Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

The Asia in Review (AiR) team is pleased to present to you this week´s AiR issue with the latest events, developments and trends in domestic politics, international relations and geopolitics in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Wishing you an informative read, I extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Senegal's Independence Day and Malta's Freedom Day this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Guangdong official Guo Yonghang under investigation for corruption

(ms) Chinese authorities have placed senior Guangdong official Guo Yonghang under investigation for alleged corruption, according to the country's top anti-corruption watchdog.

Guo, 60, a vice-chairman of the Guangdong Provincial Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, is suspected of "serious violations of discipline and law," a term commonly used to refer to corruption-related offenses. The announcement was made by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the National Commission of Supervision, which did not provide further details.

Guo previously served as Communist Party secretary of Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, from June 2023 until December. Before that, he held several senior positions across the province, including party secretary roles in Zhuhai and Guangzhou, and built a long career within the regional administration.

He was also known as a close associate of Ma Xingrui, a former Guangdong governor who later became party secretary of Xinjiang. Guo worked under Ma during his tenure in Shenzhen, where he served as a key aide between 2015 and 2016.

The investigation has drawn attention due to its connection to Ma, who was removed from his Xinjiang post in mid-2025 and has not appeared in public since. Authorities have not commented on Ma's status.

Guo's case is part of ongoing anti-corruption efforts led by the Communist Party, which regularly target officials across different levels of government. Outcomes of such investigations can include internal disciplinary measures or criminal prosecution, depending on the findings.

No additional information has been released regarding the allegations against Guo or the timeline of the investigation. [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

China: Former aviation executive Tan Ruisong given suspended death sentence in corruption case

(ms) A Chinese court has sentenced former aviation executive Tan Ruisong to death with a two-year reprieve for corruption-related offenses, in one of the most prominent recent cases involving the country's defense industry.

The Dalian Intermediate People's Court found that Tan, former chairman of the state-owned Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), accepted more than CNY 613 million (USD 89 million) in bribes and engaged in insider trading and embezzlement over a period spanning more than two decades.

Tan, 64, led AVIC from 2018 until his retirement in 2023. The company is a major state-owned enterprise responsible for military aircraft production and is directly overseen by the central government.

According to the court, Tan used his positions in multiple aviation-related roles between 1998 and 2024 to provide benefits to companies and individuals in

exchange for payments and valuables. The case also involved the embezzlement of nearly CNY 90 million (USD 13 million) in public funds and the misuse of insider information for securities trading.

The court imposed a combined sentence of death with a two-year reprieve, lifelong deprivation of political rights, and confiscation of all personal property. It also ordered that illegal gains be recovered and returned to the state.

Tan was not immediately executed due to mitigating factors cited by the court, including his admission of guilt, cooperation with investigators, and return of illicit assets. In China's legal system, such sentences are often commuted to life imprisonment if no further offenses are committed during the reprieve period.

The case follows an investigation launched in 2024. Tan was expelled from the Communist Party in early 2025 before being formally charged and tried later that year. [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

China: Senior financial regulator Zhou Liang under investigation in corruption probe

(ms) China has placed senior financial regulator Zhou Liang under investigation for alleged corruption, in one of the latest cases targeting officials within the country's financial oversight system.

Zhou, vice-chairman of the National Financial Regulatory Administration, is suspected of "serious violations of discipline and law," according to an announcement by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the Communist Party's top anti-corruption body. The term is commonly used by authorities to refer to corruption, bribery, or abuse of power.

Zhou, 54, has had a long career in both government administration and financial regulation. He worked in provincial and central government roles before moving into the financial sector, where he held senior positions in banking and insurance supervision. In recent years, he became vice minister at the National Financial Regulatory Administration, a key body responsible for overseeing China's financial institutions following regulatory restructuring.

Earlier in his career, Zhou worked closely with former Vice President Wang Qishan, serving in multiple roles alongside him across different regions and institutions

over roughly two decades. This included positions within the Communist Party's disciplinary system, where Zhou was involved in personnel management during earlier anti-corruption efforts.

According to official records, Zhou's last public appearance was in February 2026, shortly before the investigation was announced.

His case follows other investigations involving officials linked to financial regulation and governance. Chinese authorities have not disclosed further details about the allegations, the scope of the probe, or potential legal proceedings. [South China Morning Post]

China: Government launches long-term care insurance system to support aging population

(ms) China has announced the rollout of a nationwide long-term care insurance system aimed at supporting its rapidly growing elderly population and easing pressure on families.

The plan, issued by the State Council, will provide financial support and services for individuals with long-term disabilities lasting six months or more. It is intended to cover basic nursing and medical care needs as part of China's broader social security framework.

The system builds on pilot programs introduced in 2016 and sets a three-year target to establish a unified scheme covering both urban and rural populations. Funding will come from a combination of employer and individual contributions, along with government subsidies, with a total contribution rate of about 0.3 percent.

China is facing increasing demographic pressure, with the number of people aged over 60 expected to reach around 400 million by 2035. At the same time, the country's population has declined for four consecutive years, raising concerns about long-term workforce and pension sustainability. [Reuters]

China: New emergency management chief appointed after minister removed in investigation

(ms) China has appointed Zhang Chengzhong as party chief of the Ministry of Emergency Management following the removal of former minister Wang Xiangxi, who is under investigation for alleged misconduct.

The appointment was announced by the ministry, marking a leadership change at a key agency responsible for disaster response, workplace safety, and crisis coordination across the country.

Wang was dismissed in February after authorities launched an investigation into what were described as “serious violations of discipline and law,” a term commonly used in China to refer to corruption-related offenses.

The Ministry of Emergency Management plays a central role in managing natural disasters and industrial risks, making leadership stability a priority for maintaining operational effectiveness.

Officials have not disclosed further details about the investigation, and no timeline has been provided for its conclusion. [DevDiscourse] [Reuters]

China: New policy limits homework and exams to reduce student pressure

(ms) China has introduced new education measures aimed at reducing academic pressure on students, including limits on homework, exams, and classroom practices.

The Ministry of Education said schools will be prohibited from assigning excessive homework or organizing frequent examinations that increase the academic burden on students. Schools are also barred from encroaching on students’ break time or restricting their ability to leave classrooms during rest periods.

The policy is part of a broader effort to address concerns about student wellbeing. Heavy workloads and intense competition have long been associated with sleep deprivation, anxiety, and rising mental health issues among young people in China.

Authorities have also reinforced earlier measures requiring schools to ensure at least two hours of daily physical activity for primary and secondary students, while kindergartens are banned from introducing advanced academic content prematurely. [Arise] [Reuters]

China: Industrial profits rise as authorities weigh steps to strengthen bank capital

(ms) China's industrial sector posted a strong rise in profits at the start of 2026, while regulators are also considering changes to bank ownership rules to help lenders raise more capital amid economic pressure.

Industrial profits increased by 15.2 percent year-on-year in January and February, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics. The figure marks an acceleration from a 5.3 percent increase recorded in December, indicating a rebound in manufacturing activity.

Officials attributed the growth to higher factory output and improving product prices, particularly in high-tech manufacturing. Profits in the high-tech sector rose by 58.7 percent, driven by industries such as unmanned aerial vehicles and semiconductor production. Raw material sectors also posted strong gains, with non-ferrous metals profits rising by 148.2 percent and chemical producers reporting a 35.9 percent increase.

Despite the positive data, authorities cautioned that recovery remains uneven across sectors. Analysts note that structural challenges, including industrial overcapacity and weak domestic consumption, continue to affect profitability.

External factors are also emerging as a key concern. Rising geopolitical tensions, particularly in the Middle East, have disrupted global energy markets and contributed to higher oil prices. While China has sought to cushion the domestic impact by adjusting fuel pricing mechanisms, sustained increases in energy costs could raise production expenses and affect industrial output.

China's reliance on imported energy makes it sensitive to disruptions in key shipping routes such as the Strait of Hormuz. However, officials have indicated that the country's large strategic reserves and diversified energy sources may help limit the impact compared to other economies.

Alongside these developments, China is considering easing shareholding restrictions for some major investors in commercial banks, according to people familiar with the matter. The proposed change would allow certain shareholders, with regulatory approval, to hold major stakes in more banks than currently permitted. Under existing rules introduced in 2018, a major shareholder may hold 5 percent or more in no

more than two commercial banks, or a controlling stake in only one lender [CNBC] [Reuters]

China: Strict drone controls citing security risks

(ms) Beijing has announced new regulations tightening control over drones, citing growing security concerns linked to the rapid expansion of unmanned aerial technology.

Under the new rules, the sale or lease of drones and 17 designated "core components" will require approval from public security authorities. The regulation also bans bringing new drones or key parts into Beijing unless they have been registered under a real-name system and are carried by verified owners.

Authorities have also imposed limits on storage, restricting individuals or organizations from keeping more than three drones or 10 core components at a single location within the city's sixth ring road, an area covering more than 2,200 square kilometers.

The measures, approved by Beijing's municipal legislature, will take effect on May 1 and are part of broader efforts to regulate low-altitude airspace. [South China Morning Post]

China-Hong Kong: New national security rules require suspects to hand over device passwords

(ms) Hong Kong has introduced new rules under its national security framework requiring individuals under investigation to provide access to their electronic devices, including passwords, or face criminal penalties.

The amendments, added to the implementation rules of the Beijing-imposed national security law, allow police to compel suspects to hand over passwords or assist in decrypting devices. Failure to comply can result in up to one year in prison and a fine of HKD 100,000 (USD 12,800), while providing false information can lead to up to three years in jail and a higher fine.

Authorities may also require third parties—such as individuals with knowledge of passwords or access to devices—to assist investigations. The changes expand

the scope of enforcement beyond direct suspects to include device owners, users, or those with relevant information.

Additional provisions grant customs officials new powers to freeze or confiscate assets linked to national security offenses and seize materials deemed to have "seditious intention." These powers were previously limited to senior government officials and police.

Government officials have sought to address public concerns about privacy and potential misuse. Security Secretary Chris Tang said claims that police could randomly demand passwords on the street were "false and misleading," noting that a court warrant is generally required before such requests are made. However, he added that exceptions may apply in urgent situations involving imminent threats.

The amendments follow a 2024 court ruling that overturned earlier convictions related to data access orders, citing issues with evidence disclosure. Authorities say the updated rules are designed to strengthen enforcement while remaining consistent with legal safeguards. [Hong Kong Free Press 1] [Hong Kong Free Press 2]

China-Hong Kong: Janice Tse appointed constitutional affairs chief

(ms) China's State Council has appointed veteran civil servant Janice Tse as Hong Kong's new Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, filling a key government position responsible for relations with Beijing and political development.

Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee announced the appointment on March 30, describing Tse as an experienced administrator who will play a central role in shaping the city's first five-year development plan.

Tse, 61, comes out of retirement to take up the post, replacing Erick Tsang, who stepped down in January citing health concerns. During the interim period, the role had been held by acting secretary Clement Woo.

With a civil service career spanning nearly four decades, Tse joined the government in 1987 and later entered the Administrative Service. She has held senior roles across multiple departments, including director of home affairs and permanent secretary for the environment. She retired in January 2025 and was awarded the Gold Bauhinia Star the same year for her public service.

The Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau plays a key role in managing Hong Kong's political framework and its relationship with mainland China, including electoral arrangements and policy coordination. Tse is expected to oversee work related to long-term planning and institutional coordination under the new five-year agenda.

Lee said her experience in policy analysis and administrative leadership would support communication and cooperation across government levels.

The appointment is part of a broader set of senior government reshuffles, with several other officials taking up new roles in finance, transport, and commerce in the coming months. [Hong Kong Free Press] [RTHK]

Japan: Protests staged against constitutional revision and Middle East war

(dql) Thousands gathered outside the National Diet on March 25 to oppose potential constitutional amendments and protest U.S.–Israeli military actions against Iran, reflecting rising domestic unease over both security policy and Japan's pacifist identity. Organizers estimated around 24,000 participants, marking a significant increase in turnout compared to earlier demonstrations in March.

The rally, led by civil society groups advocating the preservation of Article 9—the pacifist clause of Japan's Constitution that renounces war and restricts military force—, was triggered by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's recent electoral landslide, which secured the two-thirds majority needed to initiate constitutional revision. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has signaled strong interest in amending the postwar charter, long a contentious issue in Japanese politics.

Protesters framed their opposition in both domestic and international terms—rejecting constitutional change while condemning the use of military force in the Middle East. The linkage underscores broader concerns that revising Article 9 could draw Japan more directly into overseas conflicts, particularly amid heightened alliance pressures from Washington.

The scale and persistence of the demonstrations point to a reactivation of civic mobilization reminiscent of earlier protests over security legislation, highlighting

enduring societal divisions over Japan's defense posture. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Stopgap budget exposes upper house constraints of ruling party

(dql) Japan has adopted an JPY 8.56 trillion (USD 54 billion) stopgap budget to sustain public spending at the start of the new fiscal year on April 1, after the government abandoned efforts to pass the full FY2026 budget in time, highlighting legislative constraints on Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's administration.

The provisional measure—the first in over a decade—was approved with bipartisan support to bridge the gap until the record JPY 122.31 trillion (USD 770 billion) annual budget is enacted. It covers essential expenditures such as social security payments, education subsidies, and transfers to local governments, with limited expected impact on households. [Kyodo News]

The delay reflects institutional gridlock between the two chambers of parliament. While Takaichi's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) secured a supermajority in the lower house in the February snap election (see AiR No. 6, February/2026, 2) and fast-tracked the budget there, it lacks control of the upper house, where opposition parties—led by the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan—forced extended deliberations and pushed for a stopgap measure, even threatening a boycott.

The impasse was exacerbated by compressed legislative timelines following February's election, while the ruling coalition's inability to manage upper house dynamics underscored the opposition's leverage. Under constitutional provisions, the budget can still take effect automatically if not approved within 30 days of lower house passage, setting a deadline of April 11, at which point the interim budget will lapse. [The Mainichi 1] [The Asahi Shimbun]

Beyond immediate fiscal management, the episode is seen as exposing structural constraints on Takaichi's leadership, including limited coordination within both the ruling bloc and parliament. Analysts suggest the government may need to adopt a more pragmatic approach toward opposition parties and pursue ad hoc cooperation to advance its legislative agenda. [The Mainichi 2]

Japan: Supreme Court sets limits on administrative discretion in landmark firearms ruling

(dql) The Supreme Court has, for the first time, ruled that the revocation of a firearms license was unlawful, establishing clearer limits on the discretionary authority of administrative bodies in sanctioning individuals.

In a unanimous decision, the Court overturned a lower ruling that had upheld the cancellation of a hunting gun license by a prefectural public safety commission. It found the measure “too harsh” and constituted an abuse of administrative discretion, emphasizing the need for proportionality in regulatory enforcement.

The case arose after a licensed hunter, acting under official supervision in a public safety capacity, used a firearm to eliminate a bear in Hokkaido. Authorities revoked his license on the basis of potential risk to surrounding structures, despite no actual damage or injuries occurring.

The Court underscored that sanctions must be assessed in light of the circumstances and consequences of the act, warning that excessive penalties could undermine the functioning of delegated public roles. [Japan Times]

The ruling strengthens judicial oversight of administrative decision-making in Japan by reinforcing proportionality and constraining punitive discretion. It sets a precedent likely to influence a broader range of regulatory actions beyond firearms control, particularly where individuals act under quasi-official mandates.

Japan: Strategic oil reserves released amid Hormuz disruption

(lr) Japan has begun its largest-ever drawdown of strategic oil reserves to stabilize domestic supply following Iran’s effective blockage of the Strait of Hormuz amid the U.S.–Israeli war.

The initial release amounts to around 30 days of domestic demand (8.5 million kiloliters), following a 15-day drawdown from private sector reserves, with total planned releases reaching approximately 80 million barrels—equivalent to 45 days of consumption and around 1.8 times the volume deployed after the 2011 disaster.

The move highlights Japan's acute vulnerability, as over 90 percent of its crude oil imports originate from the Middle East, and comes amid declining tanker arrivals, record gasoline prices, and emerging supply constraints in the petrochemical sector, particularly for naphtha. [Japan Today] [Nippon.com]

Japan pivots to coal to hedge LNG risk

In parallel, Japan is preparing emergency energy measures to safeguard electricity supply, with officials approving a plan to temporarily expand coal-fired power generation. The move comes in response to concerns over liquefied natural gas (LNG) procurement risks following Iran's partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz and attacks on regional energy infrastructure.

Under the proposal, Tokyo will allow older and less efficient coal plants to operate at full capacity for one year from April, suspending previous limits that capped utilization at 50 percent. The policy aims to stabilize power supply and reduce LNG demand by an estimated 500,000 tons, as Japan—heavily dependent on imported energy—seeks to manage supply uncertainty. Thermal power accounts for roughly 70 percent of Japan's electricity mix, with coal and LNG each contributing about 30 percent. [Reuters]

Critics warn the measure risks undermining Japan's pledge to phase out inefficient coal plants by 2030 and could entrench long-term fossil fuel dependence, complicating ambitions for greater energy self-sufficiency. The decision also aligns with a broader regional trend, as countries such as South Korea and the Philippines similarly turn to coal and other domestic sources to cushion against supply shocks. [France 24]

Japan: Mandatory emissions reporting launches compliance phase of carbon market

(dql) Japan has begun enforcing mandatory emissions reporting for major industrial emitters, marking the transition of its Green Transformation Emissions Trading System (GX-ETS) from a preparatory framework to an operational compliance regime.

From April, around 300–400 companies with annual direct (Scope 1) emissions exceeding 100,000 metric tons must report verified emissions data, with full disclosure of carbon footprints and reduction targets required by September 2027. The covered entities account for roughly 60 percent of Japan's total

emissions, placing the scheme at the center of national decarbonization efforts.

The reporting obligation forms the first binding pillar of the GX-ETS, ahead of the launch of emissions trading next year following the allocation of allowances. The phased rollout underscores a gradual implementation strategy, separating compliance monitoring from market activation.

While aligning Japan with other major carbon pricing systems, the GX-ETS incorporates price floors and ceilings through 2030 and allows the use of carbon credits—design features intended to limit market volatility and protect industrial competitiveness. However, these controls may dampen short-term incentives for emissions reductions compared to more market-driven systems.

Early industry responses indicate manageable compliance burdens, suggesting limited disruption to core business operations despite expanded disclosure and verification requirements. [The Japan Times]

Japan: Deployment and naval integration accelerate shift toward counterstrike posture

(dql) Japan is advancing the operationalization of long-range strike capabilities through both land-based missile deployments and naval integration, underscoring a steady shift toward a counterstrike posture under its revised security strategy. The parallel developments highlight Tokyo's effort to enhance deterrence amid a deteriorating regional security environment while deepening alliance coordination with the United States.

Deployment of long-range missiles

Japan has begun deploying long-range missiles with counterstrike capabilities at two Ground Self-Defense Force bases, marking a significant step away from its traditionally strict defensive security posture under its pacifist constitution.

The defense ministry confirmed that upgraded Type 12 land-to-ship missiles—capable of reaching roughly 1,000 km—have been stationed at Camp Kengun in Kyushu, while Camp Fuji has received hypersonic glide projectiles for testing and future operational use. Additional deployments are planned across Japan, with further upgrades expected to extend missile ranges to around 2,000 km.

The move follows Japan's 2022 security strategy overhaul under former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, which formally endorsed counterstrike capabilities in response to a deteriorating regional security environment. [Kyodo News 1]

Tokyo frames the move as a response to a deteriorating regional security environment, citing China's expanding missile arsenal and military activity near Taiwan, as well as North Korea's advancing missile and nuclear programs.

However, domestic concerns persist that missile deployments could expose host regions to retaliatory strikes, while operational challenges remain in areas such as ammunition storage, training infrastructure, and coordination with U.S. forces. [The Japan Times]

Advancing long-range strike capability with Tomahawk-enabled destroyer

Complementing these land-based deployments, Japan has completed modifications on guided-missile destroyer JS Chokai, enabling it to launch Tomahawk cruise missile, marking another significant step in Tokyo's push to operationalize long-range "counterattack" capabilities. The vessel, currently in the United States for integration and training with the U.S. Navy, is scheduled to conduct live-fire trials later this year to validate readiness. [Kyodo News 2]

The upgrade makes Chokai the first Japanese Aegis destroyer equipped with Tomahawks, with plans to extend the capability across the fleet. Japan is procuring 400 missiles—delivery already underway—while accelerating the timeline in response to a deteriorating regional security environment.

Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi described the move as essential for deterrence, arguing that growing missile threats in the region—both in scale and sophistication—necessitate the ability to strike adversary targets at range, rather than relying solely on missile defense. Tokyo maintains that such capabilities remain strictly defensive and would only be used following an attack. [USNI] [Army Recognition]

Mongolia: Third prime minister in a year elected to break political deadlock

(dql/fs) The parliament has elected Uchral Nyam-Osor as prime minister—its third in a year—following the resignation of Zandanshatar Gombojav, in a bid to resolve a deepening political impasse that has

disrupted parliamentary functioning and raised concerns over economic stability. [WRAL News]

After only nine months in office, Zandanshatar stepped down on March 27 after escalating tensions within the ruling Mongolian People's Party and a boycott by the opposition Democratic Party, which had deprived parliament of a quorum for weeks. The boycott was driven by concerns over power concentration and corruption allegations involving Justice Minister Enkhbayar Battumur, a close ally of Zandanshatar. In announcing his resignation, Zandanshatar warned that continued political infighting risked undermining the economy and fueling inflation. [The Washington Post] [CNA]

Uchral, a 39-year-old reform-oriented politician and former minister of digital development, emerged as a compromise candidate between rival factions aligned with President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh and former Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai. After stepping down as parliament speaker to facilitate the transition, he secured a strong parliamentary mandate, winning over 80 percent of votes to assume office. [Montsame]

Uchral has pledged to restore political unity and advance governance reforms, including improving transparency and streamlining legacy regulatory systems. His appointment follows a period of rapid leadership turnover—Zandanshatar himself had replaced Oyun-Erdene—highlighting persistent factionalism within the ruling party. [WRAL News]

The leadership change comes at a sensitive juncture for Mongolia's resource-dependent economy, where political instability, frequent policy shifts, and corruption concerns have unsettled foreign investors. Restoring institutional stability and policy predictability will be critical as the new government seeks to resolve the opposition standoff and navigate mounting external economic pressures. [South China Morning Post]

Mongolia: Advancing anti-corruption, connectivity, and regional development agenda

(fs) The government has adopted a series of measures aimed at strengthening anti-corruption enforcement, expanding digital infrastructure, and advancing regional development.

Authorities reported that a government task force has recovered MNT 127.87 billion (USD 35.8 million) from failed banks and borrowers of the Development Bank. The cabinet instructed officials to draft urgent legal amendments to improve mechanisms for recovering damages caused by corruption and confiscating illicit assets, including new laws on asset management and enforcement.

In parallel, the government approved a plan to expand mobile and high-speed internet coverage nationwide between 2026 and 2028. Currently, 104 administrative units lack mobile connectivity, while around 200 have only partial coverage. The initiative aims to ensure full national coverage, improving access to digital public services, education, and healthcare, particularly in remote areas.

The cabinet also advanced regional development measures following a visit by Prime Minister Gombojav Zandanshatar to Nalaikh district, east of Ulaanbaatar. Plans include infrastructure upgrades and transforming the Nalaikh industrial and technology park into a special economic zone to attract investment and support local economic growth. [iToim]

Mongolia: Whistleblower protection law to be introduced

(fs) Mongolia is advancing legislation to establish a legal framework for whistleblower protection, with financial rewards ranging from USD 280 to USD 1,400,000. The draft law, prepared by the Ministry of Justice and Internal Affairs, has been approved by the government for submission to parliament.

The proposed legislation aims to address corruption by encouraging individuals to report violations while ensuring legal safeguards. Authorities also noted concerns about potential misuse, warning that some individuals may falsely claim whistleblower status to deflect legal accountability. [Sonin, in Mongolian]

North Korea: Rights group alleges state-run forced labor system in Russia

(dql) Amid deepening military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, a new report alleges that Pyongyang has expanded a covert labor deployment scheme in Russia, using conscripted soldiers disguised

as international students to generate foreign currency for its weapons programs.

According to findings by the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights—a Seoul-based non-governmental organization—, North Korean personnel, drawn from military and security agencies, have been sent to Russia not for combat but for construction work. Entering on student and training visas, they are formally registered at educational institutions but never attend classes, instead being dispatched to labor sites. Their wages are routed through university accounts as "scholarships," masking payments from Russian companies. [NKHR]

The scale of the scheme has grown sharply since 2023, with over 13,000 North Koreans entering Russia on educational visas in 2024 alone. The report identifies a network of more than 100 shell companies facilitating recruitment, wage transfers, and repatriation of earnings, often through intermediaries linked to Russian political and financial elites.

Working conditions are described as severe, with laborers reportedly subjected to long hours, poor living conditions, and heavy wage deductions—amounting in some cases to near-total confiscation. The report characterizes the system as state-organized forced labor.

The proceeds are said to flow into entities tied to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, including agencies responsible for uranium production and weapons manufacturing. Some funds are also linked to institutions overseeing political prison camps and leadership-controlled financial networks. [The Chosun Daily]

North Korea: Engine test signals push toward advanced long-range missile capability

(dql) North Korea has conducted a high-thrust solid-fuel rocket engine test under the supervision of Kim Jong-un, signaling progress toward more advanced intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) systems capable of carrying heavier payloads. State media said the test forms part of the current five-year defence plan, without specifying when or where it took place. [KCNA]

The reported thrust of 2,500 kilonewtons marks a notable increase over the last confirmed test in September 2024, underscoring continued

improvements in propulsion performance. Solid-fuel technology allows for faster launch readiness and enhances missile survivability, reinforcing the operational credibility of North Korea's long-range strike capabilities.

Analysts assess that Pyongyang has already demonstrated the basic range required to reach the United States, shifting the focus toward payload expansion—particularly the development of multiple-warhead (MIRV) systems. Such capabilities would enable a single missile to strike several targets while complicating interception by missile defense systems, requiring significantly higher engine thrust to accommodate increased weight.

In parallel, Kim's inspection of special forces training points to continued investment in complementary asymmetric capabilities alongside strategic weapons development. [France 24] [Korea JoongAng Daily]

North Korea: Border fortification along inter-Korean divide resumed

(dql) North Korea has restarted efforts to reinforce its side of the inter-Korean border after a winter pause, according to South Korea's military. The measures include continued installation of fences and the placement of landmines along the Military Demarcation Line.

