partners, have signaled willingness to contribute to maritime security efforts.

Koo emphasized that Taiwan's military remains focused on defending its territory, citing escalating "gray-zone" pressure and potential military threats from China, and indicated no plans for out-of-area deployments. [Focus Taiwan]

Meanwhile, Taiwanese defense officials are warning that heavy US use of long-range cruise missiles in the ongoing Iran conflict is straining stockpiles critical for

deterring a potential Chinese attack. In just the first six days of fighting, the US reportedly launched hundreds of JASSMs and Tomahawks—quantities equivalent to several years of normal production.

Experts emphasize that such standoff missiles are central to US-Taiwan defense planning, as they can strike Chinese targets beyond air defenses while minimizing risk to US forces. War game simulations have shown that large portions of the US JASSM arsenal would be needed in the opening weeks of a hypothetical conflict with China.

Current stockpiles are estimated between 3,500 and 6,500 missiles, but procurement lags and ongoing use in other conflicts could erode this capability. Analysts note potential shortfalls extend to other precision munitions like glide bombs.

US legal obligations to arm Taiwan and maintain deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, underscored by Admiral Samuel Paparo in 2024, heighten concerns that global deployments may weaken readiness against Beijing. [Taiwan News 1]

Separately, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported that China currently has no plans to invade Taiwan in 2027, preferring unification without force but retaining the option to use military action if necessary.

US intelligence notes that the People's Liberation Army is making "steady but uneven" progress toward capabilities for a cross-strait conflict, factoring in Taiwan's responses, US involvement, and operational challenges. [Taiwan News 2]

Finland, Taiwan explore closer ties on technology and security

(dql) A Finnish parliamentary delegation, led by Mats Löfström— chair of the Finland–Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Group—visited Taiwan last week to explore closer collaboration on technology and security, meeting with Vice President Hsiao Bi-khim in Taipei. [Taiwan Today]

Discussions highlighted Taiwan's strengths in semiconductors and electronics, Finland's expertise in telecommunications and space technology, and shared concerns such as cybersecurity, disinformation, and infrastructure protection.

Both sides expressed interest in deepening cooperation to address emerging technological and security challenges. [ScandAsia]

Thailand and Ireland expand cooperation in trade and high-value sectors

(msz) Thailand and Ireland are expanding cooperation in trade, investment, technology, and education, marking 51 years of diplomatic relations.

Bilateral trade now exceeds EUR 4 billion (THB 149 billion / USD 4.1 billion) annually, with both sides reporting increased two-way investment and growing presence of companies in each other's markets. Trade growth has been driven in part by high-value sectors such as pharmaceuticals, medical technology, and digital services, with officials noting an increase of more than 30 percent in goods trade compared to the previous year.

Cooperation is also expanding into areas including fintech, biopharmaceuticals, data centers, and artificial intelligence, alongside continued collaboration in education and research. Recent developments include the recognition of Irish whiskey under Thailand's geographical indication framework and new academic partnerships between Irish and Thai institutions.

Both sides also highlighted the potential impact of ongoing negotiations for a Thailand–European Union free trade agreement, which is expected to further strengthen trade and investment links. [Bangkok Post]

Japan extends next-generation ODA to support green transition and deepen economic cooperation

(hn/lr) Japan is set to provide a next-generation ODA loan worth 50 billion yen (approximately USD 315 million) to Vietnam to support its green transition and enhance climate resilience, with streamlined procedures and disbursement expected in 2026. The fundings will be used to support three pillars: infrastructure development, including roads and irrigation, particularly in northern midland and mountainous provinces, green growth and climate change adaptation, as well as disaster-resilient rural development.

The program, developed in cooperation with the Japan International Cooperation Agency, aims to promote sustainable growth, assist Vietnam in achieving its net-zero emissions target by 2050, and strengthen climate adaptation capacity. It also introduces an innovative ODA model that links Japanese technology and enterprises with Vietnamese partners, facilitating project implementation and technology transfer. Given Vietnam's significant climate vulnerabilities and estimated financing needs of USD 68.75 billion by 2030 for emissions reduction, international support particularly from Japan will remain essential. [Tuoitrenews]

At the same time, Phạm Minh Chính has called on Japanese businesses to maintain confidence and expand investment, underscoring the continued strength of the Vietnam - Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, with economic cooperation as a central pillar. He emphasized the need for deeper collaboration in high-tech, green, and innovation-driven sectors, alongside enhanced access to new investment flows, sustainable finance, and major infrastructure projects. The Prime Minister also highlighted the importance of strengthening supply chains, developing supporting industries, and building a highly skilled workforce.

Vietnam reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining a stable, transparent, and investor-friendly environment, while encouraging Japan to help address existing project bottlenecks and support the deeper integration of Vietnamese enterprises into global value chains. Japanese stakeholders, in turn, expressed strong confidence in Vietnam's economic outlook and its growing role in higher value-added industries. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam affirms compliance with global trade rules amid US manufacturing probe

(hn) Vietnam has reaffirmed that its trade and manufacturing activities fully comply with sustainability standards and international regulations, including those of the World Trade Organization, in response to a recent US investigation into global manufacturing practices.

At a regular press briefing, spokesperson Phạm Thu Hằng addressed concerns over the US Trade Representative's Section 301 probe, which is examining policies related to excess capacity in manufacturing across 16 economies, including Vietnam. She stressed that Vietnam's economy operates according to market

principles and has been recognized as a market economy by multiple countries.

Accordingly, in the new U.S. trade investigations under Section 301, Vietnam is identified as a key country under scrutiny due to its large and growing trade surplus with the United States and its central role in global manufacturing supply chains. The U.S. is examining whether Vietnam's trade practices are "unreasonable or discriminatory" and whether they contribute to excess industrial capacity or burden American commerce.

Vietnam is also seen as a major export and final-assembly hub, raising concerns about potential transshipment of goods linked to China. As a result, the investigations could lead to tariffs or trade restrictions if violations are found, potentially affecting Vietnam's export competitiveness and position in global supply chains. [ustr.gov]

These investigations are considered more powerful and unpredictable than previous tariffs, potentially leading to duties or restrictions that could affect Vietnam's export competitiveness and investment planning. The move is also viewed as part of broader U.S. efforts to rebuild a "tariff wall" and address trade imbalances, with geopolitical motivations linked to China.

Hằng emphasized that Vietnam remains transparent and cooperative, and will continue to share information and engage with relevant US agencies to clarify its policies. The goal, she noted, is to maintain and strengthen a stable, long-term, and mutually beneficial economic partnership between the two countries while ensuring alignment with global trade norms. [Vietnamnews] [Voiceofvietnam] [Channelnewsasia]

Vietnam rejects USCIRF report, defends religious freedom record amid U.S. concerns

(hn) Vietnam has strongly rejected the 2026 annual report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), stating that its assessments are biased, inaccurate, and based on misleading or ill-intentioned information.

Accordingly, the 2026 Annual Report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom presents a critical view of religious freedom in Vietnam, stating that it remains significantly restricted

under strong government control. The report highlights concerns such as the repression of independent religious groups that are not officially recognized, the detention of individuals for religious-related activities, and ongoing harassment or pressure especially among ethnic minority communities to renounce their beliefs. It also points to strict state oversight of religious organizations through registration requirements and control over their leadership and activities.

Based on these issues, USCIRF recommends that the United States designate Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" for severe violations of religious freedom and calls for stronger diplomatic measures to encourage improvements. While the report relies on information from NGOs and other sources, the Vietnamese government has rejected its findings as biased and inaccurate. [Uscirf]

At a regular press briefing, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson reaffirmed that Vietnam consistently respects and protects human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, as enshrined in the 2013 Constitution and national legal system. Authorities stressed that citizens are not subject to discrimination based on religion and that religious organizations are allowed to operate in accordance with the law.

The government also highlighted that these rights are implemented in practice, not just in legal provisions. At the same time, Vietnam expressed its readiness to engage in constructive, open, and respectful dialogue with the United States on issues of mutual concern, in line with their comprehensive strategic partnership aimed at peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. [Phapluat, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam pushes stronger economic diplomacy to deepen Italy trade and investment ties

(hn) Deputy Prime Minister Nguyễn Chí Dũng has called for stronger economic diplomacy to deepen trade and investment ties with Italy, urging support for the swift ratification of the EU–Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement by remaining EU members.