The activity follows Kim Jong Un's late-2023 declaration that inter-Korean relations should be treated as those between "two hostile countries," marking a shift away from prior frameworks of reconciliation. Construction work had been suspended since December before resuming earlier this month.

Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it is maintaining a heightened readiness posture, including warning broadcasts and, if necessary, warning shots in response to any border incursions. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Birth rebound sharply slows population decline, signals tentative demographic inflection

(co) South Korea's population decline slowed markedly in January, with the natural decrease narrowing to

5,539—the smallest gap in four years—as births rose 11.7 percent year-on-year to 26,916.

The rebound, driven by a recovery in post-pandemic marriages and rising births among people in their 30s, points to a near-term demographic upswing, reinforced by a monthly fertility rate of 0.99, the highest on record.

While the population continues to contract, the sharp moderation in decline suggests a possible cyclical turning point after years of deterioration. However, structural pressures remain entrenched as fertility rates are still far below replacement level, and rapid aging is set to drive labor shortages from 2030, underscoring that any recovery is likely to be limited and temporary without sustained policy impact. [The Korea Herald] [World Population Review]

South Korea: Police launches review of state honors tied to past abuses

(co) In renewed efforts to address unresolved accountability gaps from South Korea's authoritarian past, the police have launched a comprehensive review of around 70,000 state awards granted since 1945, targeting honors linked to abuses under past authoritarian governments.

Backed by President Lee Jae Myung, the probe focuses on decorations awarded to officers involved in torture, fabricated espionage cases, and coerced confessions—many of which have since been overturned through retrials—while aiming to identify broader patterns of state violence, particularly from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Under the Awards and Decorations Act, honors may be revoked if their cited merits are found to be false, although only limited cases—around 74 since 2018—have been rescinded despite persistent controversy, including over continued state benefits tied to such awards. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Government launches emergency response to Middle East crisis

(dql) South Korea has launched a phased emergency economic strategy to buffer mounting fallout from the Middle East war, framing the situation as an "economic wartime" scenario and mobilizing broad state

intervention to secure energy and industrial supply chains.

The government's plan—rolled out under a newly activated emergency economic command system—prioritizes stabilizing energy prices, safeguarding supply chains, supporting vulnerable sectors, and maintaining financial market stability. Immediate measures include export controls on naphtha, anti-hoarding rules for urea, expanded imports of key inputs, and efforts to secure alternative LNG supplies amid disruptions linked to the Strait of Hormuz.

To mitigate energy risks, Seoul will increase nuclear power utilization, ease restrictions on coal-fired generation, and adjust fuel pricing mechanisms, combining price caps with expanded fuel tax cuts to cushion households and industry—particularly in diesel-dependent sectors. At the same time, authorities will deploy stockpiles and incentivize private firms to diversify sourcing. [The Korea Herald 1] [Yonhap News Agency 1]

The response is structured in three stages, with a second-phase supplementary budget of roughly KRW 25 trillion (USD 16.6 billion), followed by additional stabilization tools if disruptions persist beyond May. [Channel News Asia]

Emergency economic headquarters established

In parallel, a government-wide Emergency Economic Headquarters has been set up, marking the first such centralized economic crisis body since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new mechanism elevates crisis management to the highest political level, with the presidential office serving as the central command and Prime Minister Kim Minseok heading the response.

The headquarters will coordinate five specialized task forces covering macroeconomic stability, energy supply, financial markets, livelihoods, and overseas developments. Authorities plan biweekly high-level meetings and scenario-based planning to prepare for both short-term shocks and extended disruption. [The Asia Business Daily]

President signals potential use of emergency powers

Against this backdrop, President Lee Jae Myung has signaled that constitutional emergency financial and economic powers could be invoked if necessary to address supply disruptions, urging ministries to adopt

proactive, preemptive measures and identify legal or institutional constraints.

Authorities have also moved to counter misinformation related to supply disruptions, reflecting a broader tightening of state oversight during what Lee has framed as a national crisis. [The Korea Herald 2]

Government proposes supplementary budget

In the latest development, the government proposed on March 31 a KRW 26.2 trillion (USD 17.1 billion) supplementary budget to cushion the economic impact of surging fuel prices. A central component includes cash transfers totaling KRW 4.8 trillion (USD 3.1 billion) for roughly 70 percent of the population, with payments differentiated by income and region to assist vulnerable groups.

The plan also allocates KRW 5.1 trillion (USD 3.3 billion) to cap fuel prices and mitigate supply disruptions of key inputs such as naphtha, alongside measures to promote public transport use, while KRW 9.7 trillion (USD 6.3 billion) will bolster local government finances.

Additional funding targets youth employment, renewable energy transition, and supply chain resilience. The package will be financed without new debt, relying on higher-than-expected tax revenues linked to strong economic performance. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korea: Three suspects indicted over allegedly sending drones into North Korean airspace

(co) Prosecutors on March 25 indicted three executives of a drone manufacturing company for allegedly sending drones into North Korea's airspace, leading to escalating inter-Korean tensions.

The Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office said the director was arrested on charges that include benefiting the enemy and violating the Aviation Safety Act, while two other executives were indicted without detention on the same charges.

The suspects are accused of flying drones across the Military Demarcation Line four times between last September and January this year to capture footage over North Korean territory. Two of the drones crashed in North Korea, after which Pyongyang sharply accused Seoul of infringing upon its sovereignty.

Authorities said the operations may have harmed South Korea's military interests and was partially driven by the intention to heighten tensions between the two Koreas, as well as commercial motives. According to the prosecutors, the director had previously worked at the presidential office under former President Yoon Suk Yeol whose administration pursued a confrontational stance toward Pyongyang. [The Korea Herald] [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Navy drills mark Yellow Sea clashes, reinforce combat readiness

(co) South Korea's Navy has launched four-day maneuvering drills to commemorate service members killed in past naval clashes with North Korea near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), a disputed de facto maritime border in the Yellow Sea, while reinforcing combat readiness.

The exercises involve around 20 surface ships, submarines and maritime patrol aircraft, focusing on anti-submarine warfare, tactical maneuvering and live-fire capabilities.

The drills coincide with annual commemorations for 55 sailors and Marines killed in inter-Korean maritime incidents, including the 2010 sinking of the Cheonan, underscoring continued military vigilance along a key flashpoint in inter-Korean tensions.

The exercises align with Yellow Sea Defense Day commemorations, with President Lee Jae Myung reaffirming a "peace through strength" approach, highlighting the linkage between remembrance and deterrence in Seoul's North Korea policy. [The Korea Times]

Taiwan: Conviction of former opposition party leader sparks protests

(dql/yl) The sentencing of former Taipei mayor and opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP) founder Ko Wen-je to 17 years in prison on corruption charges has triggered mass protests and intensified political polarization, while raising questions about the future of Taiwan's opposition landscape.

A Taipei court found Ko guilty of bribery and related offenses tied to the Core Pacific City redevelopment project, determining that he accepted NTD 2.1 million (USD 68,000) through intermediaries linked to

businessman Sheen Ching-jing in exchange for approving a substantial increase in the project's floor-area ratio. Prosecutors had alleged a broader NTD 17.1 million (USD 550,000) scheme, but the court dismissed the bulk of that claim for lack of evidence. The ruling also includes a six-year suspension of civil rights, which —if upheld on appeal—would bar Ko from contesting future elections, including the 2028 presidential race. [BBC]

The verdict has prompted large-scale demonstrations in Taipei, with tens of thousands rallying outside the Presidential Office. Ko, who denies all charges, and his supporters accuse the judiciary of political bias and procedural misconduct, framing the case as an attempt to sideline a prominent opposition figure. The Kuomintang (KMT) has backed these claims and signaled continued alignment with the TPP, while the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has rejected accusations of interference and emphasized respect for judicial independence. [Focus Taiwan 1]

Beyond the legal case, the episode underscores deepening partisan divides and carries broader political implications: it may weaken the TPP's role as a third force and reinforce a return to a more consolidated two-party dynamic dominated by the DPP and KMT. [Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan: U.S. chipmaker unveils new plant, plans workforce expansion to 15,000

(acl) In a move reinforcing Taiwan's central role in advanced memory production and the broader semiconductor ecosystem. U.S. memory chipmaker Micron Technology on March 26 unveiled a new plant in northwestern Miaoli County and announced plans to expand its Taiwan workforce to 15,000 by end-2026, including around 1,000 positions at the new facility.

The company has invested USD 43.88 billion in Taiwan as of January 2026 and will continue strengthening DRAM manufacturing and packaging, with high-bandwidth memory (HBM) a key priority.

Premier Cho Jung-tai stated Taiwan is Micron's largest global manufacturing base and highlighted government support for advanced memory and HBM development, alongside efforts to deepen domestic supply chains in equipment and materials. He added that authorities are working to improve the investment environment through energy transition, grid resilience, and enhanced water security. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Anti-nuclear protests mount as debate over reactor restart intensifies

(dql) Anti-nuclear groups in Taiwan have stepped up protests against a potential policy shift toward restarting decommissioned nuclear plants, highlighting growing political and societal divisions over the island's energy strategy.

Demonstrators gathered outside the government building to oppose possible plans to reopen the Kuosheng and Maanshan nuclear power plants, calling for updated evacuation planning, greater transparency on the costs of nuclear energy, and clearer solutions for long-term nuclear waste disposal. Activists also framed nuclear power as historically tied to Taiwan's authoritarian past, criticizing the government for departing from longstanding anti-nuclear commitments associated with the island's democratization.

The protests reflect broader unease over signals that the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) may be reconsidering its nuclear-free stance amid energy security concerns. While officials stressed that only preliminary legal procedures are underway, they reiterated that any policy shift would require societal consensus, safety assurances, and a viable waste management strategy. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Frontline island drills underscore shift toward integrated, real-time defense posture

(dql) Taiwan's military has intensified combat readiness training on frontline outlying islands, highlighting a shift toward real-time intelligence integration and sustained high-tempo operations amid cross-strait tensions.

Recent drills by the Army's Juguang Defense Team—the unit responsible for the defense of the Matsu Islands, one of Taiwan's key frontline outposts close to mainland China—involved reconnaissance patrols and CM-21 armored vehicle deployments across key positions, aimed at strengthening rapid-response capabilities. Commanders emphasized the expanded use of surveillance drones, which transmit live imagery to digital battlefield systems, allowing faster situational assessment and decision-making.

The training also prioritizes integration of multiple intelligence sources—including coastal radar and aerial surveillance—to improve coordination between command structures and frontline units while preserving operational flexibility. [Taiwan News 1]

Separately, the Army's Second Theater of Operations—responsible for defending and operating in eastern Taiwan—conducted exercises in Taitung, deploying howitzers, mortars, and M60A3 tanks to refine targeting accuracy and calibrate firing systems. Troops trained under challenging terrain conditions, with uneven gravel surfaces affecting vehicle stability and complicating aiming—factors intended to better simulate battlefield environments.

Parallel drills on Kinmen focused on repelling a simulated amphibious landing, with armored units, dense fire networks, and counter-drone operations integrated into continuous scenario-based training. Units also practiced command coordination and communications using digital battlefield systems to support joint operations. [Taiwan News 2]

The exercises are part of the upgraded "Combat Training Center rotation 2.0," which extends training cycles to 10 days of uninterrupted, round-the-clock operations. The shift reflects a move toward higher-intensity, multi-domain readiness, particularly in frontline and geographically exposed areas facing potential cross-strait contingencies.

Taiwan: China-born activist indicted over alleged China-directed political activities

(yl) Taiwanese prosecutors have indicted China-born activist Xu Chunying, head of a new immigrants association, on charges of violating the Anti-Infiltration Act and committing financial crimes.

Prosecutors allege Xu maintained regular contact with officials linked to Chinese government-affiliated bodies and reported on Taiwan's political developments and elections, while organizing political activities in Taiwan, including support for opposition figures.

Authorities said the actions were conducted under direction or support from "hostile foreign forces," in violation of the 2020 Anti-Infiltration Act. Prosecutors also cited communications in which Xu expressed political alignment with Beijing.

Separately, Xu was charged with financial offenses, including operating an illegal currency exchange and

fraudulently securing a loan, involving transactions totaling more than NTD 28 million (USD 870,000). [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Official flags shift in China's hybrid warfare tactics

(acl) Taiwan's deputy interior minister warned that China is advancing more sophisticated hybrid warfare methods—termed "dislocation" and "erosion" tactics—aimed at weakening democratic institutions from within.

Speaking on March 28, Ma Shih-yuan said these approaches extend Beijing's established use of public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare. "Dislocation warfare," he said, seeks to disrupt the normal functioning of governance—pointing to legislative gridlock as a potential manifestation—while "erosion warfare" relies on proxies and covert influence to gradually undermine the political system.

Ma noted that countermeasures are inherently sensitive, as efforts to curb such activities risk being portrayed as political repression. In response, authorities are prioritizing "interoperability," integrating military, law enforcement, civil defense, and civilian capabilities—an approach reinforced by lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Civil society is also adapting. The Kuma Civil Defense Education Association said it is shifting from decentralized, individual training toward institutional engagement to support a more coordinated, nationwide resilience framework. [Focus Taiwan] [Taipei Times]

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

Bangladesh: Dispute over referendum ordinance drives parliamentary tensions

(lm) Bangladesh's ongoing parliamentary review of 133 ordinances issued during the interim government period has become centered on a dispute over the referendum-related ordinance linked to the July National Charter, exposing competing approaches to constitutional reform following the 2024 political transition.

The charter—endorsed in a February referendum held alongside national elections that brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power—envisages a structured reform process including the creation of a Constitutional Reform Council, a temporary body intended to prepare constitutional amendments. Opposition parties, including Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizens' Party, support implementation through this council-based framework. However, the BNP-led government has indicated that constitutional changes should proceed through existing parliamentary procedures requiring a two-thirds majority and has questioned the legal basis for establishing such a body outside the constitutional framework.

The dispute is unfolding within a time-bound parliamentary review of all 133 ordinances, which must be approved within one month of the session's start or will lapse automatically. A special parliamentary committee reviewing the ordinances has identified around 20 issues requiring clarification, with disagreements persisting over approximately 18 politically sensitive measures.

Against this backdrop, on March 25, according to Jamaat representatives on the committee, a proposal by ruling-side members to repeal the referendum-related ordinance stalled agreement within the review process. Opposition figures argued that removing the referendum provision would contradict the "spirit" of

the July 2024 uprising that led to the ouster of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

The government is simultaneously moving to formalize a subset of ordinances, including five revenue-related measures covering value-added tax, finance, and excise frameworks, which are already in force as part of the fiscal year 2025–2026 budget.

Further disagreements within the same review process relate to ordinances affecting the Anti-Corruption Commission, policing, enforced disappearances, judicial appointments, and human rights institutions. Committee deliberations are ongoing ahead of an early April deadline for submission of its report. [Dhaka Tribune 2] [Dhaka Tribune 3] [Dhaka Tribune 4]

The dispute escalated into a procedural confrontation during the parliamentary sitting on March 29—the first following a 14-day recess—when Opposition Leader and Jamaat leader Shafiqur Rahman sought to raise a notice on the "July National Charter Constitutional Reform Implementation Order 2025," which would operationalize the proposed reform process. Opposition members argued that the issue was of urgent national importance and should take precedence over routine proceedings, while government lawmakers insisted on adherence to parliamentary procedure requiring completion of question time and Rule 71 matters first. The Speaker ruled that the proposal would be considered after scheduled business. [Dhaka Tribune 5]

Bangladesh: Government moves to grant legal protection to participants in 2024 protest movement

(lm) Bangladesh's Ministry of Home Affairs stated that legislation will be introduced and passed in parliament to provide legal and constitutional protection to individuals involved in the July–August 2024 student-led protest movement—referred to by the government as "July fighters." The measure builds on an ordinance issued under the interim government that took over following the ouster of longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and is currently under review by a parliamentary committee.

The proposal is linked to the "July National Charter"—a post-uprising reform blueprint agreed between key actors outlining constitutional and institutional reforms and including commitments to recognize the movement and protect its participants. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Election Commission to publish voter list for 50 reserved women's parliamentary seats

(lm) Bangladesh's Election Commission plans to publish the final voter list on April 6 for the 50 seats reserved for women in the 13th National Parliament.

The 350-member legislature consists of 300 directly elected members and 50 additional seats allocated to women. Under the Jatiya Sangsad (Reserved Women Seats) Election Act, 2004, these seats are distributed proportionally among political parties based on their share of elected seats. The 300 directly elected members formally constitute the electoral college for these positions. In practice, parties nominate candidates equal to their allocated quotas, meaning the seats are typically filled without a competitive vote. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Prime minister reasserts father's role in independence

(lm) Incumbent Prime Minister Tarique Rahman—chairman of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and son of former president and BNP founder Ziaur Rahman—stated at a BNP Independence Day discussion at the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh in Dhaka that his father was an "essential figure" in the 1971 Liberation War and referred to him as the "declarer of independence." He argued that past efforts to diminish Ziaur Rahman's role had failed and cited a 1972 article attributed to him as evidence of his position during the war. [Bangladesh Nationalist Party]

The remarks relate to a long-standing dispute over the events of March 1971. According to the prevailing constitutional and historical account, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—widely regarded as Bangladesh's founding leader and the father of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina—declared independence before being detained by Pakistani authorities. Ziaur Rahman, then a military officer, subsequently broadcast a declaration of independence from Chittagong on March 27, 1971, stating that he was acting on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a role widely acknowledged in mainstream historical accounts.

Speaking against this backdrop, a spokesperson of the National Citizens' Party – a student-led party that emerged from the mass protests preceding Hasina's

ouster - stated that describing Ziaur Rahman as the declarer of independence constitutes a violation of the Constitution. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: New attorney general appointed

(lm) Bangladesh has appointed Barrister Ruhul Quddus Kajal as Attorney General with immediate effect. On his first day in office, he stated that action will be taken against law officers in the Attorney General's Office allegedly involved in commercial and unethical activities, following investigation, indicating a focus on internal oversight within the institution. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: Detentions of former military, intelligence officials expand probe into 2007–08 caretaker regime

(lm) Bangladesh authorities have expanded a broad investigation into the army-backed caretaker government of 2007–08, targeting former senior military and intelligence officials over alleged abuses of power during that period.

The probe focuses on actions taken under the state of emergency declared after the "One-Eleven" crisis of January 11, 2007, when the military intervened amid political unrest and installed an interim administration that ruled for nearly two years. The period has long been associated with allegations of politically motivated detentions, coercive interrogations, and efforts to sideline the leadership of the country's two main parties—the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party—commonly referred to as the "Minus Two Formula."

Against this backdrop, Lt Col Md Afzal Naser, a former director of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI)—Bangladesh's military intelligence agency—was detained by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Detective Branch for questioning in connection with alleged activities during that period, including accusations of involvement in the detention and mistreatment of political leaders and business figures. He served in the position between 2006 and 2008 and was dismissed from military service in 2009. [The Daily Star 1]

The move follows the arrest on March 23 of retired Lieutenant General Masud Uddin Chowdhury, a key figure during the emergency period, who has been remanded in multiple cases including murder, attempted murder, human trafficking, and money laundering across several jurisdictions. During the caretaker period, he was widely regarded as playing a central role in joint forces operations targeting political leaders and business figures.

The detention follows earlier arrests of senior figures linked to the same period. Retired Lieutenant General Masud Uddin Chowdhury was detained on March 23 and placed under remand in multiple cases. Based on information obtained during his interrogation, retired Lieutenant General Sheikh Mamun Khaled—former director general of DGFI—was arrested on March 25. He has been placed under remand in connection with a case involving the killing of a civilian during the July 2024 mass uprising, and has also been named in a case before the International Crimes Tribunal. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2] [Dhaka Tribune 3]

In parallel, retired Lieutenant General Sheikh Mamun Khaled, a former director general of DGFI, was also detained and placed under remand in connection with a case linked to the July 2024 mass uprising, and has been named in proceedings before the International Crimes Tribunal. Prosecutors have alleged his involvement in detention and interrogation practices during the 2007–08 period, including activities associated with so-called “Aynaghor”—a term used in Bangladesh to describe alleged secret detention facilities. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

According to investigators, ongoing interrogations have produced the names of additional senior military and intelligence officials who held key roles during the caretaker period, including former army chief Moeen U Ahmed and several DGFI officials involved in security coordination structures such as the National Coordination Committee on Combating Serious Crimes. [Dhaka Tribune 4]

Bangladesh: Court orders seizure of tax records of former air force chief and spouse

(lm) A Dhaka court has ordered the seizure of income tax records of former Bangladesh Air Force chief Sheikh Abdul Hannan and his wife, following petitions filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission. The order follows an earlier court directive to seize the former air

chief's assets, indicating a continued expansion of investigative measures in the case. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Former chief justice shown arrested in additional murder cases linked to 2024 uprising

(lm) A Dhaka court has ordered that former Chief Justice ABM Khairul Haque be shown arrested in two additional murder cases linked to the July–August 2024 mass uprising, following applications by police investigators.

The cases concern fatal shootings during protest-related incidents, including the killing of a student and a garment worker during clashes involving armed actors. Police stated that evidence indicates Khairul Haque's direct or indirect involvement, and that his formal arrest status in these cases is required for further investigation. [Prothom Alo] [Dhaka Tribune]

Khairul Haque, who was detained in July 2025 following the change in political leadership, has since been implicated in multiple cases related to the unrest. While he has received bail in several cases, including corruption-related proceedings, he remains in custody and continues to face additional charges connected to the 2024 uprising.

Bangladesh: Court defers gazette notice in fraud case involving niece of ousted ex-prime minister to April 8

(lm) A Dhaka court has deferred the gazette publication requiring Tulip Rizwana Siddiq—niece of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and a United Kingdom member of parliament—to appear in a corruption case linked to an alleged fraudulent acquisition of a residential property in Gulshan, a high-value diplomatic area of the capital. The order was issued by the Dhaka Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court, which handles cases filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission.

The gazette notice was delayed due to Eid-related administrative closures, with April 8 set as the new publication date. The court had earlier taken cognizance of the chargesheet submitted by the Anti-Corruption Commission and issued arrest warrants against Siddiq and her co-accused, a former official of

Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha, the capital development authority. [Dhaka Tribune]

In a related previous development in February, the same court ordered the issuance of an Interpol "Red Notice after authorities stated that Siddiq had left the country and failed to appear in connection with the case.

Bangladesh: Foreign debt relief declines by 26 percent in FY2025–26 amid slow project implementation

(lm) Bangladesh's foreign debt relief declined by 26 percent in the first eight months of fiscal year 2025–26 (July–February). Total loan relief amounted to USD 3.053 billion, down from USD 4.134 billion in the same period of the previous fiscal year, representing a decrease of USD 1.081 billion. Officials attributed the decline to slower implementation of development projects, which has reduced the pace of disbursement and utilization of external financing. They also cited administrative constraints, including workload pressures linked to recent electoral processes, as contributing factors affecting project execution. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Government and World Bank discuss agricultural support and Farmer Card rollout

(lm) Bangladesh's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Livestock held discussions with the World Bank on expanding cooperation in the agricultural sector, including the planned rollout of a "Farmer Card" initiative. The meeting brought together the agriculture minister and a World Bank delegation led by its country-level leadership.

The government outlined plans to introduce the Farmer Card—a policy tool intended to identify farmers and facilitate targeted support—through a phased rollout, beginning with pilot implementation in selected administrative blocks before nationwide expansion. The initiative is aimed at strengthening farmer protection, improving agricultural productivity, and supporting longer-term sector development.

The World Bank indicated interest in increasing investment in areas including agricultural inputs, processing, and market development. Both sides

expressed readiness to expand cooperation to support agricultural development and improve farmers' livelihoods. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Dual energy crisis prompts supply response, rationing measures, and enforcement actions

(lm) Bangladesh is facing a dual energy challenge, combining disruptions to liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports with tightening global oil markets and domestic fuel distribution pressures, as the ongoing Middle East war drives up prices and constrains supply routes.

On the gas side, Petrobangla—the state-owned oil and gas corporation—confirmed that QatarEnergy has declared force majeure on LNG supplies to Bangladesh until April 18, indicating a temporary suspension of contractual deliveries due to extraordinary circumstances. Qatar typically supplies 50 to 75 percent of Bangladesh's LNG imports, and the disruption has forced the country to procure replacement cargoes on the spot market at significantly higher prices, rising from around USD 14 to USD 30–35 per million British thermal units (MMBTU), a standard unit used in global gas pricing. The supply shock raises risks for electricity generation, industrial activity, and irrigation during peak demand periods. Bangladesh already allocates approximately BDT 400 billion (USD 3.28 billion) annually in power subsidies, much of it linked to LNG-based generation. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

In response to mounting external pressure, the Asian Development Bank will provide USD 1 billion in budget support to help manage rising fuel import costs and supply disruptions. The funding is expected between May and June under accelerated disbursement of existing programs. The government is also in discussions with additional partners—including the World Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, European Investment Bank, and South Korea—while broader financing needs are estimated at around USD 2 billion. Additional support from the International Monetary Fund and remittance inflows are also being considered to stabilize foreign exchange reserves. [The Business Standard]

In parallel, the oil and fuel segment is experiencing price and distribution pressures. Brent crude prices have exceeded USD 110 per barrel, while reduced traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has tightened

global supply. Domestically, the government has introduced demand-control measures, including energy-saving directives, fuel rationing at filling stations, and plans for a QR code-based “Fuel Pass” system to regulate access by setting purchase limits and intervals. Gas has also been redirected from industrial use, including the shutdown of several fertilizer plants, to prioritize power generation. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Enforcement has intensified to counter hoarding and market irregularities. Border Guard Bangladesh has been deployed to monitor depots and filling stations, and authorities have conducted inspections leading to fuel seizures, fines, and restrictions on sales. Local administrations have introduced additional controls such as fuel card systems. Despite these measures, disruptions persist in several regions, including a tanker workers’ strike in northern districts that has halted fuel distribution from a key depot, alongside reported cases of illegal sales and supply manipulation. [Dhaka Tribune 3]

In parliament, lawmakers reported difficulties obtaining fuel, although the government maintained that overall supply remains sufficient and attributed localized shortages to panic buying and stockpiling. Officials stated that fuel reserves have increased compared to the previous year and emphasized that supply volumes remain adequate. Priority distribution has been directed toward the agricultural sector, while imports are being diversified across multiple sources, including shipments from Malaysia and India and pipeline deliveries from India, with additional consignments scheduled to reinforce reserves. [Dhaka Tribune 4] [Dhaka Tribune 5] [Dhaka Tribune 6] [Prothom Alo]

At the same time, Iran has indicated that Bangladeshi-linked vessels will be granted controlled passage through the Strait of Hormuz, a key maritime chokepoint through which around one-fifth of global oil shipments typically pass, despite broader restrictions during the war. However, shipping traffic through the strait has dropped sharply, and access remains contingent on coordination with Iranian authorities. [Dhaka Tribune 7]

Bangladesh: Ahsan Habib Palash appointed director general of Rapid Action Battalion

(lm) Ahsan Habib Palash has assumed charge as director general of the Rapid Action Battalion, an elite

paramilitary unit under the Ministry of Home Affairs responsible for counter-terrorism, organized crime, and high-risk security operations. The appointment places a senior police officer in charge of the force, which operates alongside regular law enforcement with specialized mandates.