During meetings in Italy, including with Adolfo Urso, he highlighted Vietnam's focus on innovation, digital transformation, and institutional reforms, while encouraging Italian businesses to expand investment in sectors such as high technology, manufacturing, infrastructure, and clean energy. He also stressed

better use of the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement and closer cooperation in innovation, R&D, and supply chains.

Both sides agreed to enhance collaboration and sign new agreements in emerging sectors. In talks with Stefano Pontecorvo from Leonardo, Dũng welcomed expanded high-tech cooperation and potential investment, including an R&D center in Vietnam. Overall, the visit aimed to boost bilateral trade, investment, and technological cooperation while strengthening connections between businesses and institutions. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam, Belgium launch landmark cleanup of Agent Orange contamination

(hn) Vietnam and Belgium have launched a landmark partnership to clean up land contaminated by Agent Orange, marking the first time a foreign-funded war remediation project has received strong backing from the Vietnamese government.

The initiative will use advanced thermal technology from Haemers Technologies to eliminate toxic dioxin from polluted areas, restoring land for safe use. Though costly and long-term, the project aims to transform former “hot spots” into productive zones.

Beyond environmental recovery, the effort includes a humanitarian component, supporting families affected by Agent Orange through the creation of small businesses. Backed by international investment and Belgium’s political support, the project seeks to address war legacies while promoting sustainable development and economic opportunities. [Vietnamnews]

Algeria and Vietnam push implementation of strategic partnership and energy cooperation

(hn) Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính and Algerian Prime Minister Sifi Ghrieb held phone talks to strengthen bilateral relations and discuss global issues.

They agreed to quickly implement commitments under the newly upgraded Strategic Partnership, focusing on key areas such as investment, oil and gas, trade, defense, renewable energy, technology, and agriculture. Vietnam also sought Algeria’s support in

ensuring energy security, particularly through cooperation between Petrovietnam Exploration Production Corporation and Sonatrach.

Algeria reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Vietnam, especially in energy supply, and to advancing cooperation across multiple sectors. Both sides also shared concerns over Middle East conflicts and expressed readiness to promote ceasefires and peaceful solutions. [Vietnamnews] [Tuoitrenews]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

27 March 2026 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT+7), CPG, Thailand

Winds of Change: Geopolitics at the Crossroads of South and Southeast Asia

This online discussion feature *Winds of Change: Geopolitics at the Crossroads of South and Southeast Asia*, the latest book of CPG Senior Research Fellow Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, who explores how China's Belt and Road Initiative, India's regional diplomacy, and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy shape domestic and regional dynamics. The event will assess these trends in light of the ongoing U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict and its emerging impacts across South and Southeast Asia, examining how great-power competition and systemic volatility are accelerating pressures on smaller states. For more information, visit [CPG].

25 March 2026 @ 8:30-10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Stimson Center, USA

Next Steps for US-Japan Military Shipbuilding, Repair, and Maintenance

This hybrid event highlights opportunities for expanded U.S.-Japan cooperation in military shipbuilding, repair, and maintenance, building on past successes in co-development and co-production of defense equipment. Following Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi's visit to Washington, three members of a recent Stimson Task Force will present specific proposals to jumpstart this cooperation. For more information and registration, visit [Stimson Center].

25 March 2026 @ 9:00-10:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA

U.S.–ROK Cyber Cooperation: Countering North Korean Cybercrime and Strengthening Active Cyber Defense

This webcast examines research on strengthening U.S.–ROK cyber resilience and deepening bilateral cybersecurity cooperation. Two panels will explore the role of cryptocurrencies in enabling cybercrime and policy options for mitigation, as well as strategies for active cyber deterrence and coordinated responses to malicious cyber activity. For more information and registration, please see [CSIS].

26 March 2026 @ 9:30-10:30 a.m. (GMT-5), Stimson Center, USA

AI and the Future of Open-Source Intelligence

This webinar explores how AI-driven systems are transforming OSINT and expanding its applications across security, governance, and sustainable development. Panelists will examine the technologies behind this shift, discuss responsible data use in diverse contexts, and weigh the opportunities and governance challenges, including disinformation, bias, and transparency, presented by automated intelligence. For more information and registration, visit [Stimson Center].

26 March 2026 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA

Future of U.S.-Europe Relations: A Discussion with Dr. Lawrence Freedman

This webcast explores the future of U.S.-Europe relations and assesses risks and opportunities in the evolving transatlantic partnership. The discussion will feature British academic and strategist Dr. Lawrence Freedman and consider implications for extended nuclear deterrence and strategic stability in Europe. For more information and registration, please see [CSIS].

26 March 2026 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Technology and the Bomb: Evaluating Proliferation Risks in a Rapidly Evolving World

This hybrid event examines how emerging technologies—such as AI, quantum computing, additive manufacturing, and nuclear energy—could shape the future of nuclear weapons proliferation and risk. The panel discussion will explore the implications for state behavior, acquisition pathways, and opportunities for more effective monitoring and verification. For more information and registration, please see [Carnegie].

26 March 2026 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Atlantic Council, USA

The US-Syria Energy Symposium

This webcast will explore Syria's evolving energy sector and its role in the country's recovery and reconstruction. The discussion will cover the current state of oil and gas, ongoing reforms, investment opportunities for U.S. companies, and the sector's potential to support economic revitalization and regional stability. For more information and registration, visit [Atlantic Council].

26 March 2026 @ 3:00-4:15 p.m. (GMT+7), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

The CPV's 14th National Congress: Key Outcomes and Implications

This webinar will review the outcomes of the Communist Party of Vietnam's 14th National Congress, including key personnel appointments and policy directions, and assess their implications for Vietnam's political, economic, and foreign policy prospects. It will also provide an initial analysis of the upcoming National Assembly elections and discuss how the new government could advance the Party's five-year development agenda. For more information and registration, visit [ISEAS].

26 March 2026 @ 6:30-8:00 p.m. (GMT+11), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

The Prabowo Presidency: Strategic Expansion, Re-Militarisation and Autocratic Rule

This event will feature Dr. Greg Fealy, Emeritus Professor of Indonesian Politics at ANU, analyzing President Prabowo Subianto's second year in office and its impact on Indonesia's governance and strategic posture. The discussion will cover his diplomatic ambitions, military strengthening, recent policy initiatives, and the centralization of political power, highlighting both achievements and challenges in his presidency. For more information and registration, visit [AIIA].

27 March 2026 @ 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. (GMT+0), European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR), UK

The bear and the bot farm: Implications of Russian hybrid operations in Africa

This webinar will examine Russia's expanding influence in Africa, including its military operations and propaganda efforts that shape local governments' alignment with Moscow. Speakers will discuss findings from the report "The bear and the bot farm: Countering Russian hybrid warfare in Africa" and explore recent developments, such as the Bamako jihadist blockade and the regional implications of a Ukrainian ceasefire for African peace and security. For more information, visit [ECFR].

30 March 2026 @ 1:30-3:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Belfer Center, USA

How Can the US Engage China in Arms Control? Structural Obstacles to Sino-US Nuclear Stability

This hybrid event will offer a Chinese perspective on nuclear arms control amid the New START Treaty's expiration and rising U.S.-China tensions. The discussion will explore Beijing's strategic thinking, structural challenges to Sino-U.S. stability, and opportunities for diplomacy and pragmatic cooperation to prevent escalation and advance shared security goals. For more information and registration, visit [Belfer Center].

30 March 2026 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT+7), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Technological Trade Patterns: BRICS and ASEAN

This webinar will examine how integration with the extended BRICS group affects export patterns, particularly in technologically innovative and high-tech products, and the structural constraints that limit countries' ability to move up the global value chain. The discussion will also explore how R&D and domestic technological capabilities shape high-tech export performance and how demand conditions in destination markets continue to drive trade outcomes. For more information and registration, visit [ISEAS].