Palash joined the Bangladesh Police in 1995 and has served across a range of operational and administrative roles, including in metropolitan police units, district postings, and national investigative bodies such as the Police Bureau of Investigation, the agency responsible for complex criminal investigations. He also held senior regional command responsibilities prior to this appointment.

He has participated in multiple United Nations peacekeeping missions, including deployments in Kosovo, Liberia, Sudan, and South Sudan, reflecting Bangladesh's role as a major contributor to UN operations. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: former Chittagong police commissioner arrested in digital crimes case

(lm) Bangladesh's Detective Branch of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police has arrested Abdul Jalil Mondal, a former commissioner of the Chittagong Metropolitan Police—Chittagong being the country's main port city and a key commercial hub—in connection with a case filed under the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, a law used to prosecute digital and online-related offenses. He was taken into custody from the Sabujbagh area of Dhaka.

Mondal is a senior police officer with prior service in key law enforcement roles, including as additional commissioner of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police and as additional director general (administration) of the Rapid Action Battalion, an elite paramilitary force under the Ministry of Home Affairs. He also held district-level command positions earlier in his career. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Border guard displays mechanized capabilities in independence day parade after 18-year gap

(lm) Bangladesh's Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), a paramilitary force responsible for border security and

internal support operations, showcased its mechanized fleet during the March 26 Independence Day parade for the first time in 18 years.

The parade, held in Dhaka, forms part of annual commemorations marking Bangladesh's 1971 independence following a military crackdown by Pakistani forces, with March 25 observed as Genocide Day, commemorating the start of mass killings in 1971.

The BGB contingent displayed armored personnel carriers, riot control vehicles, anti-tank guided weapons, all-terrain vehicles, and air support elements. Specialized units, including rapid-response and K-9 teams, also participated. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Government considers changes to police uniform amid internal dissatisfaction

(lm) Bangladesh's Ministry of Home Affairs is considering reinstating a previous police uniform following reported dissatisfaction among members of the force, with discussions ongoing at senior government levels. The issue was raised by the home minister during a ceremony at the Bangladesh Police Academy, the country's central training institution for police officers.

The minister indicated that the review forms part of broader efforts to strengthen professionalism and public trust in law enforcement, alongside calls for discipline, neutrality, and adherence to the rule of law. He stated that the government aims to develop a modern, service-oriented, and "people-friendly" police force and emphasized that policing should remain free from political influence.

The government is also working to establish an independent Police Reform Commission intended to reduce political interference in law enforcement. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Fuel supply remains stable but import dependence and extended electricity imports expose energy vulnerabilities

(lm) Bhutan's government says there is no immediate risk of fuel or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supply disruption despite global volatility linked to the Middle

East war, citing reserves, storage capacity, and a 2024 supply framework with India covering petroleum, oil, and lubricants. As of March 5, reserves stood at 1.417 million liters of petrol, 1.499 million liters of diesel, and 15,000 LPG cylinders, with authorities maintaining regular coordination with Indian suppliers.

At the same time, Bhutan has secured an extension of electricity imports from India until May, reflecting seasonal and structural constraints in domestic hydropower generation. Imports are required during winter months when river flows decline, and have increased significantly from 617.5 gigawatt-hours in 2022 to 1,453.6 gigawatt-hours in 2024. While the government expects no major electricity shortage—supported by new hydropower capacity and the upcoming monsoon season—the extension underscores growing demand and supply gaps. [Kuensel 1]

Rising global fuel prices are now feeding into the domestic economy and posing risks to Bhutan's growth outlook. Petrol prices have increased from BTN 63.17 (USD 0.76) to BTN 85.18 (USD 1.02) per liter and diesel from BTN 70 (USD 0.84) to BTN 92 (USD 1.10), or BTN 108 (USD 1.30) without subsidies. Estimates suggest that a 10 percent increase in global oil prices could reduce economic growth by 0.7 percent and by up to 1.4 percent under a 20 percent increase scenario. Inflation has already risen to 5.76 percent, driven in part by higher energy costs.

Tourism—a key growth driver alongside hydropower exports—has also come under pressure, with more than 1,000 bookings cancelled between February and May due to flight disruptions linked to the Middle East war. Higher fuel costs are also increasing transport, logistics, and construction expenses, with knock-on effects across the broader economy. Bhutan's reliance on imports from India further transmits external price shocks.

Projections indicate continued upward pressure on fuel costs, with petrol potentially reaching BTN 102 per liter (USD 1.22) and diesel BTN 113.16 (USD 1.36), or higher under prolonged disruption scenarios. The government has already reduced diesel prices by BTN 16 per liter (USD 0.19) to contain inflationary effects. [Kuensel 2] [Kuensel 3] [Kuensel 4]

Bhutan: Government continues reducing bitcoin holdings through transfers to external addresses

(lm) Bhutan has continued to reduce its state-held Bitcoin reserves, transferring approximately 519.7 BTC valued at around BTN 3.06 billion (USD 36.75 million) in the latest transaction on March 25, as part of an ongoing drawdown of its cryptocurrency holdings. [finance.yahoo!]

According to transaction data, the Royal Government of Bhutan now holds approximately 4,453 BTC, valued at around BTN 26.25 billion (USD 315 million), down from nearly 13,000 BTC in late 2024. Total outflows since the beginning of 2025 are estimated to exceed BTN 12.5 billion (USD 150 million).

The transfers have increased in size in recent weeks, with recent movements reaching BTN 2.9–3.75 billion (USD 35–45 million) per transaction. While specific counterparties are not confirmed, the transactions are consistent with transfers to external wallets potentially linked to exchanges. [AiR No. 12, March/2026, 4]

Bhutan's Bitcoin holdings were accumulated primarily through domestic mining operations supported by hydropower. In December 2025, the government indicated that up to 10,000 BTC could be allocated to support the development of Gelephu Mindfulness City, a planned economic hub in southern Bhutan.

Bhutan: Rising temperatures and water scarcity threaten rice production

(lm) Bhutan's main rice-producing region, Punakha—a low-altitude valley in western Bhutan—faces growing pressure from rising temperatures and declining water availability, with evidence pointing to worsening conditions for agricultural productivity.

Recent data indicate a sharp warming trend, with pre-monsoon maximum temperatures increasing by around 2.8°C per decade and average maximum temperatures by approximately 3.55°C per decade over the past three decades. Post-monsoon temperatures have also risen by about 2.5°C per decade. These changes have contributed to reduced water availability, with nearly 93 percent of surveyed farmers reporting declining water sources and more than half indicating falling agricultural productivity.

Rice output has shown increasing volatility. While total production declined from 8,059 metric tons in 2022 to 7,760 metric tons in 2023 before partially recovering to 8,027 metric tons in 2025, yields per acre have steadily decreased from 2.28 to 2.07 metric tons over the same period, indicating declining efficiency despite

expanded cultivation. Water scarcity remains a key constraint, with a growing number of local water sources either drying up or at risk, and more than 1,455 acres of land left uncultivated in 2023.

The situation is compounded by climate-related risks including erratic rainfall patterns, increased pest outbreaks, and the potential for upstream hydrological disruptions in the Himalayan system. Authorities and researchers have identified the need for climate-resilient agricultural practices, including improved irrigation, drought-resistant crop varieties, and enhanced water management, as part of broader national adaptation efforts aligned with Bhutan's climate policies and international commitments. [Kuensel]

India: Election Commission reshuffles police leadership ahead of West Bengal state polls

(dql) India's Election Commission has ordered a large-scale transfer of police station chiefs across West Bengal—an eastern Indian state—ahead of upcoming state assembly elections, citing the need to ensure electoral neutrality amid concerns over potential political influence on local law enforcement. Elections for the 294-seat West Bengal Legislative Assembly will be held in two phases on April 23 and 29, with vote counting scheduled for May 4.

The directive covers officers-in-charge and inspectors-in-charge at 173 police stations, including 31 under Kolkata Police in the state capital, Kolkata. Key constituencies such as Bhabanipur in Kolkata and Nandigram in Purba Medinipur district—both politically sensitive battlegrounds between the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which leads the federal government—are among the affected areas. The reshuffle also spans multiple districts across the state.

The move comes amid ongoing friction between the central authorities and the state government, with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of the TMC previously criticizing such interventions as politically motivated. At the same time, senior BJP leader Dilip Ghosh accused the current police force of acting under TMC influence. Triggering a political storm, he also advocated adopting "Uttar Pradesh-style" police encounters if his party wins power—referring to a controversial policing approach in the northern Indian state that has been widely criticized by rights groups and opposition

parties for alleged extra-judicial killings. [The Tribune] [Devdisocurse]

The Election Commission, a constitutionally mandated federal body responsible for overseeing elections, regularly reassigns local police officials ahead of polls to limit the risk of political bias. While policing in India ordinarily falls under state government control, the Commission assumes supervisory authority over administrative and law enforcement personnel during elections to ensure a level playing field.

India: Government approves updated climate targets for 2031–2035 under Paris Agreement

(dql) The Cabinet has approved an updated Nationally Determined Contribution under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, setting new targets for the 2031–2035 period as part of its long-term climate strategy. [Prime Minister, India]

The revised commitments include reducing emissions intensity of gross domestic product by 47 percent from 2005 levels by 2035, achieving 60 percent of installed electricity capacity from non-fossil sources, and expanding carbon sinks by 3.5–4 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent through forest and tree cover.

The government highlighted that India has already met earlier climate targets ahead of schedule, with emissions intensity down by 36 percent between 2005 and 2020 and non-fossil capacity exceeding 52 percent as of early 2026. The updated plan builds on existing initiatives in clean energy, green industry, and climate adaptation, while aligning with the broader goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2070. [DD News]

Environmental analysts argue that the targets lack sufficient ambition. Experts note that with non-fossil capacity already exceeding 50 percent, the 60 percent target by 2035 appears modest and does not fully reflect India's current trajectory or potential. They also stress the need for a clearer, sector-wide decarbonization roadmap—particularly through accelerated electrification in industry, transport, and buildings—to reduce fossil fuel dependence and strengthen economic resilience. [The Wire]

India: Census resumes after 15-year gap with phased rollout from April 2026

(dql) India will begin preparations for its long-delayed population census on April 1, marking the first enumeration exercise in around 15 years after the postponement of the 2021 census due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Census 2027—India's 16th overall and eighth since independence—will be the world's largest statistical operation, involving more than 3 million enumerators and officials nationwide.

The exercise will be conducted in two phases, starting with a house-listing and housing census (April–September 2026), followed by population enumeration in February 2027, covering demographic, socio-economic, educational, and caste data. The reference date is set for March 1, 2027, with adjusted timelines for remote northern regions. The government has allocated approximately USD 1.4 billion and is deploying a digital data collection system, including mobile applications and an optional self-enumeration portal. [DD News]

India: Supreme Court pushes for operational protocol to address gaps in human trafficking case handling

(dql) India's Supreme Court has directed the central and state governments to develop a clear, implementable standard operating procedure for handling human trafficking cases, underscoring the need for immediate, ground-level response mechanisms amid persistent enforcement gaps.

The Court called on senior administrative and police officials across all jurisdictions to consult stakeholders and submit detailed proposals, stressing that effective intervention—particularly in cases involving missing persons and child trafficking—requires rapid, time-bound action at the local police level. It rejected abstract policy approaches in favor of practical frameworks that can be deployed immediately.

The Bench also signaled concern over weak institutional responsiveness, summoning explanations from state police chiefs who failed to engage with the proceedings and setting a firm compliance deadline. [The Tribune]

The directive highlights ongoing structural deficiencies in India's anti-trafficking enforcement—particularly the absence of standardized procedures, coordination

failures, and delays in response—reflecting broader challenges in translating legal protections into effective human rights implementation. At the same time, it points to wider structural questions surrounding trafficking in India, including how socioeconomic inequality and caste- and gender-based vulnerabilities continue to shape exposure to exploitation, patterns of underreporting, and access to justice. [Vidya]

India: Parliament passes controversial transgender bill

(dql) The parliament has approved legislation amending the Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act, introducing changes to how transgender individuals are legally recognized and limiting the right to self-identify. The bill now awaits presidential assent to become law.

The bill narrows the definition of transgender persons, linking recognition more closely to biological or physical characteristics, and introduces mandatory certification by medical boards and authorities for those undergoing gender-affirming procedures. The government argues the changes will better target welfare benefits and strengthen protection against exploitation.

However, the legislation has triggered strong opposition from activists and opposition parties, who warn it could exclude many transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid individuals and undermine dignity and autonomy.

Critics say the removal of self-identification contradicts a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court of India in 2014 that recognized gender self-determination as a fundamental right. [BBC] [France 24] [HRW]

India: Government proposes new law to take control of foreign-funded NGO assets

(dql) The government has introduced amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) that would significantly expand state control over NGOs receiving foreign funding, including provisions to take over and sell assets created from such funds.

The proposed legislation establishes a “designated authority” empowered to manage, transfer, or liquidate assets of organizations whose FCRA licenses are cancelled, not renewed, or expired. Proceeds from

asset sales would be transferred to the Consolidated Fund of India, while organizations losing registration would be barred from receiving or using foreign funds.

The bill also introduces stricter timelines for the use of foreign contributions and expands liability to include not only organizations but also individual office-bearers. While penalties are reduced in duration, enforcement powers are broadened, including restrictions on asset transfers during investigations. [The Tribune]

India has more than 15,000 organizations registered under the FCRA, receiving roughly USD 2.3 billion annually in foreign funding. Critics—including opposition figures and civil society groups—warn that the legislation grants disproportionate authority to the executive and could be used to restrict or target organisations, particularly those engaged in rights-based work. [The New Indian Express]

India: Social media curbs intensify amid scrutiny of Iran stance

(dql) A noticeable surge in social media content removals in India since early March points to heightened sensitivity around criticism of New Delhi's muted response to US–Israeli strikes on Iran. Digital rights groups have documented at least 40–50 takedown cases within days, targeting political satire, opposition messaging, and commentary questioning the government's foreign policy posture.

The timing coincides with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's late-February visit to Israel and the subsequent escalation in the Middle East, which has drawn unusual domestic attention to India's traditionally cautious, "strategic autonomy"-based diplomacy. While Modi has publicly called for de-escalation, the government has avoided direct condemnation of the strikes, prompting criticism at home.

Although no explicit government directive has been confirmed, analysts note that India's legal framework allows authorities to order content removals on national security or public order grounds, with such orders kept confidential. This opacity makes it difficult to establish intent, even as researchers observe a clear clustering of takedowns linked specifically to criticism of the Iran issue. [DW]

India: Lower house approves finance bill for 2026–27 with higher spending and reform focus

(dql) The lower house of parliament has approved the Finance Bill for 2026–27, clearing the way for implementation of the government's budget proposals and sending the legislation to the upper house for consideration.

The bill underpins a budget with total expenditure of approximately USD 640 billion, marking a 7.7 percent increase from the previous fiscal year. Capital expenditure is set at about USD 146 billion, alongside projected gross tax revenues of roughly USD 530 billion and borrowing of around $207 billion.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman framed the bill as part of a reform-driven agenda focused on easing tax compliance, supporting small businesses and agriculture, enhancing trade facilitation, and strengthening India's position as a global business hub. She also highlighted measures to mitigate external shocks, including those stemming from the Middle East crisis. [The Tribune]

The Finance Bill is the legislation that gives legal effect to the tax and revenue measures announced in the Union Budget, enabling their implementation once approved by parliament.

India: Energy shock response combines price controls, supply reassurance, and gas network expansion

(dql) India is deploying a multi-pronged response to the global energy shock triggered by Middle East tensions, combining fuel tax cuts to contain domestic prices, assurances on supply security, and accelerated investment in piped gas infrastructure to reduce reliance on vulnerable fuel imports.

Government absorbs fuel price shock

India has sharply cut fuel taxes to shield consumers from surging global oil prices triggered by the Middle East conflict, with Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri warning that the move has significantly reduced government revenues.

New Delhi lowered central excise duties on petrol and diesel by INR 10 (USD 0.12) per liter, bringing petrol duties down to INR 3 (USD 0.04) and effectively

eliminating them for diesel. The government aims to prevent a spike in domestic fuel prices as crude oil has surged from around USD 70 to over USD 120 per barrel in recent weeks amid supply disruptions linked to the Middle East conflict and the closure of key shipping routes.

To balance domestic supply concerns, authorities simultaneously increased export duties on diesel and aviation fuel, prioritizing internal availability. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman framed the measures as necessary to protect consumers and stabilize the market, while also easing financial pressure on state-owned oil companies facing mounting losses. [The New Indian Express] [The News Mill]

The policy comes with clear trade-offs. By absorbing higher energy costs, the government risks widening its fiscal deficit, even as it seeks to avoid inflationary pressures that could dampen economic growth. India, as one of the world's largest energy importers, remains particularly exposed to prolonged price volatility. [CNBC]

Supply security reassured across energy and agriculture inputs

At the same time, the government pushed back against concerns over supply disruptions, emphasizing that both fuel and fertilizer availability remain stable despite ongoing geopolitical tensions. The petroleum ministry stated that India holds around 60 days of fuel stocks—within a total reserve capacity of 74 days—and that crude procurement for the coming months has already been secured, reducing the need to draw on strategic reserves. Officials also stressed that domestic refining capacity underpins stable supply even as global markets face disruptions. [The Tribune 1]

Parallel assurances were issued on fertilizer availability ahead of peak demand in June–July. Authorities project demand at around 39 million tons, with current stock levels significantly above last year, indicating a comfortable supply position. To mitigate external risks, sourcing is being diversified beyond traditional Gulf suppliers to include countries such as Russia, Morocco, and Canada, while domestic production is stabilizing as gas supply to fertilizer plants improves.

However, rising global prices for key inputs such as ammonia and sulphur continue to pose cost pressures, prompting the government to maintain subsidies and encourage the use of alternative fertilizers. States have also been advised to prevent panic buying and manage distribution closely. [The Tribune 2]

Government accelerates piped gas rollout

In parallel, India is fast-tracking the expansion of piped natural gas (PNG) networks in urban areas as disruptions tied to the ongoing Middle East conflict strain liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supply, prompting efforts to secure more stable domestic energy delivery.

At a high-level review, authorities outlined plans to scale up PNG infrastructure, including a proposal to add around 5 million new connections, while promoting a gradual shift away from LPG in areas where pipeline networks are already in place. Officials highlighted PNG's advantages in cost stability, safety, and environmental performance, positioning it as a more resilient alternative during supply shocks.

However, implementation remains hindered by administrative bottlenecks—particularly delays in municipal permits, right-of-way approvals, and high restoration fees. To address this, central and local stakeholders agreed to streamline procedures through single-window systems, time-bound clearances, and potential fee rationalization, alongside stronger coordination between city gas distributors and urban authorities. [The Tribune 3]

Macroeconomic outlook faces mounting pressure

Against this backdrop, India's Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran has warned that the ongoing Middle East conflict is likely to weigh on growth and widen external imbalances, as rising energy costs and supply disruptions feed through the economy. Growth projections of 7.0–7.4 percent for the financial year ending March 2027 face "considerable downside" risks, while both the trade and current account deficits are expected to expand significantly.

India's heavy reliance on the Strait of Hormuz—accounting for roughly half of its crude imports and most liquefied petroleum gas supplies—limits short-term substitution options and amplifies exposure to sustained price increases. Early indicators already point to mounting pressure, with private-sector activity slowing and cost inflation approaching multi-year highs. [CNBC]

India: Government claims end of decades-long Maoist insurgency after intensified security campaign

(dql) The government has declared the country effectively free of Maoist insurgents, marking what it

presents as the end of one of its longest-running internal security challenges. The rebellion—once spanning large parts of central and eastern India—has been reduced to isolated remnants, with authorities stating that its last stronghold in Chhattisgarh has been cleared.

Official figures indicate a sharp decline in violence, with fatalities down by around 90 percent since 2010 and thousands of fighters killed, arrested, or surrendering in recent operations. The government attributes this to enhanced coordination among security forces and strengthened local policing, combined with sustained leadership targeting. [France 24]

The announcement reinforces New Delhi's narrative of consolidating state authority in resource-rich regions long affected by weak governance and insurgency. However, persistent grievances linked to land rights, indigenous marginalization, and extractive industries suggest that, despite the collapse of the armed movement, underlying conflict drivers remain only partially addressed. [The Times of India]

Senior Maoist commander's surrenders

Recent developments on the ground support this trend. A senior Maoist commander, Chelluri Narayana Rao, surrendered alongside several cadres in the Andhra–Odisha border region. The forested and remote border zone has historically served as a strategic stronghold for Maoist groups, providing cover, mobility, and cross-state operational access. The area has functioned as a logistical corridor, training base, and safe haven, enabling insurgents to coordinate activities across multiple states, including into central India.

A central committee member of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist), Rao had spent nearly four decades underground and was linked to multiple high-profile attacks, including the 2018 killing of two politicians, and played a role in directing operations against security forces. [Deccan Herald] [NDTV]

India: Kashmir sentencing and Pakistan-linked networks fuel tensions with Islamabad

(dql) Security concerns linked to Kashmir and cross-border activities have come into focus following the sentencing of a Kashmiri separatist leader and the

uncovering of Pakistan-linked militant and arms networks.

Court sentences Kashmiri separatist leader to life imprisonment under anti-terror law

An Indian court has sentenced Kashmiri separatist leader Asiya Andrabi to life imprisonment under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, while two associates received 30-year prison terms for conspiracy and terrorism-related offences. The ruling, delivered by a special court of the National Investigation Agency, follows their conviction on charges including waging war against the state and involvement in militant activities.

Andrabi, founder of the banned separatist group Dukhtaran-e-Millat, has long been associated with pro-independence mobilization in Jammu and Kashmir—including organizing protests—and has been in custody since 2018.

Prosecutors argued that the severity of the sentence was necessary given the nature of the offences and to deter further anti-state activity. [Anadolu Ajansı]

Pakistan condemned the life sentence handed to Kashmiri separatist leader Asiya Andrabi and prison terms for her associates, describing the verdict as a "grave miscarriage of justice" and evidence of continued suppression of rights in Jammu and Kashmir.

In an official statement, Islamabad characterized the prosecution as politically motivated, aimed at silencing dissent and intimidating those advocating Kashmiri rights. It also raised concerns over due process, judicial independence, and compliance with international human rights standards. [The Dawn]

In response, India dismissed Pakistan's criticism of the sentencing, stating that Islamabad has "no locus standi" to comment on its internal judicial matters. The foreign ministry said New Delhi "categorically rejects" the statements, accusing Pakistan of supporting terrorism and condoning violence. India also urged Pakistan to reflect on its own human rights record. [The Tribune 1]

Pakistan-linked militant and arms networks uncovered

In a parallel development, Delhi Police, in coordination with central security agencies, has arrested a suspected operative of the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba accused of directing India-focused activities from Bangladesh, highlighting an

entrenched cross-border facilitation network. The suspect, Shabbir Ahmad Lone—previously jailed on terrorism charges—was detained near Delhi and placed under interrogation.

Authorities assess that Lone used Bangladesh as an operational hub to recruit undocumented Bangladeshi nationals in India and support planned attacks. The network was uncovered following the discovery of pro-militant propaganda in central Delhi, with subsequent raids yielding forged documents and other incriminating materials. Investigators link the structure to earlier "hybrid" modules identified in northern India. [Mint]

Separately, Delhi Police have uncovered a cross-border arms smuggling network with alleged links to Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, arresting ten individuals and seizing a cache of sophisticated foreign-made weapons.

Authorities recovered 21 firearms, including sub-machine guns and high-end automatic pistols, along with around 200 live cartridges. The weapons originated from multiple countries, including the Czech Republic, Turkey, China, Italy, Brazil and Germany, indicating an extensive international supply chain.

Preliminary investigations suggest the group was part of a well-organized network coordinating with overseas handlers to transport arms through covert routes and distribute them to criminal elements across India. [The Tribune 2]

India: Court extends custody in foreign-linked insurgency case involving cross-border training allegations

(dql) A Delhi court has extended the National Investigation Agency's custody of seven foreign nationals, citing serious national security concerns in a case involving alleged links to insurgent networks and cross-border militant training. Authorities suspect the group—six Ukrainians and one US citizen—entered India on tourist visas, travelled to the northeast without permits, and crossed into Myanmar to train Ethnic Armed Organisations, potentially including the use of drones.

Investigators further allege connections to banned Indian insurgent groups through training and the provision of equipment, placing the case under India's anti-terror framework. [The Tribune]

India: Government introduces bill to regulate paramilitary leadership amid opposition criticism

(dql) The government has introduced a bill in the upper house of parliament to create a unified framework for personnel management in central armed police forces, including rules governing the deputation of Indian Police Service (IPS) officers to senior positions.

The proposed legislation, presented by Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai, aims to replace the current fragmented system of service rules across forces such as the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, and the Sashastra Seema Bal, which guards India's borders with Nepal and Bhutan. The government argues the bill will standardize administration without altering operational mandates. [The Tribune]

However, the proposal has triggered strong opposition, with critics describing it as undermining federal principles and limiting career advancement for personnel within the paramilitary forces. Opposition members also questioned its alignment with a recent Supreme Court directive calling for a gradual reduction in the deputation of Indian Police Service officers to top roles.

The debate in parliament was marked by procedural disputes and symbolic protests, reflecting broader political tensions over the measure. [The Pioneer]

India: Defense ministry tightens drone security, accelerates military procurement

(dql) The defense ministry is advancing a dual-track effort to strengthen operational resilience, combining tighter security standards for emerging technologies with a major expansion of conventional military capabilities.