31 March 2026 @ 1:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, United Kingdom

Leadership and representation in international relations: building on women's legacy

This hybrid event explores women's contributions to international relations and diplomacy over the past century. The panel discussion will focus on career paths, representation, allyship, and advancing gender equity to inspire and support the next generation of practitioners, diplomats, and academics. For more information and registration, visit [Chatham House].

31 March 2026 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT+11), Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA), Australia

The Australia-India Relationship in a Changing World Order

This hybrid event will explore the Australia–India relationship, examining its strengths, vulnerabilities, and strategic significance in a changing Indo-Pacific landscape. For more information and registration, visit [AIIA].

Recent and Upcoming Book Releases

Scott Kurashige, ***American Peril: The Violent History of Anti-Asian Racism***, University of California Press, 352 pages, to be published April 7, 2026. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Beth Lew-Williams, ***John Doe Chinaman: A Forgotten History of Chinese Life under American Racial Law***, Harvard University Press, 376 pages, published September 16, 2025. For a review, see [The New York Times].

Rian Thum, ***Islamic China: An Asian History***, Harvard University Press, 304 pages, published November 25, 2025. For a podcast with the author, see [China Books Review].

Mahmood Mamdani, ***Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State***, Harvard University Press, 352 pages, published October 14, 2025. For a review, see [Los Angeles Review of Books].

Calls

The **Global Studies Research Network** invites paper proposals for its **Twentieth Global Studies Conference "The Social Question Revisited: Inequality, Ideology, and Interdependence,"** to be held on July 15-17, 2027, at Sorbonne University, Paris, France, and online. The manuscript submission deadline is June 15, 2027. For more information, see [Global Studies Research Network].

The **European Society of International Law (ESIL)** invites paper proposals for the **conference "New Technologies and International Legal Accountability,"** to be held on October 22-23, 2026. The manuscript submission deadline is April 15, 2026. For more information, see [ESIL].

The Empowering Network for International Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University invites full paper submission for the **2026 Chulalongkorn Asian Heritage Forum**, to be held on November 6, 2026. The submission deadline is June 30, 2026. For more information, see [Chulalongkorn University].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Monitoring & Evaluation Analyst** – India. Applications are accepted until the position is filled. For more information, see [UNDP].

The **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** seeks a **Programme Management Officer** – Bangkok (Thailand). The deadline for application submission is April 3, 2026. For more information, see [UNEP].

The **International Criminal Court (ICC)** seeks a **Project Officer**, Office of the Prosecutor. The deadline for application submission is December 31, 2026. For more information, see [ICC].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** seeks a **Senior Project Associate – Reporting / Monitoring & Evaluation**. The deadline for application submission is March 25, 2026. For more information, see [IOM].

Save the Children seeks a **Senior Programme Operations Advisor** – ESA region. The deadline for application submission is March 31, 2026. For more information, see [Save the Children].

RTI International seeks a **Director – Surveys and Observational Studies**. The deadline for application submission is March 31, 2026. For more information, see [RTI].

The **European Stability Mechanism (ESM)** seeks a **Research Officer** – Chief Economist Department. The deadline for application submission is April 9, 2026. For more information, see [ESM].

The **International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)** seeks a **Project Manager** – Guatemala. The deadline for application submission is April 9, 2026. For more information, see [International IDEA].

The **World Bank** seeks an **Economist**. The deadline for application submission is April 1, 2026. For more

information, see [World Bank].

Team:

Amy Carlotti Lu (acl), Aung Naing Lin (anl), Beatrice Ong (bo), Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Christopher Ocker (co), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felix Serna Calvo (fs), Hoa Khanh Ngo (hn), Henning Glaser (hg), Jones Luka Naciri Taoufik (jn), Lalitphat Rakprik (lr), Linh Nguyen (ln), Lucas Meier (lm), May Thet Maung (may), Morten Strantzen (ms), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Nat Ng Ther Li (nl), Nichapa Boonphattanasoonthorn (ab), Sibghat Ullah (su), Sonia Teo (st), Venus Phuangkom, Yi-Chen Lin (yl)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: **contact@cpg-online.de**.

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

You are receiving this email at [email address suppressed] because you signed up for CPG's Asia in Review newsletter.
Privacy Policy

Preferences | Unsubscribe