Framework to test security vulnerabilities in military drones

The defense ministry has released a draft framework to identify and mitigate security vulnerabilities in unmanned aerial systems, reflecting growing concerns over the risks posed by insecure drone technologies. While acknowledging that indigenous capabilities will

take time to mature, the framework calls for interim safeguards through rigorous testing by certified agencies.

The proposed framework focuses on systematic testing and certification of drone hardware and software to prevent threats such as data theft, control hijacking, GPS spoofing, and network compromise. It highlights that vulnerabilities in critical components—including flight controllers, sensors, and communication systems—could undermine military operations and expose sensitive information. [The Tribune 1]

The initiative comes amid heightened scrutiny of foreign-made drones and components, particularly from China, and emphasizes the need to develop a "secure-by-design" domestic drone ecosystem. [Asia Net News]

Advancing military modernization with USD 25 billion procurement

In parallel, the ministry has approved defense acquisitions worth roughly USD 25 billion as it accelerates military modernization and replenishes capabilities following its recent conflict with Pakistan.

The package includes transport aircraft, five additional Russian S-400 air defense systems, and remotely piloted strike aircraft, alongside army and naval upgrades such as tank ammunition, artillery systems, surveillance assets, and coastguard equipment. [The Tribune 2]

It follows a separate USD 40 billion approval last month for French Rafale fighter jets and US-made maritime patrol aircraft, underscoring a sustained procurement surge (see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 4).

New Delhi also signed a smaller contract with Russia's Rosoboronexport for Tunguska air defence systems, reflecting its continued reliance on legacy defense ties even as it diversifies suppliers.

The approvals form part of a record defense spending cycle, with India expanding procurement while promoting domestic production through partnerships with Western and Israeli firms. [Reuters]

India: Navy inducts three domestically built warships

(dql) India's navy has taken delivery of three indigenously built vessels—a guided missile frigate, an anti-submarine warfare craft, and a survey ship—marking a further step in strengthening maritime capabilities and domestic defense production.

The frigate Dunagiri, part of the advanced Project 17A class, is equipped with modern missile systems including BrahMos and integrated combat technologies, enabling multi-domain operations. It is complemented by the anti-submarine warfare vessel Agray, designed for coastal surveillance and underwater threat detection, and the survey vessel Sanshodhak, which enhances hydrographic and oceanographic mapping capacities. [The Economic Times]

India: First ports of refuge launched

(dql) India has introduced its first dedicated "ports of refuge," designating Dighi (west coast) and Gopalpur (east coast) as emergency hubs for vessels in distress. Led by Adani Ports, the initiative provides ships facing accidents, technical failures or environmental risks with safe docking and access to specialised response services.

The facilities will be equipped with advanced capabilities including salvage operations, firefighting, and pollution control, supported by trained personnel and international partners. This marks a shift toward aligning India with established global maritime safety practices, addressing a longstanding gap along its heavily trafficked coastline.

The move comes as shipping volumes rise and India's ports gain prominence along key routes linking the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and Bay of Bengal. The absence of such infrastructure previously heightened risks of accidents, cargo losses and environmental damage. [Businessworld]

India: Parliamentary review flags structural gaps in space program

(dql) A parliamentary committee has identified significant structural weaknesses in India's space program, citing staff shortages, inefficient procurement, and underutilization of allocated funds as key risks to mission timelines. The review found over 2,300 vacancies at the Indian Space Research

Organisation (ISRO), alongside budget cuts and delays in spending that could push back major projects.

Flagship missions—including the Gaganyaan human spaceflight program and upcoming Chandrayaan lunar landings and a planned Venus orbiter—are now at risk of delay, with the first crewed mission unlikely to meet its March 2026 target. The committee also raised concerns over technical setbacks in the NavIC navigation system, where malfunctioning imported atomic clocks have limited operational capacity.

In addition, the report criticizes the transfer of publicly funded technologies to private firms at below-market value, warning that India may be failing to capture adequate returns from its intellectual property despite growing private sector participation. [The Register]

Maldives: Referendum on election synchronization proceeds amid pending court ruling and political divisions

(lm) The Maldives is approaching the April 4 referendum on synchronizing presidential and parliamentary elections, with the process under legal challenge and subject to increasing political contestation over its design and institutional implications. A ruling by the Supreme Court of the Maldives on a key constitutional challenge was scheduled for March 31; however, at the time of writing, no decision has been issued. [The Sun 1]

The referendum seeks approval of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, passed on February 10 by the ruling People's National Congress (PNC), which would require presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on the same day from 2028 and advance the start of the parliamentary term from May to December 1. This would shorten the term of the current parliament, elected in May 2024, by around six months. President and PNC party leader Mohamed Muizzu subsequently decreed on February 16 that the referendum be held on April 4, alongside local council elections.

A central legal dispute concerns the wording of the referendum question. Petitioners argue that the current formulation—asking voters to approve ratification of the amendment—does not explicitly seek consent to shorten the existing parliamentary term, which they contend is constitutionally required. The state maintains that the Constitution does not prescribe specific wording and that framing the question falls within presidential discretion under the

Referendum Act. A separate petition seeking to invalidate the amendment on procedural grounds was rejected at the registrar stage. [The Sun 2] [The Sun 3]

The proposal has generated broader political debate. Former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a central figure in the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) argued that holding both elections simultaneously would remove an interval allowing voters to assess government performance, noting that the separation of electoral cycles was intentionally designed to preserve accountability. The MDP itself has also opposed the proposal and pursued legal action to halt the referendum. [The Sun 4] [The Sun 5]

Meanwhile, former Home Minister Umar Naseer, who served in the Abdulla Yameen administration, recently supported reducing the number of elections but proposed instead combining parliamentary and local council polls. Yameen himself - leader of the People's National Front – warned that aligning electoral cycles could weaken institutional checks and balances by allowing both executive and legislative mandates to begin and end simultaneously, potentially reducing parliamentary oversight. [The Sun 6]

At the same time, Akram Kamaluddin, a former state minister for housing, has publicly supported synchronizing elections, breaking with his MDP's position. His proposal has received backing from members of the government as well as smaller parties, including the Maldives Development Alliance, Adhaalath Party, and Jumhooree Party, highlighting cross-party divergence on the issue. [The Sun 7]

Notably, beyond the referendum, additional institutional changes are increasingly under consideration by the presidency and the PNC. President Mohamed Muizzu recently announced plans to introduce a recall mechanism allowing voters to remove Members of Parliament and local councilors before the end of their terms through a petition and vote process, although no timeline has been specified. He has also indicated that he is considering introducing quotas of 10 percent each for women and youth in parliament, subject to further consultation, alongside plans to cap the number of parliamentary seats at the current level of 93. [The Sun 8] [The Sun 9]

Maldives: Strong formal support for UN human rights recommendations contrasted by gaps on religion, death penalty, and implementation

(lm) The Maldives' latest Universal Periodic Review (UPR)—a peer review mechanism under the United Nations Human Rights Council in which states assess each other's human rights records— highlights a growing gap between the government's formal acceptance of recommendations and concerns over their substantive scope and implementation.

In the current review cycle, the government supported a large majority of recommendations, including commitments to protect journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society actors, ensure freedom of expression, and provide a safe operating environment free from reprisals. It also endorsed calls to publish findings of the Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances—an investigative body tasked with examining unresolved cases of suspicious deaths and enforced disappearances—and to strengthen protections against harassment and criminalization of activists.

However, international civil society organizations, including CIVICUS and International Federation for Human Rights, emphasized that key recommendations were either rejected or remain unimplemented. Notably, the government declined to revise provisions in the Evidence Act seen as restrictive to media freedom, and refused to accept recommendations related to freedom of religion or belief, protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and the abolition or formal suspension of the death penalty. Observers also criticized the use of religious justifications to reject certain recommendations, warning of a shift toward cultural relativism in human rights interpretation.

At the implementation level, concerns persist over continued restrictions on civic space, including alleged police obstruction of protests, arbitrary arrests, and excessive use of force. Civil society actors report an insecure operating environment, with some human rights defenders having left the country and others facing threats. Particular attention has been drawn to the continued non-reinstatement of the Maldivian Democracy Network - a prominent Maldivian civil society organization previously deregistered by authorities -, as well as delays in releasing findings from the deaths and disappearances investigation. [CIVICUS] [International Federation for Human Rights]

Maldives: Middle East war disrupts tourism and construction while

government moves to strengthen energy buffers

(lm) The Maldives is facing widening economic pressure from disruptions linked to the Middle East war, affecting tourism, construction, and energy supply, while authorities and state institutions are implementing short-term support measures and longer-term mitigation efforts.

In tourism, the partial closure of key Middle Eastern air corridors—major transit routes for international visitors—has led to nearly 500 flight cancellations between late February and late March, resulting in a sharp decline in arrivals and operational strain on resorts. In response, the Bank of Maldives has begun providing targeted financial support to tourism businesses. Authorities are also seeking to restore connectivity through increased flight frequencies and new airline partnerships. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

At the same time, supply chain disruptions are affecting the construction sector. Shortages of imported materials—particularly cement—have led to sharp price increases, in some cases more than doubling from below MVR 100 (USD 6.5) to above MVR 200 (USD 13), affecting both private projects and public infrastructure. The government has activated a special ministerial committee to coordinate mitigation measures, including engagement with industry stakeholders and efforts to stabilize supply and build reserves of essential goods. [The Sun 3] [The Sun 4]

Energy security has emerged as a parallel area of concern. The state-owned State Trading Organization is expanding liquefied petroleum gas storage capacity in the Malé area by 1,500 tons, raising total capacity to 2,500 tons and allowing for an estimated buffer of around two and a half months of supply. The move follows recent supply tightness that led to temporary measures such as partial cylinder fillings priced at approximately MVR 100 (USD 6.5). [The Sun 5]

However, the underlying vulnerability remains structural. The Maldives spent approximately MVR 10 billion (USD 650 million) on fuel imports in 2025—around 10 percent of gross domestic product—with most supplies sourced from the Middle East. Disruptions affecting key routes such as the Strait of Hormuz are increasing exposure to both price volatility and supply risks. Authorities are therefore prioritizing a gradual shift toward renewable energy, including floating solar projects, although capacity constraints limit near-term substitution. [The Sun 6]

Beyond energy, broader supply chains have so far remained resilient but are increasingly under pressure. Authorities state that food imports have not been disrupted, supported by diversification toward suppliers in Southeast Asia and continued reliance on established trade links, particularly with China. At the same time, rising global transport and fuel costs are feeding through into domestic markets. [The Sun 7]

Maldives: Sukuk repayment, budget trends, and public-sector employment remain central to fiscal debate

(lm) The Maldives is preparing to settle a USD 500 million sovereign sukuk (Islamic bond) due in April as part of broader efforts to manage external debt and stabilize its fiscal position. The government stated it has secured USD 650 million for the payment and plans to refinance part of the sukuk while repaying the remainder directly. Authorities said full details of the transaction, including the interest rate, will be disclosed after settlement, and indicated that successful repayment could support investor confidence and improve the country's credit rating outlook, as the Maldives faces more than USD 1 billion in debt repayments this year and remains below investment grade. [The Sun 1]

At the same time, recent fiscal data show that total government expenditure has declined, driven by lower administrative and operational spending, while salary, allowance, and pension costs have increased. Public-sector wage-related spending rose to MVR 2.7 billion (USD 175.5 million), up by MVR 80 million (USD 5.2 million) compared to the same period last year. Overall expenditure fell to MVR 7.27 billion (USD 472.6 million) from MVR 8.1 billion (USD 526.5 million), while the fiscal balance recorded a surplus of MVR 2.1 billion (USD 136.5 million). The increase in wage-related spending has been discussed in the context of broader fiscal pressure and upcoming elections. [The Sun 2]

Against this backdrop, former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a senior figure in the main opposition Maldives Democratic Party, said the government spends around MVR 400 million (USD 26 million) per month on public-sector salaries, amounting to about MVR 4.8 billion (USD 312 million) annually, and argued that if expenditure is to be reduced, salary-related costs should be addressed first. He contrasted this with about MVR 900 million (USD 58.5 million) per month spent on salaries in the final year of his own administration. [The Sun 3]

Separately, legislator Abdulla Jabir, an independent Member of Parliament and former leader of the now-defunct Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party, called for expanded job creation through public projects and state-owned enterprises after the Road Development Corporation opened applications for 150 positions across multiple islands. He said employment policy should not be linked to political timing or external conditions, argued that increased employment through government-linked entities had contributed to a decline in crime, and added that previous administrations had also expanded public-sector hiring beyond operational needs. [The Sun 4]

Maldives: Audit flags procurement and asset management gaps in police service

(lm) An audit by the Auditor General's Office (AGO) found that the Maldives Police Service procured goods and services worth MVR 10.68 million (USD 0.69 million) in 2021 without securing required performance guarantees, in breach of public finance regulations.

The report also identified gaps in asset management. The police spent MVR 30.06 million (USD 1.95 million) on fuel for vehicles and vessels but did not maintain records of usage, trips, or fuel consumption, and did not keep a complete record of owned or rented vehicles and vessels.

In addition, the audit noted deficiencies in the handling of confiscated cash. As of an August 2022 inspection, MVR 9.01 million (USD 0.59 million) was being held as evidence, including funds linked to older cases, with no formal policy governing storage, return, or disposal.

Yet, the AGO stated that overall budget utilization for 2021 was in line with public finance requirements. [The Sun]

Nepal: Balendra Shah sworn in as prime minister, unveils reform agenda and cabinet amid institutional reset

(lm) Nepal has entered a new political phase following the formation of a majority government led by Balendra Shah of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), after the party secured a near two-thirds majority in the March 5 parliamentary elections, enabling it to govern without coalition constraints.

Shah was first selected unanimously as parliamentary party leader on March 26—formally positioning him for the premiership under constitutional provisions requiring the president to appoint the leader of the majority party—and was sworn in as prime minister on March 27 by Ramchandra Paudel. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

His appointment follows a rapid political rise: previously mayor of Kathmandu (2022–January 2026) and known for his background as a structural engineer and public figure, he entered national politics only shortly before the elections. His victory in Jhapa-5, a constituency previously associated with KP Sharma Oli, underscores the scale of the electoral shift.

A 14-member cabinet was sworn in alongside Shah, reflecting a mix of technocratic and movement-linked figures. Key appointments include Swarnim Wagle as finance minister (an economist and RSP vice-chair), Sudan Gurung—who rose to prominence during the Gen Z protest movement—as home minister, and Shishir Khanal as foreign minister. Other portfolios were distributed across party figures with backgrounds in law, journalism, public administration, and regional representation, with an emphasis on inclusivity and professional expertise. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

The new government has signaled an immediate reform push. According to internal planning, the first cabinet meeting is expected to adopt a package of "100 decisions" focused on governance reforms, improved public service delivery, and digitization. The administration has also emphasized that the civil service should remain politically neutral and merit-based, rejecting entrenched practices of political patronage within state institutions. [The Kathmandu Post 4] [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Institutionally, the Cabinet has moved to convene the first session of the newly elected federal parliament, with President Ramchandra Paudel summoning both the House of Representatives and the National Assembly to meet on April 2, following a Cabinet recommendation. This marks the start of parliamentary proceedings under the new political configuration.

At the same time, the government has initiated preparations for potential constitutional reform by establishing a taskforce to prepare a discussion paper on amendments. The taskforce will include representation from all parliamentary parties and is tasked with identifying areas requiring revision and facilitating consensus-based reform. [The Kathmandu Post 6] [The Kathmandu Post 7]

Nepal: Rapid escalation of protest accountability process follows appointment of new prime minister

(lm) Nepal's handling of accountability for the September 2025 Gen Z protests has seen a rapid and sequential escalation in recent days, beginning with the delayed publication and subsequent leak of a judicial inquiry report under the outgoing interim government, followed by immediate implementation measures under the new administration led by Prime Minister Balendra Shah, who was sworn in on March 27.

Before the change of government, the interim administration faced pressure over the unreleased report of the commission led by former judge Gauri Bahadur Karki, which had been submitted on March 8. On March 25, officials said publication had been delayed because of consultations and the imminent transfer of power after the March 5 elections. Later that same day, the report entered the public domain through leaks. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

According to the leaked findings, the commission recommended criminal investigation of former prime minister KP Sharma Oli, former home minister Ramesh Lekhak, and former Inspector General of Police Chandra Kuber Khapung under provisions of the National Penal Code relating to negligent and reckless homicide, in connection with the protest crackdown that left 77 people dead. The report also recommended action against former home secretary Gokarna Mani Duwadee, Armed Police Force chief Raju Aryal, former National Investigation Department chief Hut Raj Thapa, former Kathmandu chief district officer Chhabilal Rijal, and a number of senior police, armed police, intelligence, and army officers. It further stated that authorities had prior warning of possible escalation, but key coordination mechanisms, including a meeting of the National Security Council, were not convened. At the same time, the report also called for investigation into arson and violence during the unrest and said it had found no conclusive evidence of organized external infiltration. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3] [The Kathmandu Post 4]

After taking office, the Shah government moved quickly. At its first Cabinet meeting on March 28, it decided to implement the Karki commission report. Oli and Lekhak were arrested the same day, and Rijal was arrested on March 31. The government, however, has so far taken a differentiated approach toward security

officials: politicians and civilian officials have faced immediate action, while cases involving security personnel are to be reviewed through a separate committee. This selective sequencing has drawn criticism from legal experts and opposition figures, while security specialists have described it as a strategic effort to avoid immediate disruption within the police and broader security apparatus. [The Kathmandu Post 5] [The Kathmandu Post 6]

The legality of the arrests has itself become contested. Oli and Lekhak were detained using urgent arrest warrants rather than court-issued warrants, prompting criticism that the executive acted too hastily and without adequate judicial basis. The Kathmandu District Court allowed both men to remain in custody for investigation, but Nepal's Supreme Court later declined to grant interim relief and instead ordered the government to submit written explanations justifying the detentions. Further hearings remain pending. [The Kathmandu Post 7] [The Kathmandu Post 8] [The Kathmandu Post 9]

Parallel to the protest-related cases, authorities have also intensified a major money laundering investigation involving several senior political figures. The Department of Money Laundering Investigation, with support from the Central Investigation Bureau of Nepal Police, has expanded scrutiny to former prime ministers Sher Bahadur Deuba, KP Sharma Oli, and Pushpa Kamal Dahal, as well as former ministers Arzu Rana Deuba and Deepak Khadka. Khadka, a former energy minister, was arrested on March 29. The probe stems in part from burnt currency fragments recovered from residences after the September unrest and has broadened after months of preliminary inquiries into financial and asset discrepancies. [The Kathmandu Post 10]

A further layer of dispute concerns the adequacy of the Karki report itself. The National Human Rights Commission conducted a separate investigation and, according to officials involved in that process, examined both the state crackdown on September 8 and the violence and destruction on September 9 more comprehensively than the Karki panel. Calls have therefore grown for the release of the human rights body's report as well, with critics arguing that relying only on the leaked Karki findings risks an incomplete accountability process. [The Kathmandu Post 11]

Politically, the arrests have triggered a sharp escalation. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), led by Oli, has denounced the move as politically motivated and launched nationwide protests, with clashes reported in Kathmandu and

other districts. The party has announced plans to challenge the arrests both legally and politically, organize demonstrations across the country, and seek broader opposition coordination. [The Kathmandu Post 12] [The Kathmandu Post 13] [The Kathmandu Post 14] [The Kathmandu Post 15] [The Kathmandu Post 16]

Nepal: Supreme Court refers petitions over revisions to cases against ruling party chair to full bench

(lm) Nepal's Supreme Court has referred writ petitions challenging revisions to criminal cases against Rabi Lamichhane, a former home minister and chair of the ruling Rastriya Swatantra Party, to a full bench, indicating that the matter requires broader judicial scrutiny. The referral comes just days after Prime Minister Balendra Shah of the same party was sworn in on March 27, following the party's landslide election victory earlier this month.

The petitions challenge a decision by the Office of the Attorney General to amend charge sheets filed in multiple district courts, dropping organized crime and money laundering charges while retaining cooperative fraud charges. The revisions were approved under Section 36 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which allows changes to charges if new or stronger evidence emerges during trial proceedings. Petitioners argue that no such new evidence emerged and are seeking to nullify the revisions. [The Kathmandu Post]

The underlying cases relate to alleged misappropriation of funds from several cooperatives—member-based savings and credit institutions—in districts including Kaski, Rupandehi, Kathmandu, and Chitwan. Earlier reporting said Lamichhane had faced cooperative fraud, organized crime, and money laundering charges in multiple courts before the later revisions.

Nepal: Government plan to dismantle party-affiliated student unions triggers constitutional and political backlash

(lm) Nepal's new government has triggered a fresh political and constitutional debate by proposing to dismantle all party-affiliated student unions in educational institutions within 60 days, as part of its broader 100-point reform agenda adopted

immediately after Prime Minister Balendra Shah took office on March 27.

The plan, approved on March 28, aims to remove political party structures from schools and universities, with authorities arguing that entrenched politicization has undermined academic standards, distorted student representation, and turned campuses into arenas of party competition. In place of existing structures, the government intends to introduce alternative, non-partisan bodies—such as student councils—within 90 days.

The proposal directly targets Nepal's long-standing Free Students' Union system, under which student wings affiliated with political parties contest campus elections and play a central role in student representation and mobilization.

Student organizations across the political spectrum have strongly opposed the move, arguing that it violates Article 17 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of association. They contend that dissolving politically affiliated student bodies amounts to restricting constitutionally protected political participation and risks dismantling a historically important platform for democratic engagement. Student leaders have warned of protests and coordinated responses, framing the measure as authoritarian and legally questionable.

The government's interpretation is contested. Some constitutional experts argue that while the constitution protects the right to form associations, it does not explicitly guarantee the existence of party-affiliated structures within educational institutions, suggesting that removing formal party links may not necessarily violate constitutional provisions.

The debate reflects a deeper structural tension. Critics of student unions point to longstanding problems, including factionalism mirroring national party divisions, pressure on university administrations, and prioritization of political interests over academic concerns. At the same time, opponents of the reform emphasize the historical role of student movements in Nepal's democratic development—including mobilization against the Panchayat system and contributions to the 1990 transition to multiparty democracy—arguing that eliminating these structures risks weakening political socialization and future leadership development.

Even among critics of current student politics, there is skepticism about the government's approach. Several voices support reform and regulation—such as

separating student unions from party control or introducing structured debate platforms—rather than a blanket dismantling. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Internal conflict escalates within main opposition party amid parallel factional activity, legal dispute, and widening investigations

(lm) Internal divisions within the Nepali Congress, Nepal's historically dominant democratic party and now the main opposition, have intensified as rival factions expand parallel political activities while a broader leadership dispute remains unresolved before the Supreme Court, alongside a widening criminal investigation targeting senior political figures.

The conflict centers on a special convention held from January 10–12, which brought current party president Gagan Kumar Thapa to power after delays in holding a regular convention. The process was boycotted by a rival faction backed by Sher Bahadur Deuba, a former prime minister and former party president, and Shekhar Koirala, a senior party leader from a prominent political family, who have challenged its legality before the Supreme Court.

On March 30, the dissident faction led by Purna Bahadur Khadka, a senior party leader and former deputy prime minister, and Koirala organized a separate gathering of newly elected lawmakers and announced further outreach, including a planned meeting of district-level leaders. The faction has also used official party letterhead in its communications, prompting the Thapa-led leadership to consider disciplinary action. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The dispute directly affects preparations for the party's 15th General Convention, scheduled for September 9–11. The Deuba–Koirala faction has stated it will not participate unless the Court rules on the legitimacy of the January convention, raising the risk that the process proceeds without a unified party structure. At the same time, party rules require a regular convention within one year, placing pressure on the current leadership to move forward despite the pending case.

In parallel, the Thapa-led leadership is continuing preparations, including nationwide membership renewal and internal elections across 6,743 wards and 165 constituencies, in an effort to consolidate organizational control. This follows a weak

performance in the March parliamentary elections, where the party secured 38 seats and Thapa lost his own constituency. His subsequent resignation offer was rejected by the party's Central Working Committee [see AiR No. 12, March/2026, 4]. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

At the same time, authorities have intensified a money laundering investigation centered on Deuba. The probe also covers individuals linked to the Deuba family. Members of Deuba's immediate family—including his wife, Arzu Rana Deuba, a former foreign minister, and their son—are currently abroad, reportedly in Hong Kong, but investigators have stated that proceedings will continue regardless of location. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

More recently, the investigation has expanded alongside arrests of other political figures. Deepak Khadka, former energy minister and Nepali Congress leader, was also arrested on March 29 in connection with alleged money laundering offenses linked to funds recovered during the September 2025 unrest. [Deutsche Welle]

Nepal: Maoist leader Dahal appointed parliamentary party leader of unified communist party

(lm) Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a former three-time prime minister and longtime Maoist leader, has been unanimously selected as parliamentary party leader of the Nepali Communist Party, a left-wing party formed in November 2025 through the merger of multiple communist factions, including Dahal's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist). In this role, Dahal will appoint the deputy parliamentary leader and the chief whip, consolidating control over the party's parliamentary organization.

The Nepali Communist Party currently holds 17 seats in the House of Representatives, including eight elected through the first-past-the-post system and nine through proportional representation. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Loan shark victims resume protests in Madhesh as enforcement gaps persist despite legal reforms

(lm) Victims of predatory lending in Rautahat district, in Nepal's Madhesh Province - a southern region bordering India with high levels of informal finance -, have resumed public protests, alleging continued failure by police, courts, and local authorities to enforce laws introduced to curb loan sharking.

Borrowers report repaying debts multiple times over without recovering collateral, as lenders rely on documentation structures—such as cheque-based loans with cash repayments—that are difficult to challenge legally.

Although the government criminalized unlicensed money lending in 2023 and established a commission led by former judge Gauri Bahadur Karki, victims say enforcement remains weak, with pressure to settle cases and alleged political protection for lenders. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Chinese-led joint venture selected to operate first cross-mountain road tunnel

(lm) A Chinese-led joint venture has been selected to operate the Nagdhunga–Sisnekhola tunnel, a major road tunnel connecting Kathmandu with the western districts, despite earlier reservations from the Japanese side, as the project approaches completion and prepares for trial operations by early May.

The contract was awarded following an international tender process, in which a joint venture between China's Yusin and Nepal's ART was selected as the lowest bidder with an offer of NPR 1.10 billion (USD 8.03 million). Under procurement rules, foreign firms were required to partner with Nepali companies to support knowledge transfer. The selected operator will manage the tunnel for five years, with a complaint period and contract finalization process currently underway.

The project is financed through a concessional loan of NPR 16 billion (USD 116.8 million) from Japan and NPR 6 billion (USD 43.8 million) from the government, with an additional NPR 5.5 billion (USD 40.2 million) loan under consideration to cover remaining costs. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: New government sets 180-day deadline to clear power agreements and

accelerate electricity export strategy

(lm) Under the government led by Balendra Shah, who was sworn in on March 27 as prime minister following an election victory, Nepal has set a 180-day deadline to resolve pending power purchase agreements (PPAs) and licensing decisions as part of efforts to accelerate electricity production and exports.

Authorities aim to clear a backlog of projects—some pending since 2018—by addressing bottlenecks in generation, transmission, distribution, and export. Projects totaling around 13,000 megawatts are currently awaiting PPAs with the Nepal Electricity Authority, with decisions expected within six months to enable further development.

The plan also includes preparing an energy export strategy within one month and advancing structural reforms, including the restructuring of the Nepal Electricity Authority and streamlined environmental approval processes for hydropower projects. Measures to improve investor security and reduce project delays are also being introduced.

Nepal currently exports surplus electricity to India year-round and to Bangladesh seasonally, with exports to Bangladesh set to increase from 40 megawatts to 60 megawatts from mid-June. The government has indicated that exports, particularly during peak demand periods, will be prioritized.

Stakeholder responses reflect differing priorities. Industry groups have welcomed the focus on production and exports, while other voices have emphasized the need to align generation with domestic demand and avoid excess capacity, noting the absence of measures to expand domestic electricity consumption despite ongoing structural imbalances between seasonal surplus and dry-season imports. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Government absorbs fuel price shock, prepares contingency measures amid Middle East disruption

(lm) Between March 25 and 30, Pakistan implemented a set of fiscal, supply, and contingency measures to manage the domestic impact of disruptions linked to the Middle East war, focusing on fuel price stabilization, supply continuity, and protection of critical agricultural inputs.

On March 27, the government decided to absorb rising global fuel costs rather than pass them fully to consumers, rejecting proposed increases of PKR 95 (USD 0.33) per liter for petrol and PKR 203 (USD 0.71) for diesel. Instead, it assumed a weekly fiscal burden of PKR 56 billion (USD 196 million), bringing the total subsidy cost over three weeks to PKR 125 billion (USD 437.5 million). These measures build on earlier transfers to the energy regulator to cover price differentials, while officials have indicated that fiscal space for continued subsidies remains limited. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

At the same time, authorities have confirmed that fuel supply remains stable in the short term. As of March 29, arrangements to import petrol for April have been completed, and existing reserves are assessed to cover approximately four weeks of demand. [Arab News 5]

In parallel, the government is preparing additional policy tools to manage demand and supply risks. Fuel stocks are currently assessed as stable, covering approximately four weeks, supported by continued imports. However, contingency planning is underway, including potential rationing mechanisms such as odd-even vehicle usage and quota systems for motorcycles and rickshaws, alongside the development of targeted, technology-based subsidies and a broader fuel conservation strategy. [Arab News 6]

Beyond fuel, authorities have moved to stabilize fertilizer supply, given its dependence on energy markets and importance for food security. On March 30, officials confirmed that urea stocks are expected to remain sufficient through the upcoming cropping season, with projected carryover reserves of approximately 570,000 tons, while Diammonium Phosphate (DAP) stocks are estimated at around 96,000 tons through July. [Arab News 6]

Pakistan: Jailed ex-prime minister's son raises UN concerns over detention

(lm) Kasim Khan has called on the United Nations to intervene over the detention of former prime minister Imran Khan, alleging mistreatment and broader human rights violations in Pakistan.

Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council, he said his father—detained since August 2023—has been held for nearly 1,000 days and described his conditions as "torture," including confinement in a cell typically used for death row inmates, according to his account. He urged the Office of the United Nations

High Commissioner for Human Rights (the UN body responsible for monitoring global human rights compliance) to press Pakistan to release his father and other political prisoners. He also stated he had not seen his father for over three years and raised concerns about his health.

His remarks were made in the context of discussions around Pakistan's access to the European Union's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus, a preferential trade arrangement granting duty-free market access in return for compliance with 27 international conventions. While affirming support for maintaining the scheme, he called on Pakistan to fully comply with these obligations. The intervention triggered controversy after claims circulated that Khan's family was lobbying for a review or revocation of the trade status, which he denied. [The Independent]

Pakistan's government rejected the allegations. Defense Minister Khawaja Asif criticized Khan's family for raising the issue internationally and denied suggestions of lobbying against the country's trade status. Authorities maintain that legal proceedings against Imran Khan—who has been convicted in multiple cases—follow due process, while his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, continues to describe the cases as politically motivated. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Court ruling strengthens recognition of women's matrimonial property rights

(lm) Pakistan's Islamabad High Court has issued a landmark judgment recognizing that assets acquired during marriage constitute "matrimonial property" subject to equitable distribution, a decision welcomed by the Federal Ombudsperson for Protection Against Harassment.

The ruling addresses a long-standing gap in Pakistan's legal framework, where property is typically registered in the name of the earning spouse—most often the husband—leaving women with limited claims despite significant non-financial contributions. The court explicitly affirmed that caregiving, household management, and support within the family carry legal value and must be considered in property division.

The case arose from a petition by a former Pakistan Air Force officer challenging earlier court decisions that had denied her claim due to lack of documentary proof. The High Court overturned those rulings, noting

that lower courts had failed to account for the realities faced by working women.

The judgment builds on earlier calls for reform by the Lahore High Court and signals a shift toward recognizing marriage as a legal partnership. Authorities indicated that further legal reforms may follow to align matrimonial property law with principles of equity and gender justice. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Staff-level agreement with IMF reached to unlock USD 1.2 billion

(lm) Pakistan has reached a staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that is set to unlock approximately USD 1.2 billion in financing, while authorities are also considering fuel pricing reforms under ongoing program reviews.

The agreement follows the third review of the USD 7 billion Extended Fund Facility and the second review of the USD 1.4 billion Resilience and Sustainability Facility. Once approved by the IMF Executive Board, Pakistan will gain access to around USD 1.0 billion under the Extended Fund Facility and USD 210 million under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility, bringing total disbursements under both programs to about USD 4.5 billion. The IMF noted that Pakistan's macroeconomic indicators have improved, including contained inflation, a stable current account, and strengthened external reserves, but warned that the Middle East war could negatively affect inflation, growth, and external balances. [Arab News 1]

In parallel, Pakistan is considering shifting from weekly to daily fuel price adjustments to better reflect global market volatility. The proposal follows discussions with the IMF and is linked to the Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies, a document outlining reform commitments under IMF programs. Officials indicated that while more frequent pricing could improve responsiveness to international oil price movements, implementation challenges—particularly market oversight—remain. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Canadian mining cooperation delays Reko Diq review amid security concerns in Balochistan

(lm) Canada-based Barrick Mining Corporation has postponed its comprehensive review of the Reko Diq

gold and copper project in Pakistan's Balochistan province by one year, with the assessment now continuing until at least July 2027.

The company said the delay reflects worsening security conditions in Balochistan, where separatist violence has intensified in recent months. The review, launched in February, covers capital allocation, project timelines, and delivery strategy. Barrick has maintained its long-term commitment to the project, but the extended review is likely to affect previously announced development assumptions, including the planned start of production in 2028. [Arab News 1]

Reko Diq, one of the world's largest undeveloped copper and gold deposits, is structured as a joint venture between Barrick (50 percent), Pakistani federal state-owned enterprises (25 percent), and the provincial government of Balochistan (25 percent). The project remains central to Pakistan's effort to expand mineral exports and attract foreign capital.

The security environment remained unstable over March 29–30, when coordinated militant attacks in several parts of Balochistan killed civilians, injured others, and disrupted infrastructure. In Panjgur district, attacks on residences of "pro-government" tribesmen killed five civilians, while security operations killed six militants. Within 24 hours, further attacks on police and Frontier Corps checkposts in Quetta caused additional civilian casualties, and a separate incident damaged a railway line in Mastung district, temporarily affecting train operations. No group claimed responsibility, but the attacks fit a pattern associated with Baloch separatist groups, particularly the Baloch Liberation Army, an insurgent organization seeking greater autonomy or independence for Balochistan. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

Pakistan: Gwadar promoted as alternative transshipment route amid Strait of Hormuz disruptions

(lm) Pakistan is promoting Gwadar port as a transshipment route following the berthing of a specialized cargo vessel, amid shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. A vessel carrying 35 units of transshipment cargo recently docked at Gwadar. The move follows regulatory changes in March allowing more flexible handling of such cargo to attract international shipping lines.

Gwadar, a deep-sea port in Balochistan, Pakistan's southwestern province bordering Iran and

Afghanistan, lies near the Hormuz entry point and is part of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, a China-backed infrastructure initiative connecting western China to the Arabian Sea. The port has capacity for up to 16,000 Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (standard container measure) and around 90,000 square meters of general cargo storage, with incentives such as free storage offered to operators. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Grid indigenization drive generates USD 45 million in local contracts

(lm) Pakistan's government has reported that its power sector indigenization policy has generated contracts worth PKR 12.6 billion (USD 45 million) for domestic industries, as part of efforts to reduce reliance on imports and ease pressure on foreign exchange reserves.

According to the Ministry of Power, the initiative focuses on localizing the production of transmission equipment such as cables, conductors, and related infrastructure. Authorities state that the policy has reduced procurement costs by around 40 percent while accelerating project timelines through faster local delivery.

As part of the program, pilot "educational orders" worth PKR 900 million (USD 3.2 million) have been issued to domestic firms to build technical capacity, while 11 companies have been integrated into capability development schemes through partnerships with international manufacturers. [Arab News]

Seychelles: Central bank holds policy rate at 1.75 percent

(lm) The Central Bank of Seychelles has kept its Monetary Policy Rate—the benchmark interest rate used by the central bank to influence borrowing costs and overall liquidity in the economy—at 1.75 percent for the second quarter of 2026, signaling a cautious stance as external shocks linked to the Middle East war begin to affect inflation expectations and tourism dynamics.

Inflation remains subdued, with both year-on-year and 12-month average inflation at 0.3 percent in February. However, the outlook points to gradual upward pressure driven by higher global oil prices, increased

freight costs, and potential currency weakening—factors that are expected to transmit into domestic prices through imports.

At the same time, the tourism-dependent economy is showing early signs of strain. While arrivals remained broadly stable in early 2026—reaching 78,194 visitors, a marginal decline of 0.4 percent compared to the previous year—and tourism earnings rose to USD 208 million, disruptions since early March have affected travel flows. Temporary airport closures and reduced capacity at key Middle Eastern transit hubs have constrained connectivity, while broader security perceptions may continue to weigh on demand.

Authorities have responded by adjusting connectivity, including the introduction of new direct flights to Europe, but the Central Bank has warned that continued global uncertainty could affect both tourism revenues and broader economic activity. [Seychelles News Agency, in French]

Seychelles: Independent commission launched to investigate prison deaths and use of force at main detention facility

(lm) The government of Seychelles has formally established an independent commission of inquiry to investigate the December 2024 incidents at the Montagne Posée prison—Seychelles' main detention facility on Mahé Island—where two inmates died and concerns were raised over the use of force by security services.

The commission is chaired by Alfred Mavedzenge, a Zimbabwean legal scholar, and includes two additional members drawn from the domestic legal and public administration environment. It has been mandated to establish the facts surrounding the events of December 6–7, 2024, determine responsibility, and assess the response of key state actors, including prison authorities, police, and defense forces.

The inquiry will conduct public hearings and has been granted broad investigative powers, including the ability to summon witnesses and collect evidence. It is expected to deliver its findings within six months and propose recommendations aimed at improving crisis management and oversight in the prison system.

The establishment of the commission follows calls from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights for a prompt, independent, and impartial investigation. [Seychelles News Agency, in French]

Seychelles: New police commissioner formally appointed

(lm) The government of Seychelles has formally confirmed the appointment of Godfra Hermitte as Commissioner of Police, marking a leadership transition within the country's law enforcement system. Hermitte, who had been serving in an acting capacity since February becomes the 15th commissioner to lead the Seychelles Police Force. [Seychelles News Agency, in French]

Sri Lanka: Middle East war continues to drive multi-sector strain despite emergency measures and official assurances

(lm) Sri Lanka is facing deepening economic and operational pressures linked to disruptions affecting the Strait of Hormuz amid the ongoing Middle East war, affecting energy supply, transport, agriculture, healthcare, and business activity, even as authorities maintain that key supplies remain stable in the short term.

A study by Germany's prestigious Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German economic research institute, identifies Sri Lanka as among the countries most vulnerable to a prolonged closure of the Strait of Hormuz. It highlights a "triple vulnerability" driven by dependence on imported energy, reliance on imported fertilizers, and a large agricultural sector with limited domestic alternatives, and projects food prices could rise by more than 15 percent. Separately, experts at the Institute of Policy Studies estimate that a prolonged disruption could increase Sri Lanka's import bill by around USD 1.9 billion, or roughly 23 percent [Daily Mirror 1]

A potential further amplifier would arise if the conflict expands to also disrupt the Bab al-Mandab Strait—a key shipping corridor linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean—following recent attacks by the Houthi movement, which could have direct implications for Sri Lanka's trade routes, shipping costs, and broader maritime environment.

The Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, Sri Lanka's state fuel supplier, has said stocks are sufficient until mid-May and that additional shipments are scheduled, but hoarding, queues, and public concern have persisted.

Medical professionals have warned that rising fuel costs and transport difficulties could disrupt healthcare services, while agriculture faces fertilizer risks ahead of the Yala cultivation season, with about 130,000 metric tons required and only around 60,000 metric tons available at the time of reporting. Authorities have also said rice stocks remain sufficient, though rising input and transport costs are adding to broader cost-of-living pressure. [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3] [Daily Mirror 4] [Daily Mirror 5] [Daily Mirror 6]

For the immediate term, fuel supply remains dependent on external support and logistical adjustments. After suppliers linked to the Middle East invoked force majeure, India provided emergency shipments of fuel through Indian Oil channels. Announced deliveries amounted to around 38,000 metric tons, while subsequent reports indicated that approximately 36,000 metric tons—comprising diesel and petrol—had arrived in Colombo for distribution. Sri Lanka has also requested additional supplies of diesel and furnace oil from India for power generation. [Daily Mirror 7] [Daily Mirror 8]

At the same time, authorities are exploring longer-term measures, including expanded storage capacity at the Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm—a strategic fuel storage facility on the eastern coast jointly managed by Sri Lankan and Indian entities. Of the 99 tanks at the facility, 14 are operated by Indian Oil Corporation, 24 by the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, and the remaining 61 are managed by a joint venture. [Daily Mirror 9]

Beyond India, on March 26, Sri Lanka secured an agreement in principle with Russia for the supply of refined fuel during a visit by a senior Russian energy official, with discussions focused on energy security and longer-term cooperation. While specific volumes and delivery timelines remain under negotiation, the development reflects efforts to diversify fuel supply sources amid global disruptions. [Daily Mirror 10] [Daily Mirror 11]

In this context, domestic political debate has also referenced Sri Lanka's external alignment. Opposition legislator Namal Rajapaksa argued that closer engagement with the BRICS could have enabled earlier access to Russian fuel supplies. Speaking during a function, he said President Anura Kumara Dissanayake should have participated in the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan, to which Sri Lanka had been invited [see Daily Mirror 12]. The issue has been part of a broader and ongoing discussion: in June 2025, former president

Ranil Wickremesinghe publicly advocated for Sri Lanka to join BRICS, describing it as a "Russia-led" grouping.

Separately, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko is scheduled to arrive in Sri Lanka on March 31 to participate in the 11th round of bilateral political consultations, aimed at strengthening diplomatic ties and expanding cooperation across political, economic, and cultural sectors. [Daily Mirror 13]

In parallel, the government plans to invite Russian investors to explore opportunities in the Colombo Port City—a major Chinese-funded development project positioned as an international financial hub but facing ongoing challenges related to regulatory uncertainty, governance concerns, and investor confidence. [Daily Mirror 14]

Sri Lanka: Opposition appeals to international organizations over law and order concerns

(lm) Sri Lanka's opposition has sought the involvement of international legal and human rights organizations, citing concerns over a perceived deterioration in law and order.

The appeal was made jointly by Sajith Premadasa, Leader of the Opposition and head of the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya; Namal Rajapaksa, national organizer of the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna and a member of the Rajapaksa political family; and Ranil Wickremesinghe, former president from 2022 to 2024 and long-time leader of the smaller United National Party.

The letter was addressed to multiple international bodies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as international legal and civil society organizations. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Parliament to hold sixth debate on 2019 Easter Sunday attacks

(lm) Sri Lanka's Parliament is scheduled to debate the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks on April 9, marking the sixth parliamentary debate on the coordinated bombings that killed more than 250 people in churches and hotels. Previous parliamentary debates on the attacks were held in 2019, 2021, 2023, and 2024.

The attacks were carried out by members of the National Thowheeth Jama'ath—an Islamist extremist group in Sri Lanka—with militant leader Zahran Hashim widely identified as the operational mastermind. Investigations have, however, extended beyond the perpetrators to include allegations of intelligence failures and possible state-linked involvement. [Daily Mirror]

The debate follows renewed developments under President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's National People's Power government, which came to power in 2024 promising accountability. In February, former intelligence chief Suresh Sallay was arrested as part of an expanded investigation examining alleged prior contacts between intelligence-linked actors and individuals connected to the attackers, as well as the handling of advance warnings received before the bombings.

Sri Lanka: Court to hear challenge to minister's parliamentary eligibility on May 13

(lm) Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal has fixed May 13 for hearing a writ petition seeking to declare Upali Pannilage—who serves as Minister of Rural Development, Social Security and Community Empowerment—disqualified from serving as a Member of Parliament. According to the petition, the claim is based on the allegation that Pannilage remained an employee of the University of Ruhuna at the time he was declared a Member of Parliament and subsequently appointed as a cabinet minister. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Court allows case against former ministers over alleged misuse of state funds to proceed

(lm) The Colombo High Court has rejected preliminary objections raised by former ministers Mahindananda Aluthgamage and Nalin Fernando in a case concerning alleged misappropriation of public funds, allowing proceedings to continue.

The case relates to allegations that during the 2015 presidential election period, 14,000 carrom boards and 11,000 draught boards were imported through Lanka Sathosa—a state-owned retail network—and distributed to political offices of then presidential

candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa, causing a loss of LKR 39 million (USD 132,600) to the state.

The defense had argued that the accused had already been convicted in a separate case filed by the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption on similar charges, and that initiating new proceedings would be unlawful. The court, however, held that the earlier case was filed under the Bribery Act, while the present case was initiated by the Attorney General under the Code of Criminal Procedure, and that the elements of the offences differed.

Separately, the court ordered the release of Nanda Mallawaarachchi, a retired major general and former Sports Ministry secretary, following a request by the Attorney General's Department. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court finds former health minister and officials liable in drug procurement case

(lm) Sri Lanka's Supreme Court has held Keheliya Rambukwella and several senior health officials liable for violating fundamental rights in connection with a controversial drug procurement process. The Court held that the granting of a waiver of registration for the medicines was "wrongful, arbitrary, and capricious," and ruled that procurement through a direct unsolicited contract was unlawful, declaring the transaction null and void.

As part of the judgment, the Court ordered Rambukwella to pay LKR 75 million (USD 255,000) in compensation, while other respondents were each ordered to pay LKR 50 million (USD 170,000). The Court also directed the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption to initiate action under the Anti-Corruption Act against those found responsible. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Central bank holds policy rate as external risks rise amid Middle East war

(lm) Sri Lanka's Central Bank has kept its Overnight Policy Rate, the benchmark interest rate at which banks borrow or lend short-term funds to each other, unchanged at 7.75 percent, despite rising external

pressures linked to the ongoing Middle East war, citing low inflation and stronger external buffers.

The decision comes as fuel prices have increased by around 35 to 40 percent since late February, feeding into broader price pressures across the economy. However, inflation remains relatively low, with March estimates at around 2 percent, moving toward the Central Bank's 5 percent medium-term target earlier than previously projected.

Authorities point to improved macroeconomic conditions, including foreign exchange reserves of approximately USD 7.3 billion and stable inflows from remittances and trade, as factors supporting the decision to hold rates. The Central Bank indicated that these buffers provide greater capacity to absorb external shocks compared to previous periods.

At the same time, risks remain linked to the external sector, including potential impacts on energy costs, tourism, with arrivals down around 17 percent in early March, trade, and remittance flows. The rupee has depreciated by around 1.6 percent against the U.S. dollar since the escalation of the conflict. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: ADB increases financing allocation and releases emergency funds

(lm) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has increased its 2026 financing allocation for Sri Lanka to USD 480 million from USD 380 million and approved the immediate release of USD 200 million to support current economic and recovery needs. The decision was conveyed during a meeting between the president and an ADB delegation during an official visit to Colombo, with discussions focusing on development financing, economic stability, and recovery efforts.

The funding increase comes in the context of post-disaster recovery following Cyclone Ditwah, a recent severe storm that caused infrastructure damage, and broader external pressures linked to the ongoing Middle East war. Authorities indicated that support would include reconstruction of damaged infrastructure and measures to strengthen resilience, including protection of water systems. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Doctors warn hospital capacity may fall short amid ageing population, rising treatment demand

(lm) Sri Lanka's public health system may face increasing pressure due to insufficient hospital capacity, with medical professionals warning that current infrastructure may not meet future demand driven by demographic changes and rising treatment needs.

Sri Lanka currently has around 85,000 hospital beds, split between central government and provincial facilities. However, the share of the population aged over 60 has risen to about 18 percent in 2024 - from 12 percent in 2012 - and is projected to reach nearly 25 percent by 2040, increasing demand for long-term and specialized care.

On the ground, waiting lists already indicate strain on the system, with approximately 10,000 patients awaiting heart surgery, another 10,000 requiring kidney-related procedures and dialysis, and around 40,000 cancer patients needing treatment. Intensive care capacity remains limited at about 1,000 ICU beds, constraining access to timely care. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Tariff increase, record demand, and supply constraints intensify pressure on power sector

(lm) (lm) Sri Lanka's Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka—the country's electricity and utilities regulator—has announced a revision of electricity tariffs effective April 1, following its review of a proposal by the Ceylon Electricity Board, which had sought an overall increase of 13.56 percent. The approved adjustments introduce moderate increases for households and broader upward revisions for commercial, industrial, and government users. [Daily Mirror 1]

The tariff revision comes amid sustained pressure on the power system, with peak electricity demand reaching a record 3,089 megawatts and remaining close to 3,000 megawatts in recent days. Authorities have urged consumers to reduce electricity usage, citing seasonal constraints as dry weather between February and April reduces hydropower output while increasing demand. [Daily Mirror 2]

At the same time, power generation faces additional constraints. Sri Lanka's electricity mix relies on both renewable sources—accounting for around 59 percent of generation, including hydropower, wind, and solar—and fossil-fuel-based thermal power. However, disruptions to global fuel supply linked to the Middle East war have delayed crude oil shipments, while

substandard coal imports have reduced efficiency at the Lakvijaya coal power plant, the country's largest thermal power facility. [Daily Mirror 3]

Officials indicate that the situation will depend heavily on rainfall levels in key reservoir areas. Insufficient rainfall would require increased reliance on thermal generation, placing further pressure on fuel availability. Authorities warned that without adequate rainfall in the coming weeks, maintaining sufficient fuel supplies for power generation could become a challenge. [Daily Mirror 4]

In parallel, the government has approved the appointment of an expert committee to develop a national framework for the energy economy as part of efforts to support long-term growth. The initiative follows concerns over slowing investment in the energy sector, which authorities attribute in part to weak coordination across key economic sectors. The government has identified the energy economy as a priority area and emphasized the need for a more integrated development approach in the 2026 budget. [Daily Mirror 5]

Sri Lanka: Authorities seek repatriation of 89 red-notice suspects as anti-drug operation expands

(lm) Sri Lanka is moving to repatriate 89 individuals subject to Interpol red notices under an ongoing nationwide operation targeting drug trafficking and organized crime. The operation, "Ratama Ekata", has involved coordinated action by police, military, and customs authorities. Since its launch in October 2025, authorities report the seizure of more than 1,071 kg of heroin, 1,938 kg of crystal methamphetamine, and 4,917 kg of cannabis, alongside the arrest of over 114,000 suspects. Investigations into the assets of 215 individuals have been initiated, and 1,911 drug users have undergone rehabilitation. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Police and special task force to recruit 7,500 personnel

(lm) Sri Lanka has announced recruitment to fill approximately 7,500 vacancies in the Sri Lanka Police and the Special Task Force, including positions across the Northern and Eastern Provinces. [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: Budget consolidation underscores fiscal discipline amid external pressures

(dql) The Legislative Council—Brunei's parliament—has approved a BND 6.3 billion (USD 4.67 billion) budget for the 2026/2027 fiscal year, slightly lower than the previous year, as the government prioritizes fiscal discipline and long-term economic transformation under its Vision 2035 agenda, the country's long-term national development strategy, launched by the government of Brunei to guide economic and social transformation through to the year 2035.

The budget is framed against a weakening fiscal position. Government revenue declined to BND 3.53 billion (USD 2.61 billion) in 2024/2025, while expenditure rose to BND 6.25 billion (USD 4.63 billion), resulting in a widening deficit of BND 2.72 billion (USD 2.01 billion). The new budget signals continued reliance on deficit spending, albeit within a more controlled framework.

Policy priorities center on strengthening fiscal governance, advancing economic diversification through innovation, and supporting sustainable social development. Authorities emphasize more targeted and efficiency-driven public spending, with a focus on high-impact investments while maintaining fiscal discipline.

Expenditure remains heavily weighted toward recurrent spending. Salaries and personnel-related costs account for 36.7 percent of the budget, while operational expenses across ministries represent 38.8

percent. Development spending remains comparatively limited, with BND 480 million (USD 355 million) allocated to projects under the Twelfth National Development Plan.

Officials highlighted a challenging external environment shaped by geopolitical tensions, shifting trade patterns, and subdued global growth, reinforcing the need for prudent fiscal management. [United Daily]

Brunei: Fuel controls tightened to protect subsidized supply amid external pressures

(dql) Brunei will implement stricter fuel control measures from April 1, targeting cross-border consumption and safeguarding its heavily subsidized domestic supply as global energy disruptions intensify.

Under the new rules, foreign-registered vehicles must enter the country with at least three-quarters of a fuel tank or be denied entry, while being restricted to purchasing higher-priced premium fuels at market rates. Brunei-registered vehicles returning from abroad will also face limits on repeated refueling within short timeframes. Authorities have instructed petrol stations to tighten verification procedures, with enforcement measures targeting misuse such as falsified registration plates.

The measures are aimed at preventing the outflow and misuse of subsidized fuel—particularly amid widening price differentials with neighboring countries—and ensuring domestic availability during a period of heightened global uncertainty linked to Middle East tensions. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei: Export value decline underscores commodity price pressures despite volume gains

(dql) Brunei's export earnings weakened in late 2025 as falling global commodity prices offset rising shipment volumes, highlighting the economy's continued exposure to price volatility in key sectors.

In the fourth quarter, export value slipped marginally year-on-year to BND 3.33 billion (USD 2.47 billion), despite a strong increase in export volumes driven primarily by higher shipments of mineral fuels and

gains in chemicals and manufactured goods. The decline was primarily due to a drop in unit prices across several categories, indicating softer market conditions.

The trend was more pronounced on an annual basis. Total exports for 2025 fell by 10.5 percent to BND 13.45 billion (USD 9.98 billion), reflecting both weaker prices—particularly for fuel-related exports—and a slight contraction in volumes. This underscores the dominant role of hydrocarbons in shaping Brunei's external performance and its vulnerability to global price cycles.

Imports showed a mixed picture. While fourth-quarter import value rose to BND 2.25 billion (USD 1.67 billion), supported by demand for fuels, machinery, and chemicals, full-year imports declined by 11.6 percent, mirroring softer volumes and prices.

Overall, trade data point to a widening disconnect between quantity and value, with price effects outweighing volume gains. [Asia News Network]

Cambodia: Press groups condemn upheld sentences for journalists

(dql) Local and regional press groups have called for the release of two Cambodian journalists after an appeal court upheld on March 27 their 14-year prison terms for disclosing information deemed harmful to national defense. [Khmer Times 1]

Porn Sopheap and Pheap Pheara were convicted over reporting on the Cambodia–Thailand border conflict. They denied wrongdoing and sought to have the charges dismissed or reduced, but their appeal was rejected.

Media organizations warned that the use of broadly defined national security laws risks deterring public-interest reporting, noting that several journalists have faced legal action linked to conflict coverage. [Cambodianess]

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Information has asserted that press freedom was fully maintained during recent tensions along the Thailand border, citing the presence of more than 100 journalists from around 50 media outlets reporting on the ground.

Officials said both domestic and international media were able to operate freely, covering developments and impacts of the conflict across multiple phases.

Authorities also emphasized that reporting was conducted in line with legal and professional standards, with safety measures coordinated to protect journalists in high-risk areas.

The ministry maintained that such controls were necessary to safeguard national security while enabling continued media coverage. [Khmer Times 2]

Cambodia: Rising household debt and overdue loans test banking sector resilience

(dql) Cambodia's credit market continues to expand, but rising repayment stress and the growth of informal lending channels are beginning to test the resilience of the financial system, even as authorities and banks maintain that overall stability is intact.

Latest data show total outstanding loans climbing to around USD 62 billion—exceeding the country's GDP—while borrower numbers rose modestly to over five million. Lending remains concentrated in key economic hubs such as Phnom Penh and surrounding provinces, with credit flowing primarily into retail, agriculture, real estate, and household financing.

At the same time, asset quality is deteriorating gradually. Loans overdue by more than 90 days have increased, while gross non-performing loan ratios stand at around 8 percent, though significantly lower when accounting for provisioning. Banks have responded by strengthening reserves and expanding loan restructuring, with nearly 400,000 accounts adjusted by end-2025, reflecting a more cautious, risk-managed approach following years of rapid credit growth.

Localized pressures are also emerging. Economic disruptions in border regions have affected borrowers' repayment capacity, prompting lenders to offer temporary repayment holidays and restructuring measures. While these interventions have helped stabilize some distressed loans, they point to underlying vulnerabilities tied to income shocks and regional instability.

A more structural concern lies in the gradual shift toward informal lending. As formal institutions tighten credit conditions, some borrowers are turning to unregulated channels—including pawn-based and online lenders—where risks are less visible and consumer protections are weaker. This trend

complicates oversight and may obscure the true extent of financial stress. [Cambodianess]

Cambodia: Fuel supply safeguards and demand measures amid global energy strain

(dql) Cambodia is moving to avert a potential fuel shortage as disruptions linked to Middle East tensions tighten global supply, prompting the government to secure continued imports while encouraging domestic conservation.

Energy Minister Keo Rottanak said authorities are maintaining steady inflows of diesel and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) through coordination with domestic and international suppliers, following inspections of storage facilities in Preah Sihanouk province. However, he warned that supply conditions remain fragile, with Asia particularly exposed due to reliance on energy shipments transiting the Strait of Hormuz.

Diesel and LPG are under the greatest pressure, with regional shortages affecting multiple Asian markets. In Cambodia, reduced LPG deliveries—currently four to five shipments per month compared to a typical seven to eight—highlight tightening supply, despite recent arrivals aimed at stabilizing availability. The government is seeking additional sourcing options to mitigate the shortfall.

Alongside supply-side efforts, authorities are promoting demand management. Households are being advised to limit consumption, including shifting from diesel to gasoline where possible and reducing reliance on gas for cooking.

To cushion the domestic impact of rising global prices, the government has introduced tax relief measures, including eliminating certain fuel levies and reducing value-added tax on gasoline and diesel. Retail fuel prices remain elevated, underscoring continued pressure on households and the broader economy. [Cambodianess]

Cambodia: Zero tariffs on EVs and solar gear mark push to cut fuel dependence

(dql) Cambodia has introduced sweeping tariff cuts on electric vehicles (EVs) and solar-powered technologies,

eliminating import duties on a wide range of products from April 1 in a bid to reduce exposure to volatile global oil markets and accelerate energy transition efforts.

Approved in late March, the measures reduce duties—previously ranging from 7 percent to as high as 35 percent—to zero for family EVs, hybrid and plug-in hybrid vehicles, as well as related equipment such as chargers, batteries, solar lamps, and electric household appliances. The policy also includes reductions in export taxes on select materials, signaling a broader adjustment of trade incentives.

However, uptake remains limited. EVs account for only a small fraction of Cambodia's nearly eight million vehicles, despite gradual expansion of charging infrastructure. While the government targets a 40 percent EV share by 2050 and significant growth by 2030, analysts caution that price incentives alone will not suffice. Constraints linked to electricity costs, grid reliability, and regulatory oversight of imported technologies could slow adoption. [Cambodianess] [Kiripost]

Indonesia: Military intelligence chief steps down as activists demand accountability in acid attack case

(ms) Indonesia's military intelligence chief has stepped down following the arrest of four officers linked to an acid attack on a human rights activist, but civil society groups say the move falls short of ensuring accountability.

Lt. Gen. Yudi Abrimantyo relinquished his position as head of the Indonesian Military's Strategic Intelligence Agency (BAIS) after the March 12 attack on Andrie Yunus, an activist with the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (KontraS). The assault occurred in Jakarta when unidentified assailants on a motorcycle threw acid at Yunus as he was riding home, leaving him with burns to around 20 percent of his face and body. He has since undergone surgery, including treatment to his eye and skin graft procedures.

Authorities have detained four military personnel, identified by their initials, who were assigned to BAIS and are suspected of carrying out the attack. Investigators have not disclosed a clear motive, but Yunus is known for his criticism of the military's expanding role in civilian affairs, which has raised concerns among rights groups.

While the military described Yudi's resignation as a form of accountability, officials have not clarified whether he will face further investigation or disciplinary action.

Indonesia has pursued reforms since the end of military-backed rule in 1998, aiming to separate the armed forces from civilian governance. However, recent developments have prompted renewed scrutiny over the military's domestic role.

Civil society organizations argue that the resignation does not address possible responsibility within the chain of command. Some groups have suggested the move could deflect attention from senior figures and limit accountability to lower-ranking officers.

Activists have called for the case to be handled in civilian courts rather than military tribunals, warning that internal proceedings risk undermining transparency and reinforcing perceptions of impunity. They have also urged the government to establish an independent investigation to examine whether broader institutional failures contributed to the attack.

President Prabowo Subianto has described the attack as "terrorism" and pledged a full investigation, stating that those responsible would be prosecuted regardless of rank, however the extent to which this transfers into action is questionable. [CNN Indonesia] [Jakarta Globe] [Kompas] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Anti-graft agency faces scrutiny over house arrest granted to former minister

(ms) Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) is facing mounting criticism after granting temporary house arrest to former religious affairs minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, raising concerns about transparency and equal treatment under the law.

Yaqut, who is a suspect in a corruption case related to the alleged misallocation of the 2024 haj quota, was transferred from detention to house arrest on March 19 following a request from his family ahead of the Idul Fitri holiday. The move was not immediately disclosed to the public and only came to light after reports of his absence from detention surfaced.

The KPK is Indonesia's main anti-corruption body and has historically been regarded as one of the country's most trusted institutions. However, in recent years, it

has faced criticism over perceived weakening of its independence and enforcement capacity.

Legal experts and anti-corruption activists have questioned the decision, arguing that similar requests from other detainees are typically rejected. Some observers say granting house arrest in this case could indicate preferential treatment and undermine the agency's obligation to remain impartial.

Under Indonesian law, authorities have discretion to place suspects under house arrest, provided adequate supervision is ensured. However, critics say the lack of transparency surrounding the decision has raised doubts about whether the rules were applied consistently.

Several analysts have called for the KPK's supervisory council to open an ethics investigation into the agency's leadership. They argue that the decision risks damaging public trust, particularly in high-profile corruption cases involving senior political figures.

The KPK has not publicly detailed the full rationale for the decision. Observers say the outcome of any internal review could have broader implications for the agency's credibility and its role in enforcing anti-corruption laws in the country. [The Jakarta Post 1] [The Jakarta Post 2]

Indonesia: Former presidential rivals' meeting raises speculation of political reconciliation

(ms) A recent meeting between former presidential candidate Anies Baswedan and former Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has prompted speculation about a possible shift in the country's political landscape following divisions during the 2024 election.

Anies attended an Idul Fitri gathering hosted by Yudhoyono at his private residence in Cikeas, West Java, alongside senior political figures from multiple parties. Idul Fitri, a major Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan, is often used in Indonesia as an opportunity for informal political engagement and relationship-building.

Anies, a former governor of Jakarta, ran in the 2024 presidential election but lost after a breakdown in his political coalition. His relationship with the Democratic Party, founded by Yudhoyono, deteriorated during that

period over disagreements about the vice-presidential candidate.

The Democratic Party had expected its chairman, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, to be chosen as Anies' running mate. Instead, Anies selected Muhaimin Iskandar of the National Awakening Party, prompting the Democrats to withdraw support and join a rival coalition that ultimately won the election.

Observers say the recent meeting could indicate an effort to ease tensions and potentially rebuild political ties. Images circulating on social media showed Anies in conversation with Yudhoyono and his son, further fueling speculation.

No official statements have confirmed renewed cooperation. However, analysts note that such encounters can signal early moves ahead of future elections in Indonesia's coalition-driven political system. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Government considers salary cuts for officials amid global energy pressures

(ms) Indonesia is considering cutting the salaries of senior public officials as part of broader efforts to manage potential economic pressures linked to rising global energy costs and geopolitical tensions.

State Secretary Minister Prasetyo Hadi said the government is conducting a detailed study on reducing the pay of cabinet ministers and members of the House of Representatives. The proposal comes as authorities assess the impact of disruptions in global oil supply caused by ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

President Prabowo Subianto first raised the idea during a cabinet meeting in mid-March, emphasizing the need for early preventive measures even though the country is not yet facing a full economic crisis. He cited steps taken by other countries, including Pakistan, which introduced salary cuts and other austerity measures during periods of economic strain.

Government officials said the current fuel supply remains stable, with reserves maintained at around 25 days based on national standards. However, the proposal reflects growing concern about longer-term risks if global tensions persist and energy prices remain elevated.

The potential salary cuts are part of a wider push for budget efficiency. Authorities are also exploring measures to reduce fuel consumption, including encouraging greater use of public transportation and reviewing government spending priorities.

Several political parties within the ruling coalition have expressed support for the proposal, framing it as a signal of shared responsibility during uncertain economic conditions. [Tempo] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Government enforces social media restrictions for users under 16

(jn) Indonesia has introduced nationwide restrictions on social media use for individuals under the age of 16, becoming the first country in Southeast Asia to implement such measures. The policy targets platforms classified as “high-risk,” including TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, X and Roblox, requiring them to restrict access and deactivate underage accounts.

The regulation, affecting an estimated 70 million minors, aims to address concerns over cyberbullying, online fraud, exposure to harmful content and excessive screen time. Authorities warned that companies failing to comply could face sanctions, including potential platform bans.

Implementation is expected to be gradual, with platforms introducing safeguards or account deactivation measures, although uncertainty remains regarding enforcement mechanisms and verification processes. Experts have raised concerns about possible loopholes and the ability of users to bypass restrictions, while public reactions have been mixed. [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters]

Indonesia: Prabowo says Board of Peace role depends on benefit to Palestine

(jn) President Prabowo Subianto said Indonesia joined the Board of Peace because it viewed the initiative as a possible channel to support Palestinian independence and influence postwar arrangements in Gaza from within. In remarks published after a discussion with journalists and experts, he said Jakarta’s participation was tied to its long-standing support for a two-state solution and would continue only if the platform

remained consistent with Palestinian interests and Indonesia's national position.

Prabowo also reiterated that Indonesia has made no financial commitment to the Board of Peace and that its contribution is limited to potential peacekeeping support. He said any deployment of Indonesian troops to Gaza would require approval from Palestinian actors and would be subject to Indonesia's national caveats, including noninvolvement in combat operations or the disarmament of Hamas. The plan to send troops remains on hold amid the current regional security situation. [ANN] [Kompas]

Indonesia: Coal tycoon detained in graft probe linked to illegal mining operations

(ms) Indonesian prosecutors have detained prominent coal businessman Samin Tan as part of a corruption investigation into alleged illegal mining activities, with the government's tightening oversight of the country's extractive industries.

The Attorney General's Office said Tan was named a suspect in connection with operations at PT Asmin Koalindo Tuhup, a coal company linked to mining activities in Central Kalimantan. He has been placed in detention for 20 days while investigators continue their inquiry.

Authorities allege the company continued mining and selling coal between 2017 and 2025 despite its permit being revoked in 2017. Investigators say the operations were conducted using invalid licenses and may have involved coordination with officials responsible for overseeing the mining sector.

The total financial losses to the state are still being calculated. Prosecutors have not disclosed the identities of any officials allegedly involved, and no additional suspects have been formally announced.

Indonesia is one of the world's largest coal producers, and the sector plays a significant role in its economy, supplying both domestic energy needs and global markets. However, weak enforcement and overlapping permits have historically contributed to illegal mining and corruption risks.

Tan, once ranked among Indonesia's wealthiest individuals, built his fortune through coal ventures and previously held leadership roles in major mining firms.

The case comes as President Prabowo Subianto's administration increases scrutiny of natural resource industries, following a series of high-profile corruption investigations in sectors such as mining and commodities. [Bloomberg] [Jakarta Globe] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Adjusting of free meals program as government balances economic stimulus and fiscal pressures

(jn) Indonesia's government continues to position its Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program as a central economic policy, while simultaneously considering and implementing adjustments to its scale amid rising fiscal pressures linked to global energy market volatility.

National Development Planning Minister Rachmat Pambudy described the program as a key driver of economic transformation, particularly for the food and livestock sectors. He said the initiative is expected to stimulate domestic production and investment, with targets including meeting 96 percent of national milk demand and 70 percent of beef demand domestically, alongside projected increases in supply such as 1.5 million liters of milk and 47,000 tonnes of beef by 2029.

At the same time, authorities are moving to reduce program costs. Officials said the distribution of free meals, primarily for schoolchildren, will be cut from six to five days per week starting March 31, a measure expected to save around IDR 40 trillion (approximately USD2.3 billion). The adjustment is part of broader efforts to shield the economy from the impact of rising global oil prices linked to the Middle East conflict.

Exceptions will apply in remote areas and regions with high rates of stunting, where six-day distribution will continue. The program, which has reached tens of millions of beneficiaries, remains a flagship policy despite criticism related to implementation challenges, including reported food safety issues. [South China Morning Post]

The developments reflect the government's dual approach of using large-scale social programs to support economic activity while introducing targeted spending adjustments to maintain fiscal stability under external pressures. [Antara] [Reuters]

Indonesia: Stock market loses value as Middle East tensions trigger outflows

(ms) Indonesia's stock market lost around IDR 31 trillion (USD 1.8 billion) in value over the past week as rising tensions in the Middle East pushed up oil prices and weighed on investor sentiment.

The Indonesia Stock Exchange's total market capitalization fell to IDR 12,547 trillion (USD 740.9 billion), while the benchmark index slipped 0.14 percent to 7,097.

Foreign investors recorded net sales of IDR 30.88 trillion this year, indicating continued capital outflows.

Despite the decline, trading activity increased, with average daily transaction value rising 15.27 percent, reflecting heightened market volatility. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Second Italian-built warship arrives to strengthen naval capabilities

(ms) Indonesia has received its second multipurpose combat ship, KRI Prabu Siliwangi-321, marking a continued effort to modernize its naval fleet and enhance maritime security.

The vessel, built by Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri, arrived at Tanjung Priok Port in Jakarta on March 26, 2026, after departing Italy on February 11. It was later officially commissioned in waters off Surabaya on March 29.

KRI Prabu Siliwangi is the second ship in the Brawijaya-class frigates acquired by Indonesia, following the earlier induction of KRI Brawijaya-320. Both vessels were purchased by the Defense Ministry for €1.18 billion, equivalent to approximately IDR 20.4 trillion (USD 1.27 billion).

The 143-meter warship is equipped with advanced weapons and sensor systems designed for a variety of missions, including maritime patrols, protection of strategic assets, and humanitarian assistance.

During its voyage to Indonesia, the ship made several stops in Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, and Mauritius. It traveled via the Cape of Good Hope instead of the Red Sea due to regional security concerns linked to ongoing conflict.

Senior Indonesian military officials, including the commander of the armed forces and service chiefs,

welcomed the ship's arrival in Jakarta.

Officials said the addition of the second vessel is expected to improve the Navy's operational readiness and strengthen its ability to respond to evolving maritime security challenges. [Jakarta Globe] [The Jakarta Post]

Laos: Leadership confirmed under one-party system as vice president appointment draws attention

(ms) Laos has confirmed its top leadership for another five-year term, with President Thongloun Sisoulith and Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone reappointed by the National Assembly in a process shaped by the country's one-party political system.

The most closely watched development was the appointment of Viengthong Siphandone as vice president, placing two members of the same family in senior state positions. Viengthong, a former president of the People's Supreme Court, joins her brother Sonexay, reinforcing the prominence of the Siphandone family within the political hierarchy.

Thongloun, who also serves as general secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, retains significant control by holding both the top party and state roles. His reappointment, along with other senior positions, was widely expected, as candidates are selected and endorsed within the ruling party before being approved by the legislature.

Laos operates under a single-party system in which the Lao People's Revolutionary Party maintains exclusive political authority. While general elections are held, they do not feature open competition between parties, and the National Assembly's role is largely to formalize leadership decisions already made within party structures.

The newly confirmed leadership will oversee the country's 2026–2030 development agenda, including economic reforms and infrastructure projects. However, the concentration of power among established political elites and families has drawn scrutiny from observers, who say it may limit institutional independence and accountability.

The appointments underscore continuity at a time when Laos faces economic challenges, including rising inflation, public debt, and external vulnerabilities, with

limited signs of political diversification. [Asia News Network] [The Laotian times]

Laos: Inflation rises sharply as fuel prices surge

(ms) Laos is experiencing a sharp rise in inflation, with consumer prices increasing 9.7 percent in March, driven largely by surging fuel costs and broader increases across essential goods and services.

The latest data from the Finance Ministry shows inflation has accelerated for three consecutive months, up from 6.2 percent in February and 5.1 percent in January. The first-quarter average has already exceeded the government's annual target of 5 percent.

Price increases have been widespread, affecting transportation, housing, healthcare, and food services. Transport and communications rose 18.1 percent, while housing and energy costs increased 17.2 percent, reflecting higher fuel and utility prices.

The surge has been linked to disruptions in global oil supply following tensions in the Middle East, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz, a key route for global petroleum shipments. Diesel prices in Laos more than doubled within a month, rising from LAK 19,970 (USD 0.91) per liter in late February to LAK 44,340 (USD 2.02) by late March.

As a landlocked country heavily reliant on imports, Laos is particularly vulnerable to global price shocks. Analysts say continued volatility in energy and commodity markets could sustain inflationary pressures in the coming months, posing challenges for economic stability and household affordability. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government reviews minimum wage increase amid rising living costs

(ms) Laos is reviewing a proposed increase in its national minimum wage as rising inflation and living costs place growing pressure on households.

The National Labor Committee met in Vientiane on March 19 to discuss adjustments, with proposals ranging from LAK 2.7 million (USD 125) to LAK 4.1 million (USD 190) per month. The current minimum wage stands at LAK 2.5 million (USD 116), following a previous increase in 2024.

Inflation reached 6.2 percent in February, while fuel prices have surged sharply, nearly doubling in recent weeks. Energy-related costs have risen more than 24 percent year-on-year, alongside increases in food, housing, and services. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government launches first gold refinery to expand domestic processing capacity

(ms) Laos has officially launched its first internationally certified gold refinery, marking a step toward expanding domestic processing capacity and reducing reliance on foreign facilities.

The Laos-International Precious Metals Refinery (LIPMER), inaugurated in Vientiane, is capable of processing up to 150 tons of gold annually and refining it to purity levels of up to 99.999 percent, meeting global market standards.

Officials said the facility will allow Laos to process gold domestically rather than exporting raw ore, a practice that has limited value capture for the country's mining sector over the past decade.

The refinery is part of broader efforts to strengthen the minerals industry and support economic development under the national five-year plan. Authorities also say it could contribute to building national reserves and improving financial stability. [Vientiane Times]

Laos: Audit finds widespread budget violations as government pushes reforms

(ms) Laos' State Audit Organization (SAO) has identified budget violations totaling LAK 37,600 billion (USD 1.8 billion) over the 2021–2025 period, highlighting persistent weaknesses in public financial management.

The findings, presented to the National Assembly, cover 611 audit cases across state spending, public investment, loans, and state-owned enterprises. Despite the scale of violations, recovery efforts have been uneven, with only LAK 7,000 billion (USD 323 million) recovered over five years.

Recovery rates improved significantly, rising from 5.87 percent in 2021 to nearly 48 percent in 2024, suggesting stronger enforcement in recent years.

However, the 2025 total of LAK 12,033 billion (USD 555 million) marked the highest annual level of violations recorded.

Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone called for reforms, citing structural weaknesses, overlapping oversight roles, and limited enforcement capacity.

The SAO's new five-year plan aims to strengthen accountability through legal reforms, institutional restructuring, and digital modernization. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government seeks approval for railway linking country to Vietnam port

(ms) Laos has submitted a proposal to its National Assembly for a USD 1.3 billion (LAK 28.6 trillion) railway project aimed at connecting the landlocked country to Vietnam's Vung Ang Port, in a move to improve trade access and regional connectivity.

Deputy Prime Minister Saleumxay Kommasith presented the plan on March 24, describing it as a key infrastructure priority for the 2026–2030 development period. The proposed railway will span about 562 kilometers, linking the capital Vientiane to the Vietnamese coast.

The project is expected to be developed in phases, beginning with a 147-kilometer section between Thakhek and the Vietnam border. The railway will use standard gauge tracks and support passenger speeds of up to 150 kilometers per hour.

Total project costs could reach USD 6.6 billion (LAK 145.2 trillion). Officials say the railway would reduce logistics costs, improve export capacity, and strengthen economic ties with Vietnam, while providing Laos with direct access to maritime trade routes. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: UMNO to weigh return of expelled leaders on April 17

(dql) The Supreme Council of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a dominant Malay nationalist party within the ruling Pakatan Harapan-led coalition, will deliberate on April 17 applications by several former senior figures—including Khairy Jamaluddin and Hishammuddin Hussein—to rejoin the

party, as leadership signals a cautious but positive stance toward reintegration.

Khairy, a former health minister and prominent reformist voice who played a key role in Malaysia's pandemic response, and Hishammuddin, a long-serving defense minister and senior party figure with deep establishment ties, were among those expelled and suspended for six years, respectively, in 2023 after internal disputes following the 2022 general election. Their potential return is seen as symbolically significant given their influence across different party factions.

Party vice-president Mohamed Khaled Nordin said the discussion will be guided by the "Rumah Bangsa" (national unity) concept, which promotes a more inclusive and unified party identity aimed at bridging internal divisions and appealing to a broader electorate beyond UMNO's traditional base. He stressed a broader emphasis on reconciliation, though a final decision may not be reached at that meeting.

The party continues to receive applications with no fixed deadline, suggesting a wider review of former members seeking reinstatement.

Khairy has indicated he is willing to return as a rank-and-file member without pursuing leadership positions. [Free Malaysia Today] [The Star]

Analysts assess that the return of high-profile figures could lift morale and reinforce UMNO's image as a stable force, particularly as rival parties face fragmentation. While some internal resistance persists toward re-admitting previously disciplined members, observers do not expect this to significantly disrupt party cohesion.

The developments are seen as early positioning for Malaysia's next electoral cycle. Although the 16th General Election (GE16) is due by February 2028, political groundwork is reportedly underway for a possible earlier poll, potentially aligned with state elections in Melaka and Johor as their legislative terms expire between late 2026 and mid-2027. [Channel News Asia]

Malaysia: Court orders former prime minister to pay USD 1.3 billion in state-linked fund case

(dql) The High Court has ordered former Prime Minister Najib Razak to pay USD 1.3 billion in damages to SRC International, a state-linked investment entity,

marking a major civil ruling tied to the country's broader financial scandal and reinforcing judicial scrutiny of political accountability.

The case stems from the broader 1MDB-linked corruption scandal, involving billions of dollars—widely estimated at around USD 4.5 billion—misappropriated from the state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), which was established when Najib was prime, with funds including those from its former subsidiary SRC International ultimately traced into accounts linked to him.

The court found him liable for USD 1.18 billion in losses and an additional USD 120 million in damages, concluding that he had abused his position, breached fiduciary duties, and acted in bad faith by directing the misappropriation of funds into his personal accounts. The judge determined that he functioned as a "shadow director," exercising decisive control over key financial decisions—including loans, transfers, and investments—while bypassing institutional safeguards.

The ruling highlighted deliberate efforts to circumvent oversight mechanisms and conceal critical information from the Cabinet and other authorities, including the receipt of substantial funds. The court further held that he failed to act on the misuse of a MYR 4 billion (USD 850 million) loan from the Retirement Fund Inc (KWAP), instead obstructing investigations and recovery efforts—conduct interpreted as evidence of bad faith.

While the judgment has been suspended for 14 days pending an appeal application, it represents a significant legal escalation in proceedings linked to Malaysia's largest corruption case. Claims against former company directors were dismissed, with the court ruling that their alleged negligence did not break the chain of causation. [Free Malaysia Today] [The Straits Times]

Malaysia: Probe into alleged "corporate mafia" implicates ruling coalition lawmaker

(bo) Police are investigating allegations of a "corporate mafia" scheme involving a lawmaker from the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR), a core component of the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, with the government emphasizing that the probe is proceeding methodically and without political interference.

Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail said investigations are being conducted step by step under anti-money laundering provisions and in coordination with financial regulators, adding that police are working to identify all individuals involved. He said he had been briefed by the inspector-general of police and expressed confidence in the investigative team.

The case follows claims by businessman Victor Chin that a PKR Member of Parliament solicited MYR 10 million (USD 2.1 million) in cash to resolve unspecified corporate issues. Police have confirmed links to a party lawmaker but have not disclosed identities. [Malay Mail 1] [Malay Mail 2]

Malaysia: Gig Workers Act enters into force with income negotiations and expanded protections

(dql) Malaysia has operationalized its first comprehensive legal framework for gig workers, with authorities prioritizing income levels as an early test case for balancing worker protection and platform-based business models.

A newly formed tripartite Gig Advisory Council—bringing together government, worker representatives, and platform operators—is set to begin negotiations on remuneration structures, reflecting persistent concerns over earnings stability in the sector.

The Gig Workers Act 2025 (Act 872), effective March 31, establishes clearer legal safeguards for an estimated 1.64 million gig workers, following extensive stakeholder consultations. It introduces standardized service agreements, formal dispute resolution channels, and mandatory social security contributions, while maintaining the sector's hallmark flexibility. Coverage extends across both platform-based and non-platform work, including ride-hailing, delivery services, and freelance sectors, though it applies only to Malaysian citizens and permanent residents.

Institutionally, the law creates a dedicated complaints system with a 21-day resolution target and a tribunal mechanism for unresolved disputes. It also limits arbitrary account suspensions by platform providers, requiring compensation during prolonged deactivations. A 1.25 percent social security contribution will be automatically deducted from workers' earnings. [Free Malaysia Today] [The Edge Malaysia]

Malaysia: Racism incidents in political and public discourse reach 11-year high

(dql) Reported racism-related incidents in Malaysia rose to their highest level in over a decade in 2025, underscoring the growing prominence of race-based rhetoric in political and public discourse.

According to civil society organization Pusat Komas, 107 cases were recorded, up from 73 in 2024, with the majority occurring in public discourse and policy debates (45 cases) and in Parliament (43), while fewer incidents were documented in social settings (19), partly due to under-reporting. [Komas]

The report identifies parliamentary discourse as a key driver, particularly debates linked to ethnic preference policies under Article 153 of the constitution, alongside instances of xenophobic rhetoric, religious framing, and exclusionary language. These trends point to the institutional and political embedding of racial narratives rather than primarily grassroots-level tensions.

While recent budget measures show a partial shift toward needs-based welfare through broader assistance programs, the report argues that race-based prioritization continues to shape policy outcomes in practice. It calls for structural reforms, including the establishment of an independent national harmony commission and a full transition toward needs-based policy frameworks. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar orders economic safeguards as Middle East tensions strain energy security

(bo) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim ordered immediate measures to safeguard economic resilience as escalating tensions in the Middle East heighten risks to global energy supply and price stability.

The move followed a National Economic Action Council meeting assessing the economic and security implications of the crisis. Anwar said the government is prioritizing energy security by diversifying fuel sources and exploring alternative shipping routes to reduce reliance on vulnerable chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz.

He affirmed that Malaysia's fuel supply remains adequate until at least May, but authorities are actively

securing additional sources through state-owned oil and gas company Petronas' global network, including from suppliers such as Brazil and Canada, to mitigate potential disruptions.

The government is also coordinating responses across federal and state levels. [Malay Mail] [Scoop]

Separately, officials indicated that the government may roll out a targeted stimulus package if conditions deteriorate, drawing on precedents from pandemic-era support measures, with a focus on cushioning fuel price increases and easing cost-of-living pressures on households and businesses. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Growth outlook upgraded as inflation remains contained amid external risks

(dql) Malaysia's central bank has slightly upgraded its 2026 growth outlook, signaling economic resilience despite mounting external risks from Middle East tensions and global trade frictions.

Bank Negara Malaysia now expects the economy to expand by 4 percent to 5 percent in 2026, up from an earlier forecast of 4 percent to 4.5 percent, supported by robust household consumption, sustained demand for electrical and electronics exports, and continued tourism recovery. The revision contrasts with downward adjustments seen in other economies affected by geopolitical instability.

The upgrade follows stronger-than-expected performance in 2025, when gross domestic product grew by 5.2 percent, driven by record trade and investment levels. Authorities assess that Malaysia's position as a net energy exporter, combined with recent fiscal reforms, provides a buffer against external shocks.

At the same time, the central bank cautions that risks remain, particularly if the Middle East conflict intensifies and disrupts global energy markets. The government has already significantly increased fuel subsidies—now estimated at around MYR 4 billion (USD 994 million) per month—to contain domestic price pressures. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, inflation is expected to rise modestly in 2026, reflecting increasing external cost pressures while remaining broadly contained by domestic policy support and stable demand conditions.

Bank Negara Malaysia projects headline inflation at 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent in 2026, up from 1.4 percent in 2025, but still close to its long-term average. Core inflation is forecast to remain stable at 1.8 percent to 2.3 percent, indicating limited demand-driven price pressures as economic activity stays near potential.

The central bank assesses that cost increases—despite heightened global volatility—will remain manageable, with cautious pricing behavior among firms and mitigating factors such as a relatively strong currency and targeted government measures. However, risks are tilted to the upside, particularly from geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, which could disrupt energy markets and supply chains, as well as from global tariff measures and persistent services inflation in advanced economies.

On monetary policy, authorities signal a continued data-dependent approach, aiming to balance growth support with price stability. Following a pre-emptive rate cut to 2.75 percent in July 2025, financial conditions are expected to remain accommodative, supported by steady credit growth and favorable borrowing conditions. [The Edge Malaysia]

Malaysia: Government explores nuclear energy to strengthen energy security

(bo) The government will begin assessing the feasibility of a nuclear energy program under the 13th Malaysia Plan—the country's five-year national development blueprint for 2026–2030—, positioning it as a long-term response to rising energy insecurity and a means to support the country's clean energy transition. The initiative signals a cautious but notable shift in Malaysia's energy strategy, with nuclear power re-emerging as a strategic option to enhance resilience, diversify energy mixes, and hedge against geopolitical supply risks.

Deputy Prime Minister Fadillah Yusof emphasized in a statement that the move reflects the need to hedge against volatile fossil fuel markets and strengthen energy security, citing growing geopolitical instability and disruptions to global oil and liquefied natural gas flows. He added that nuclear power could provide a stable, low-carbon alternative and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

The study, led by MyPOWER Corporation—the government-designated nuclear program implementing body—will evaluate regulatory and legal frameworks, technical feasibility, industry participation,

stakeholder engagement, and workforce development in line with international guidelines. Authorities stressed that any future development would follow a cautious, evidence-based approach aligned with national priorities and international obligations.

Malaysia's move aligns with a broader regional recalibration, as Southeast Asian states increasingly revisit nuclear energy in response to supply disruptions and sustained volatility in global fuel markets. [Bernama] [Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Military chief steps down amid signs of political repositioning

(anl) Myanmar's military has announced that coup leader Min Aung Hlaing has stepped down as Commander-in-Chief after 15 years, marking a notable leadership adjustment within the ruling junta that points to a possible transition from direct military command to formal political office.

Deputy junta chief General Ye Win Oo has assumed the role following a handover ceremony in Naypyidaw, signaling continuity rather than a shift in the military's power base. Vice Senior General Soe Win remains formally in place as deputy, although reports suggest that Joint Chief of Staff Kyaw Swar Lin may be taking on expanded operational responsibilities.

The move coincides with Min Aung Hlaing's nomination as a vice-presidential candidate following the recent general elections, reinforcing assessments that he is positioning himself for the presidency. Under Myanmar's system, the head of state is selected from among three vice-presidential nominees put forward by the legislature and the military bloc.

Since leading the February 2021 coup, Min Aung Hlaing has consolidated authority at the apex of the military government, which continues to face Western sanctions and international legal pressure, including proceedings at the International Criminal Court over alleged crimes against the Rohingya. [Mizzima 1] [Mizzima 2] [France 24] [Reuters]

Myanmar: NUG expands internal security leadership amid governance push

(anl) Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government (NUG) has expanded the leadership of its home affairs ministry, reflecting growing administrative and security

demands in areas under its control as it seeks to consolidate parallel governance structures in opposition to the military junta.

The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) appointed Htay Ngwe as Deputy Minister of Home Affairs and Immigration on March 30, adding a second deputy to the ministry. He joins Kyaw Ni, who was reappointed following a broader cabinet restructuring in 2025 that reduced the number of ministries from 17 to 12.

The move underscores the NUG's efforts to strengthen internal administration, law enforcement, and coordination in so-called "liberated areas," where resistance forces have established varying degrees of territorial control since the 2021 military coup. [Mizzima]

The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) is a body formed in February 2021 by elected lawmakers from Myanmar's parliament who were prevented from taking office following the military coup. It functions as a parallel legislative authority, claiming democratic legitimacy based on the results of the November 2020 general election, which was won overwhelmingly by the National League for Democracy (NLD).

Myanmar: Fuel prices surge as digital rationing system triggers market disruption

(su) Fuel prices in Myanmar rose sharply following the junta's rollout of a digital rationing system, with premium diesel in Yangon jumping from MMK 4,820 (USD 1.48) to MMK 6,085 (USD 1.87) per liter overnight, underscoring worsening shortages despite tighter controls. The new system, which requires barcode or QR-code scanning to enforce daily quotas by vehicle type, has been layered onto existing odd-even restrictions.

Motorists reported long queues, technical failures in the scanning process, and inconsistent fuel allocation, with some unable to access even limited quotas. The disruptions have fueled public frustration and driven some consumers to higher-priced black-market supplies, highlighting implementation failures in the junta's attempt to stabilize distribution.

The shortages are pushing up transport costs, disrupting agricultural activity during key planting and harvesting periods, and eroding driver incomes, adding

to broader economic strain. While the regime has cited global supply pressures linked to the Middle East crisis, the chaotic rollout has raised questions about state capacity and the credibility of earlier claims that fuel reserves were sufficient to meet domestic demand. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta introduces remote work and fuel controls amid energy strain

(anl) State media reported that Myanmar's military junta has ordered civil servants to work from home once a week and stepped up transport controls as part of efforts to curb fuel consumption amid rising prices.

According to the state-run Global New Light of Myanmar, government departments have been instructed to implement remote working every Wednesday to reduce fuel use. The measure forms part of a broader push to manage energy demand as fuel costs climb and supply pressures persist.

The moves come as Myanmar faces mounting fuel constraints. Junta officials have linked the situation to disruptions in the global energy market. State media cited international factors, including the conflict in the Middle East, as contributing to higher import costs and tighter supply.

Public transport options have also been expanded, including rail and bus services, alongside measures to regulate fuel distribution and prioritise essential sectors, the report said.

Authorities have also encouraged commuters to shift away from private vehicles and rely more heavily on public transport systems to ease demand. Additional controls on fuel usage and distribution have been introduced, including systems to manage access and reduce non-essential consumption.

The measures signal a growing reliance on administrative controls to manage economic pressures, as the junta seeks to stabilise fuel availability and limit the impact on key sectors.

While framed as temporary efficiency measures, they reflect broader constraints in the country's energy supply and distribution system. State media reports did not indicate how long the remote working policy would remain in place, but emphasised the need for continued efforts to reduce fuel consumption and support economic stability. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Resistance forces escalate offensives across key military and trade corridors

(su) Resistance forces across Myanmar have stepped up coordinated attacks on military positions and strategic infrastructure in recent days, targeting trade corridors, air bases, and frontline troop movements.

Ethnic armed group tightens control over northern Shan trade routes

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) has consolidated its position in northern Shan State after seizing Kutkai from the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) in mid-March, tightening its grip on a key segment of the Mandalay–Muse highway linking Myanmar to China's Yunnan Province. The town, previously jointly held following Operation 1027, was taken after escalating rivalry between the two groups over territorial control.

Following the takeover, the Kachin Independence Army and the Shan State Progress Party withdrew checkpoints along the Muse–Lashio route, leaving the MNDAA as the dominant force along a key stretch of the corridor, though the military continues to restrict areas further south. The group also controls additional crossings such as Chinshwehaw, reinforcing its expanding footprint, while two of Muse's main border gates—previously handling around USD 5 billion in annual trade—remain under other ethnic armed groups.

The shift has significant implications for cross-border commerce and regional dynamics involving China, which has sought to stabilize trade routes through engagement with both the junta and armed groups. However, traders continue to face multiple layers of taxation imposed by competing authorities, underscoring fragmented control and persistent uncertainty. The MNDAA's growing territorial and economic leverage is likely to shape future negotiations over border trade governance in northern Shan State. [The Irrawaddy]

Arakan Army advances near naval bases in Sittwe and Kyaukphyu

Fighting between Myanmar's military and the Arakan Army intensified on March 23, 2026, near the Rakhine State capital Sittwe, including reported attacks on the Shwe Min Gan naval base. Local and military sources said the group launched coordinated assaults using

heavy weapons and snipers, with clashes reported close to key installations along the Kaladan River.

The fighting has moved closer to central areas of Sittwe, with clashes reported around Shwe Min Gan Port and nearby waterways. Sources indicated that casualties among military personnel occurred during the clashes, while reinforcements have been transported by naval vessels during curfew hours. The base plays a role in supplying military operations in the township, and fighting in surrounding rural areas has continued since late February.

Clashes have also intensified in Kyaukphyu Township, where the Arakan Army is reported to be advancing toward military positions near naval facilities. The group has expanded its territorial control across parts of Rakhine State and Chin State, while both Sittwe and Kyaukphyu remain strategic locations due to the presence of multiple military units and infrastructure. [Mizzima 1]

Anti-junta group targets Magway air base

An anti-junta group launched a rocket attack on Myanmar's Magway Air Force Base on March 25, targeting facilities linked to the military's air operations, with Brave Warriors for Myanmar (BWM) saying it fired eleven 107mm rockets at the site. The group said the coordinated strike began around 11:20 pm and was aimed at installations including oil tanks, bomb depots, and aircraft storage areas.

BWM said the operation was carried out with allied groups and described the base as a hub for storing and distributing aerial munitions produced by Defence Equipment Factory No. 21. It reported explosions inside the compound and ambulance movements during the night, indicating possible damage, though the claims could not be independently verified.

The group said the attack forms part of broader efforts to counter military operations in central Myanmar's Anyar region, where fighting has intensified, and pledged to continue targeting the military's air capabilities in coordination with allied resistance groups, including No More Dictatorship (NMD-PDF). [Mizzima 2

Landmine ambush kills soldiers as military advances on Chin stronghold

(su) Around 10 Myanmar military soldiers were killed in a landmine ambush near Zaw Kaung village in Chin State on March 19, according to the Chinland Defence Forces (CDF), which said it targeted a column of about

300 troops advancing from Kalay toward Falam using multiple directional mines.

CDF's Civil Defence Militia-Siyin unit said the attack destroyed an entire squad, though the claim could not be independently verified. The military reportedly responded with three retaliatory airstrikes in the area, while continuing its advance, with further clashes reported near Var Lon village on March 24.

The incident comes amid an ongoing military offensive to retake Falam, a key town held by Chin forces since October 2025. Local sources say more than 1,000 troops have been deployed along multiple routes, with sustained fighting causing casualties on both sides and damage to civilian infrastructure. [Mizzima 3]

Myanmar: Military air and drone strikes intensify pressure on resistance areas

(su/anl) Myanmar's military has carried out airstrikes and drone attacks across multiple regions, targeting resistance-held areas and civilian locations.

Airstrikes hit Myawaddy corridor as fighting intensifies near Thai border

Military aircraft carried out multiple airstrikes on March 26 along the Myawaddy corridor near the Thailand–Myanmar border, with local sources reporting that jet fighters circled before dropping bombs on areas around Minletpan, Hpalu, and Yathaegu villages amid ongoing clashes with Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)-aligned forces.

The strikes come as part of sustained military efforts to assert control over the strategic corridor, involving combined use of ground troops, artillery, drones, and air power. Reports indicate that conscripts recruited under the People's Military Service Law have been deployed, but resistance from KNLA-aligned forces has limited advances and contributed to casualties among newly recruited personnel.

Airstrikes and artillery have also hit civilian-populated areas and displacement sites, causing reported casualties and damage to infrastructure. On the same day, heavy bombardment was reported in Thayetchaung Township in Tanintharyi Region, where local sources said more than 30 bombs were dropped.

The attacks have disrupted local activity and prompted some armed group-linked facilities, including those

associated with the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, to relocate amid ongoing hostilities. [Mizzima 1]

Drone strike damages monastery

Separately, a junta military drone strike damaged a monastery in Nobokhe village, Mone Township, in eastern Bago Region's Nyaunglebin District on March 23, according to the Karen National Union (KNU), which said two drones launched by Light Infantry Battalion 439 hit the religious site, destroying parts of its roof and ceiling.

The incident forms part of continued military operations in KNU-designated areas, where the group reports repeated use of drones, artillery, and aircraft against villages and civilian locations, driving displacement and insecurity. Nyaunglebin District remains an active conflict zone with frequent clashes and aerial attacks.

Additional strikes were reported in Kyauk Kyi and Shwegyin townships between March 19 and 22, involving drones and Y-12 aircraft, which the KNU said injured one person and damaged 16 houses. [Mizzima 2]

Airstrike in Mandalay

Four civilians were killed and a child injured in an airstrike on Nyaung Kone village in Mahlaing Township, Mandalay Region in central Myamanr on March 26. The incident was reported as the first aerial strike of this kind in the township.

Additional airstrikes have been reported in Mahlaing Township, with communities advised to construct shelters and avoid gatherings due to continued risk of aerial bombardment. [Mizzima]

Airstrike on Ngapayin Village

On March 30, a military airstrike on Ngapayin village in Sagaing Region's Butalin Township killed approximately 10 civilians and left several others seriously injured. According to local residents, three fighter jets conducted a coordinated attack, dropping four bombs and firing rockets directly into the village.

This incident follows a pattern of intensified aerial operations across Sagaing Region, where junta forces have increasingly relied on air power to compensate for ground-level losses. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Activist group presses for aviation fuel sanctions

(su) Myanmar activist group Blood Money Campaign (BMC) called for coordinated international measures to block aviation fuel supplies to Myanmar's military, warning that continued access has enabled sustained airstrikes that have killed 4,299 civilians since February 2021. The group said the military conducted 6,986 airstrikes over the period, underscoring the central role of airpower in its operations.

BMC cited multiple incidents in March 2026 across Kayin, Rakhine, Kachin, and Sagaing, reporting civilian casualties including children and displaced persons, and noting the use of jet fighters, drones, and transport aircraft.

Despite existing sanctions, the group said the military continues to secure fuel through imports and seizures, and urged ASEAN, the EU, and the UK to impose tighter, coordinated restrictions on fuel supply chains and related services, alongside broader efforts to deny legitimacy to the junta. [Mizzima]

Philippines: President Marcos declares energy emergency in the wake of Iran War

(ms) The Philippines has declared a national energy emergency in response to surging fuel prices and supply risks linked to conflict in the Middle East, becoming one of the first countries in Asia to take such a step as the disruption to Gulf energy flows spreads beyond the region.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said the emergency was needed because of the "imminent danger" posed by the oil supply disruption. The measure gives the government broader powers to coordinate fuel distribution, respond to hoarding and profiteering, and directly procure petroleum products without normal bureaucratic delays. Marcos also said the government was seeking an additional one million barrels of oil and trying to secure a steady stream of deliveries from alternative suppliers. Officials have said the Philippines has about 45 days of fuel reserves.

The move reflects the country's vulnerability to external energy shocks. The Philippines imports most of its oil, with the Middle East accounting for the overwhelming majority of supply. Since the conflict escalated, local diesel and gasoline prices have risen sharply, adding pressure to household budgets,

transport costs, and business operations. The government has responded with targeted subsidies for transport workers, energy conservation measures, and legal authority to reduce or suspend fuel excise taxes.

The emergency declaration has also become a political test for the Marcos administration. While allies in Congress have backed the move, some lawmakers have called for stronger or broader intervention, including tax cuts, price controls, and a review of the country's oil deregulation framework. Critics have argued that earlier government assurances that the economy remained stable understated the scale of the problem. Transport groups and labor organizations have also criticized the official response as too slow or inadequate, especially as fuel costs continue to rise.

Public frustration has translated into strike plans and protest calls by transport and labor groups demanding relief, fare adjustments, and deeper reforms to energy pricing. Business leaders, meanwhile, have generally supported the emergency powers, saying the government needs flexibility to manage the crisis.

At the same time, authorities have moved to secure additional supplies to stabilize the situation. State-linked firms and private companies have procured alternative crude shipments, including 2.48 million barrels of Russian oil to help replenish national stocks amid disrupted Middle East routes. The government has also arranged over one million barrels of diesel imports, with staggered deliveries expected to extend supply by several days and prevent immediate shortages.

Despite these efforts, supply disruptions are already visible on the ground. Hundreds of fuel stations across the country have temporarily closed due to delayed deliveries, highlighting the strain on distribution networks and the uneven availability of fuel.

To cushion the impact on workers, the government has rolled out a nationwide fuel subsidy program worth billions of pesos, targeting transport operators and drivers with direct financial assistance. However, these measures are largely short-term and may not fully offset the sustained rise in energy costs.

The Philippine government has earmarked around PHP 230.2 billion (approximately USD 4.1 billion) to mitigate the economic impact of the Middle East crisis. Most of the funds come from the 2026 national budget, supplemented by earlier appropriations, with a portion already allocated to strengthen fuel supplies. The funding will support cash assistance programs, fuel subsidies for the transport sector, and aid for overseas

Filipino workers. At the same time, authorities are considering reducing non-essential government spending if the crisis persists. Beyond energy concerns, food security has also become a priority, with lawmakers urging the use of existing agricultural funds to prevent supply shortages. Additional proposals include temporarily suspending social security contributions and loan payments to ease the financial burden on workers, farmers, and small businesses, who are particularly affected by rising fuel and commodity prices. [PhilStar 1] [PhilStar 2] [PhilStar 3] [PhilStar 4] [PhilStar 5]

Beyond the immediate issue of fuel supply, the emergency has wider political significance. Rising oil prices affect food, transport, and electricity costs, making them especially sensitive in a country where living costs are already a major concern. With the 2028 presidential election still ahead but political alignments already shifting, the government's handling of the energy shock could shape public confidence in Marcos' leadership and his coalition's stability. [Asia Times] [BBC] [The Diplomat]

Philippines: House impeachment panel seeks Duterte wealth records as legal fight intensifies

(ms) The impeachment proceedings against Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte have entered a more confrontational phase, with the House of Representatives' justice committee moving to collect financial records and other documents while Duterte's lawyers challenge the process as unconstitutional.

At the center of the dispute is Duterte's statement of assets, liabilities, and net worth, or SALN, a document that Philippine public officials are required to file to disclose their wealth and business interests. The Office of the Ombudsman said it would comply with a House subpoena seeking Duterte's SALNs from 2007 onward, covering her years as vice mayor and mayor of Davao City and later as vice president. Ombudsman officials said the request falls within the legal and constitutional process governing impeachment.

The House justice committee has also issued subpoenas to the Bureau of Internal Revenue for tax records and to the Securities and Exchange Commission for corporate documents linked to Duterte, her husband Manases Carpio, and related business interests. Lawmakers say the records are needed to examine allegations of unexplained wealth, one of the grounds raised in the impeachment

complaints. Committee members have pointed to a sharp rise in Duterte's declared net worth between 2007 and 2024 and said the discrepancy needs to be explained.

In addition, the panel has sought records from the National Bureau of Investigation concerning Duterte's alleged public threats against President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos, and former House Speaker Martin Romualdez. It also ordered the appearance of detained former aide Ramil Madriaga, whose sworn affidavit has become part of the evidence cited by complainants. Madriaga has made allegations involving cash movements and confidential funds, while Duterte has denied links to him and questioned his credibility.

Duterte did not attend the House hearing, and her legal team has argued that the committee is overstepping its authority. Her lawyers say the Constitution gives the Senate, not the House, the sole power to conduct an impeachment trial, and they have described the committee's proceedings as an unconstitutional "mini-trial." They also argue that the House is engaging in a "fishing expedition" by trying to gather evidence after complaints have already been filed. Duterte's camp says she is prepared to answer the allegations, but only in a Senate trial, where her side would have the opportunity to cross-examine witnesses.

House leaders have rejected that argument, saying they are still in the stage of determining probable cause, which is part of the House's constitutional role in impeachment. The committee has already set a sequence for upcoming hearings, beginning with allegations related to confidential funds and later moving to education, bribery, and corruption issues. Lawmakers say consolidating evidence from multiple complaints will help speed up proceedings. [PhilStar 1] [Philstar 2] [PhilStar 3] [PhilStar 4]

Philippines: Supreme court dismisses former presidential spokesperson case after inquiry ends

(ms) The Philippine Supreme Court has dismissed a legal challenge by former presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, ruling that the case is no longer relevant because the circumstances behind it have already changed.

Roque had asked the court to stop lawmakers from arresting him and forcing him to attend hearings linked

to an investigation into Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs), an industry that has faced scrutiny over alleged illegal activities. However, the court said the case had become “moot,” meaning a ruling would no longer have any practical effect.

This is because the House of Representatives committee leading the investigation had already lifted its contempt order against Roque, and the previous Congress formally ended its term in June 2025. As a result, there was no longer any active order or inquiry to challenge.

The dispute dates back to 2024, when Roque was summoned by a special congressional panel investigating alleged crimes linked to offshore gambling operations. After failing to submit requested documents and missing hearings, he was cited in contempt and ordered detained. He then went to court, arguing that the demands violated his legal rights.

The Supreme Court also used the case to clarify that Congress can only detain individuals for contempt while an investigation is ongoing or within its legislative term. Once these end, such powers expire.

The ruling effectively closes the case without resolving the broader allegations, as the legal dispute has been overtaken by events. [GMA News] [Inquirer] [PhilStar]

Philippines: Supreme Court to review campaign donation case involving Escudero

(ms) The Philippine Supreme Court has agreed to review a case involving Senate President Francis “Chiz” Escudero over a PHP 30 million (USD 530,000) campaign donation, reopening questions about political financing rules in the country.

The case stems from a 2022 campaign contribution made by contractor Lawrence Lubiano, who is also the majority owner of Centerways Construction and Development. The Commission on Elections (Comelec) had previously cleared Escudero of any wrongdoing, ruling that Lubiano and his company are separate legal entities and therefore did not violate election laws.

However, a petitioner, high school teacher John Barry Tayam, challenged this interpretation, arguing that the distinction between the individual donor and his company should not apply given their close financial ties. The Supreme Court has now admitted the petition

for review, though it has not yet issued a final ruling on the matter.

The decision to take up the case could have broader implications for campaign finance regulation in the Philippines, particularly regarding how donations from individuals linked to government contractors are assessed. Comelec officials have welcomed the review, noting that a Supreme Court ruling could provide clearer legal guidance in similar cases.

For now, Escudero remains cleared of any violations, but the case signals continued scrutiny of political donations and transparency in the country's electoral system. [GMA News] [PhilStar] [Rappler]

Philippines: Peso Hits Record Low of PHP 60.82 Amid Oil Price Surge

(ms) The Philippine peso weakened to a new record low on March 30, falling to PHP 60.82 against the US dollar during intraday trading, as global energy market disruptions continue to weigh on the economy.

The decline extends a broader downward trend throughout March, with the currency losing around 4.4 percent in value. Analysts link the падение largely to rising oil prices triggered by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, which has disrupted supply routes and increased global demand for the US dollar.

As a net oil importer sourcing nearly all of its crude from the region, the Philippines is particularly exposed to these developments. Higher oil prices raise import costs, increasing demand for dollars and putting further pressure on the peso. This dynamic has intensified as uncertainty over supply persists.

Earlier in March, the peso had already breached the PHP 60 level, a psychological threshold in currency markets. Economists note that under the country's floating exchange rate system, such movements are largely driven by global market forces rather than direct government control.

While a weaker peso can benefit exporters by making Philippine goods cheaper abroad, it also increases the cost of imports, especially fuel. This contributes to inflation and rising living costs, complicating economic management at a time when the country is already facing an energy supply crisis.

The currency's slide underscores the broader economic impact of global geopolitical tensions, with

energy security and inflation emerging as key concerns for policymakers in the months ahead. [PhilStar] [Rappler]

Philippines: Gas discovery at Malampaya offers boost amid energy crisis

(ms) The Philippines has announced a significant natural gas discovery at the Malampaya gas field, providing a potential boost to the country's energy security at a time of rising global fuel prices. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. confirmed that the Camago-3 well, located offshore Palawan, can produce up to 60 million standard cubic feet of gas per day and is estimated to contain substantially larger reserves than a previous nearby discovery. Together with earlier findings, the new well is expected to extend the life of the Malampaya field by around six years.

The project is part of an USD 893 million investment aimed at strengthening domestic energy production. Officials highlighted that electricity generated from Malampaya gas is significantly cheaper than imported liquefied natural gas, potentially helping to stabilize power prices.

The discovery comes as the Philippines faces an energy emergency triggered by disruptions in global oil supply linked to the Middle East conflict. As a country heavily dependent on imported fuel, the Philippines has been particularly exposed to rising costs and supply risks (see article above). [Gulf News] [PhilStar]

Singapore: Government expands parental leave to 30 weeks amid declining birth rate

(ms) Singapore will expand parental leave to up to 30 weeks starting April 1, as the government seeks to address a declining birth rate and aging population.

Under the revised policy, eligible parents will receive a combination of 16 weeks of maternity leave, four weeks of paternity leave, and 10 weeks of shared parental leave funded by the government, capped at SGD 2,500 (USD 1,879) per week.

The expansion comes as Singapore's total fertility rate fell to 0.87 in 2025, among the lowest globally. Officials warn that without intervention, the population could begin shrinking in the coming decades.

Authorities say the policy aims to support families and encourage childbirth, but analysts note that high living costs, work pressures, and changing social attitudes continue to influence family planning decisions. [VnExpress]

Singapore: Authorities outline plan to become regional hub for central bank gold

(ms) Singapore has announced plans to expand its role in the global gold market by positioning itself as a hub for storing and trading bullion held by foreign central banks.

The Monetary Authority of Singapore said it is exploring vaulting services for central banks and sovereign entities, alongside developing new gold-related financial products and a clearing system for local trading.

The initiative is part of a broader effort to strengthen Singapore's position as a financial center and compete with established hubs such as Hong Kong and London. Authorities are working with major financial institutions, including global banks and local lenders, to build the necessary infrastructure.

The move comes amid strong global demand for gold, as central banks increase holdings to diversify reserves and hedge against currency volatility. Central banks collectively hold around 18 percent of the world's gold supply.

Officials say attracting these reserves could boost liquidity and deepen Singapore's financial markets. However, analysts note that competition from existing hubs and geopolitical factors may influence how much of the market Singapore can capture. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

Singapore: Entry ban on Malaysian activist highlights strict controls on political expression

(ms) Singapore's decision to deny entry to Malaysian activist and scholar Fadiah Nadwa Fikri has renewed attention on the country's strict approach to political expression and public dissent.

Authorities labeled Fadiah an “undesirable visitor,” alleging she had encouraged youths in Singapore to adopt “radical advocacy” and engage in disruptive or unlawful protest activities. The government maintains that foreign involvement in domestic politics will not be tolerated.

Fadiah, a human rights lawyer and recent PhD graduate from the National University of Singapore, said she was denied entry without clear explanation and described the move as politically motivated. She had planned to attend academic engagements and collect her degree certificate.

Singapore enforces tight restrictions on public assembly, requiring permits for most forms of protest. Officials argue such rules are necessary to preserve social stability in the densely populated city-state. However, critics say the measures limit freedom of expression and discourage activism.

The case follows similar incidents involving activists denied entry, reflecting a broader pattern of preemptive controls over political participation.

Analysts note that while Singapore is often praised for governance and economic performance, its regulatory framework continues to prioritize order and state authority over open political contestation. [BBC] [Channel News Asia]

Singapore: Government order against independent media raises questions over speech controls

(ms) Singapore’s use of its anti-fake news law against an independent media outlet has drawn renewed attention to the balance between government authority and freedom of expression in the city-state.

The Online Citizen (TOC), an independent publication, said it received a Correction Direction under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in March, requiring it to publish government-mandated notices across its platforms.

Under the law, authorities can order corrections to online content deemed false, with compliance required before any legal challenge is resolved. TOC said it complied with the order but disputed the government’s characterization of its reporting, arguing that its article involved analysis based on publicly available information rather than false factual claims.

The case also marks a notable escalation, with the direction reportedly naming an individual journalist and requiring a paid correction notice in a national newspaper costing SGD 10,400 (USD 7,800).

Singapore introduced POFMA in 2019 to counter misinformation, particularly from foreign actors and coordinated online campaigns. However, critics and civil society groups have long argued that the law grants broad discretionary powers to ministers and may be used to regulate political speech.

Analyses of the law's structure note that appeals are limited and occur only after compliance, placing the burden on recipients to challenge decisions already in effect.

The government maintains that POFMA is necessary to safeguard public trust and prevent harmful misinformation, while critics say its application risks narrowing space for independent journalism and public debate. [The Online Citizen 1] [The Online Citizen 2]

Thailand: New cabinet approved following vetting, confirms Bhumjaithai-dominated coalition structure

(lm) Thailand's new cabinet under Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul received royal approval on March 31, following vetting of a 35-member lineup, clearing the way for swearing-in and the formal start of government operations in early April.

The cabinet, published in the Royal Gazette, reflects a Bhumjaithai Party-led coalition that secured parliamentary backing in the prime ministerial vote on March 19. While the coalition draws support from multiple parties, cabinet positions are concentrated in the Bhumjaithai Party led by Anutin and the Pheu Thai Party, the junior partner in the coalition, with Bhumjaithai holding the majority of portfolios. The cabinet includes 35 members, with 13 ministers retained from the previous administration and 14 newly appointed. Prime Minister Anutin also serves as interior minister, consolidating control over domestic administration.

Key portfolios are distributed as follows: Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn (Bhumjaithai) serves as deputy prime minister and transport minister; Ekniti Nitithanprapas (Bhumjaithai) as deputy prime minister and finance minister; Sihasak Phuangketkeow (Bhumjaithai) as deputy prime minister and foreign affairs minister;

Suphajee Suthumpun (Bhumjaithai) as deputy prime minister and commerce minister; and Akanat Promphan (Bhumjaithai) as energy minister. Additional Bhumjaithai-aligned appointments include Lt Gen Adul Boonthumjaroen as defense minister, Rutthaphon Naowarat as justice minister, Suriya Jungrungreangkit as agriculture minister, and Suchart Chomklin as minister of natural resources and environment. From the Pheu Thai Party, Yodchanan Wongsawat – the party's prim ministerial candidate and nephew of de facto party leader Thaksin Shinawatra - is deputy prime minister and minister of higher education, science, research and innovation. [Bangkok Post 1]

Notably, Sudawan Wangsuphakitkosol from the Pheu Thai party, initially nominated for the social development and human security portfolio, failed the qualification screening and was not appointed. She is under investigation by the Department of Special Investigation in connection with alleged unlawful use of public and protected land in Ubon Ratchathani province for reservoirs linked to a family-owned tapioca starch business [see AiR No. 12, March/2026, 4]. The case, dating back to 2019, involves reported use of grazing and forest land; authorities have issued summonses, while she maintains that the transactions were lawful. She was replaced by her husband, Nikorn Soemklang. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Constitutional Court reviews ballot design dispute, requests evidence from election bodies

(lm) Thailand's Constitutional Court has requested additional evidence and written clarifications from relevant authorities in an ongoing case reviewing the legality of ballot design in the recent general election. The court, which had earlier accepted a petition forwarded by the Office of the Ombudsman, is now requiring the Election Commission and other involved bodies to submit detailed statements and supporting evidence within 15 days. The submissions must include both the material relied upon and how it was obtained, forming the basis for further judicial review.

The case centers on whether the inclusion of barcodes and QR codes on ballot papers complies with constitutional requirements governing election procedures, including ballot secrecy. The court indicated that the need for hearings will depend on the sufficiency of the submitted evidence. Information from external sources, including reports of civil society tests on ballot traceability, will only be considered if formally submitted to the court. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Anti-corruption body moves toward court referral in progressive party case

(lm) Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) is expected by the end of the week to decide whether to forward a case against 44 former members of parliament from the dissolved Move Forward Party (MFP) to the Supreme Court.

The commission has already concluded that the individuals committed serious ethical violations linked to a 2021 parliamentary proposal to amend Section 112 of the Criminal Code, Thailand's lèse-majesté law, which criminalizes offenses against the monarchy. The proposed amendments included reducing penalties and limiting who could file complaints.

The case follows the dissolution of the MFP, which was disbanded by the Constitutional Court in 2024 after ruling that its efforts to amend Section 112 constituted an attempt to undermine the constitutional system with the monarchy as head of state. Following the dissolution, many former members regrouped under the People's Party, which now holds seats in parliament.

A decision by the NACC's full board is required before the case can be submitted to the Supreme Court, which has jurisdiction over political officeholders in cases concerning ethics and eligibility. If the case proceeds, the court will determine whether sanctions apply. Possible penalties include lifetime bans from holding political office and temporary loss of voting rights. Any suspension of currently serving members would depend on a court ruling during proceedings.

Of the 44 individuals, 10 are currently serving as members of parliament under the People's Party. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Transport minister denies conflict of interest over fuel price increase

(lm) Transport Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn has rejected allegations that he benefited from a recent fuel price increase, denying any conflict of interest linked to his shareholding in PTG Energy, a firm operating fuel stations and oil distribution businesses across Thailand. The scrutiny follows a rise in domestic fuel prices determined by mechanisms including the

Oil Fuel Fund Committee, a government body that manages fuel price stabilization through subsidies and levies.

According to official asset disclosures, Phiphat holds approximately 2 million shares in PTG Energy, while his brother serves as the company's chief executive, prompting questions about a potential overlap between political authority and private business interests. Phiphat stated that he had no prior knowledge of the committee's decision and emphasized that, as transport minister, he does not have authority over national energy policy or fuel procurement decisions. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Former central bank governor appointed to Privy Council

(lm) Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput has been appointed as a member of the Privy Council following a royal command published in the Royal Gazette, with immediate effect. The appointment expands the advisory body that supports King Maha Vajiralongkorn in matters of state and royal duties.

Sethaput previously served as governor of the Bank of Thailand from 2020 and is widely recognized for his role in economic policy and financial governance. His career includes senior positions at the World Bank and advisory roles during Thailand's response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Jailed ex-prime minister Thakins's parole eligibility still under review

(msz) Former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra remains eligible for parole from May 11, with Thai authorities confirming that the review process is ongoing and his legal rights remain intact. Justice Minister Rutthaphon Naowarat stated that the application is still under consideration at the prison committee level and must proceed through multiple institutional stages, including the Department of Corrections and the ministry, before a final decision is made.

The current situation follows a September 2025 ruling by the Supreme Court of Thailand, which ordered Thaksin back to prison after determining that his earlier hospital detention did not count toward serving

his sentence. He is therefore serving a one-year prison term, which had been reduced from an original eight-year sentence through a royal pardon after his return to Thailand in August 2023 following years in exile.

Authorities indicate that eligibility for parole does not guarantee release, as approval depends on whether all legal criteria are met. Officials also noted that parole reviews are conducted regularly and involve multiple agencies, with Thaksin expected to be among those considered in the upcoming review cycle. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Proposal to abolish MP pensions to be debated amid cost and fairness concerns

(lm) Thailand's parliament is expected this week to consider a proposal to abolish pensions for former members of parliament, as scrutiny increases over the scheme's cost and eligibility criteria.

The motion is scheduled to be raised on April 2 during deliberations on a financial report concerning the fund for former parliamentarians. The proposal has been put forward by a member of the Thai Pakdee Party, a small conservative party, who argued that the system undermines public trust and creates disproportionate benefits for politicians.

The pension scheme, established under a 2013 law, provides lifetime payments and additional welfare benefits to former MPs, including medical coverage, education support for dependents, disability assistance, and death benefits. Eligibility can begin after as little as one year of service, subject to application.

According to recent data, more than 3,000 former MPs are eligible for the scheme, with 1,291 currently receiving payments. Monthly pensions range from THB 21,000, approximately USD 610, for those serving one to four years, up to THB 42,700, approximately USD 1,240, for longer-serving members. Contributions to the fund are set at THB 3,500 per month.

Financial data indicate increasing pressure on the system. Pension expenditures rose from approximately THB 199 million, equivalent to USD 5.8 million, in 2023 to nearly THB 229 million, approximately USD 6.6 million, in 2024, while the fund's assets declined from about THB 30.8 million, around USD 890,000, to THB 7.6 million, approximately USD 220,000, over the same period. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Anti-corruption group criticizes overseas ‘study trips’ by state agencies

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand has called on government agencies to halt overseas “study trips,” citing concerns that many are largely tourism-oriented and provide limited public value. According to data cited by the group, at least 928 such trips were conducted between 2016 and 2025, with total spending exceeding THB 2.5 billion (USD 72.5 million), or roughly THB 250 million (USD 7.25 million) annually.

The group argued that the expenditures represent a significant opportunity cost, noting that comparable funds could support large-scale public programs such as school meal schemes. It also highlighted that some individual trips cost over THB 20.8 million (USD 603,000), with destinations frequently including European countries as well as Japan and South Korea.

The criticism focuses on the content and purpose of the trips, which are often framed as training or capacity-building but reportedly center on general topics such as culture or tourism-related exposure. The group welcomed a recent decision by a judicial training institute to cancel a planned overseas trip for senior judges following public criticism, and urged tighter oversight, clearer objectives, and greater accountability in the use of public funds for international travel. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Report alleges Myanmar junta-linked family acquired Bangkok property via nominee structure

(lm) A human rights group has reported that the family of Myanmar’s military leader Min Aung Hlaing acquired a luxury property in Bangkok through a corporate structure that may circumvent Thai restrictions on foreign land ownership.

According to the group Justice for Myanmar, the property—a house valued at approximately THB 98 million, equivalent to about USD 2.8 million—was purchased in December 2022 in the name of Myo Yadana Htaik, the spouse of Aung Pyae Sone, son of Min Aung Hlaing. Aung Pyae Sone is subject to international sanctions, while Myo Yadana Htaik is not, which the report identifies as a factor enabling the transaction.

Thai law generally prohibits foreign nationals from owning land directly. The report states that the purchase was conducted through Emerald Princess Co Ltd, a company established shortly before the transaction and registered as a wholesale trading business without a declared link to real estate. The company acted as a nominee owner, a structure that may contravene provisions of the Land Code Act and the Foreign Business Act if used to conceal beneficial ownership.

Corporate records reviewed by the group indicate that the company's sole director at the time was a senior executive of the listed Thai developer that sold the property. The transaction was reportedly facilitated by Tun Min Latt, a Myanmar-linked business figure with ties to the military leadership, who has previously faced criminal charges in Thailand and was acquitted in 2024.

The report further states that payments were made through a combination of cash deposits and bank transfers involving multiple Thai financial institutions, and that legal services were used to support the transaction. The developer involved did not publicly respond to requests for comment.

Separately, records indicate that Aung Pyae Sone holds a condominium unit in Bangkok that has been frozen since September 2024 due to unpaid tax obligations. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: SAO collapse remains unresolved one year on amid incomplete accountability

(lm) One year after the collapse of the State Audit Office (SAO) headquarters in Bangkok's Chatuchak district on March 28, 2025, authorities have yet to publish a full investigation report, with accountability gaps continuing to draw criticism. The disaster, which killed 93 people and left several missing, followed earthquake tremors from Myanmar that were amplified by Bangkok's soil conditions.

Investigations to date have identified structural and construction deficiencies, including substandard materials, insufficient reinforcement, and non-compliant design, with the failure originating in lower structural elements. Legal proceedings are ongoing, with criminal cases filed against multiple individuals and companies over alleged construction failures, document falsification, and related violations. Additional investigations involve the Department of

Special Investigation and the National Anti-Corruption Commission, including scrutiny of procurement processes and alleged use of nominee business structures.

Authorities have terminated contracts with construction and supervision firms, are pursuing damages, and have suspended plans to rebuild the project at the original site. Compensation has been paid to victims and their families, while extensive documentation has been submitted to investigators. [AiR No. 12, March/2026, 4]

The Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand has called for full disclosure of findings, warning that limited transparency risks further undermining public confidence. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Civil society challenges police ban on recruits living with HIV

(lm) Civil society groups have petitioned the Royal Thai Police to amend regulations that bar individuals living with HIV from joining the force. The petition—submitted by the People Movement to Eliminate Discrimination (MovED) and backed by dozens of organizations and individuals—targets provisions in the 2023 Police Commission Regulations that classify HIV/AIDS as a disqualifying condition.

The groups argue the rule lacks scientific basis and contributes to stigma, noting that HIV is not transmitted through normal social or professional contact and referencing the "Undetectable = Untransmittable" principle—meaning that individuals whose viral load is suppressed through treatment cannot transmit HIV to others. They further contend the regulation violates constitutional protections on equality and human dignity, and is inconsistent with Thailand's National Strategy to End AIDS (2017–2037), which aims to eliminate discrimination.

The petition also raises concerns over compatibility with international obligations, including the right to work under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and calls for the removal of the provision as part of broader anti-discrimination efforts. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Fuel prices hit record highs as government shifts to targeted relief and

activates contingency planning

(lm) Between March 25 and 31, Thailand transitioned from broad fuel price controls to a targeted crisis-response framework while managing rising prices, supply risks, and wider economic pressure linked to the Middle East war.

On March 25, Finance Minister Ekniti Nitithanprapas confirmed that the government would phase out blanket fuel price caps and allow domestic prices to align more closely with global markets. This followed heavy use of the Oil Fuel Fund, a state-managed mechanism used to stabilize fuel prices by subsidizing or smoothing price adjustments, which had spent about THB 20 billion, equivalent to USD 580 million, in three weeks, with daily subsidy costs reaching approximately THB 2.5 billion, or USD 72.5 million.

Days later, Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul publicly acknowledged mismanagement following a sudden fuel price increase of about THB 6 per liter that triggered nationwide queues. He clarified that subsidies would not be fully removed but reduced and redirected toward targeted support. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

However, retail prices continued to rise, reaching record levels on March 31. These increases occurred despite expanded subsidies, with the Oil Fuel Fund increasing diesel support to THB 18.76 (USD 0.54) per liter. The fund remains under significant pressure, with daily outflows of approximately THB 1.5 billion (USD 43.5 million) and an accumulated deficit of about THB 42 billion (USD 1.22 billion). [Bangkok Post 4]

Beginning March 26, the government introduced targeted mitigation measures. These include a one-month increase in state welfare payments of THB 100 (USD 2.90), bringing monthly support to THB 400 (USD 11.60), fertilizer subsidies for farmers, subsidized B20 diesel for the fishing sector, and THB 10 billion (USD 290 million) in soft loans for small and medium-sized enterprises. Additional measures include targeted fuel subsidies for transport operators from April 1 to April 30 and a planned reduction of THB 1 (USD 0.029) per liter in diesel excise tax, pending approval due to the government's caretaker status. Authorities are also preparing a renewed co-payment scheme, a state cost-sharing mechanism for household consumption, to reduce living costs once the new government takes office. [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6] [Bangkok Post 7] [Bangkok Post 8] [Bangkok Post 9]

The Fiscal Policy Office is also studying the feasibility of a windfall tax on oil refineries—a levy on excess profits

generated during periods of sharp price increases—though the measure remains politically and technically contentious and has not been adopted. [Bangkok Post 10]

Alongside demand-side measures, Prime Minister Anutin has overseen supply stabilization efforts. Authorities confirmed that fuel supplies remain sufficient ahead of the Songkran holiday in mid-April, supported by imports and distribution measures. More than 36 million barrels of oil are scheduled to arrive through May, including over 24 million barrels in April. Reserve requirements have been temporarily reduced to facilitate imports, and distribution has been increased to approximately 7 million liters per day. Inspections conducted on March 27 by the Department of Special Investigation, Thailand's special criminal investigation agency, found no irregularities in fuel storage or distribution. [Bangkok Post 11] [Bangkok Post 12]

On March 31, the government outlined a three-phase contingency plan to manage potential escalation. Thailand is currently assessed at phase 2, level 2.2, where supply remains stable but risks persist. Measures include diversifying import sources, increasing refinery output above normal capacity, expanding biofuel use, and restricting exports. A potential phase 3 scenario would involve stricter controls, including fuel rationing, limits on petrol station operating hours, and prioritization of essential services. [Bangkok Post 13]

Economic effects are emerging across sectors. Businesses report rising logistics and production costs, with some adjusting prices or scaling back operations. Tourism operators report declining bookings ahead of the holiday period, while farmers and fishing operators indicate that existing support measures only partially offset rising fuel and input costs. [Bangkok Post 14] [Bangkok Post 15] [Bangkok Post 16] [Bangkok Post 17]

Thailand: Population declines to 65.8 million amid rapid aging pressures

(lm) Thailand's population declined to 65.8 million in 2025, marking a decrease of about 142,000 compared to 2024. The figures include approximately 64.8 million Thai nationals and just under 1 million non-Thai residents, with Bangkok remaining by far the most populous province.

At the same time, demographic pressures are intensifying as Thailand transitions into a fully aged

society. More than 20 percent of the population—around 15 million people—are now aged 60 and over, with roughly one in three of them still working, often due to limited savings or insufficient family support. Income data indicates that a significant share of older individuals earn very low daily incomes, while about two-thirds have no savings.

Authorities warn that the rising proportion of elderly citizens could affect labor market dynamics and economic growth. In response, the Ministry of Labour has initiated upskilling and reskilling programs, particularly focused on digital skills, and expanded targeted employment opportunities for older workers, with several hundred placements already reported through state-supported job platforms. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Prime minister appoints senior Muslim leader as adviser on southern peace efforts

(lm) Wan Muhamad Noor Matha—a senior Muslim political leader from southern Thailand and former parliament speaker—has been appointed chief adviser to Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, with a mandate to support peace-building efforts and address unrest in Thailand's southern border provinces, a region in the far south with a Muslim-majority population that has experienced a long-running insurgency.

The appointment was announced by Anutin, who also serves as interior minister, following his election as prime minister by a multi-party coalition that includes the Prachachat Party, a party that primarily represents Muslim constituencies in the southern provinces and focuses on regional development and political inclusion. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste: President Ramos-Horta weighs re-election amid political considerations

(ms) Timor-Leste's President José Ramos-Horta has said he will decide whether to seek re-election after consulting Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, highlighting the importance of political coordination ahead of next year's presidential vote.

Ramos-Horta told journalists that he has not yet made a final decision, emphasizing that he values Gusmão's advice and the broader national interest when

considering his political future. He added that if Gusmão supports another candidate, he would be willing to step aside, underlining his focus on political stability and effective cooperation within the country's leadership.

The remarks reflect the close relationship between Timor-Leste's senior political figures and the role of consensus in governance. Since gaining independence in 2002, the country has often relied on coordination among key leaders to maintain stability, particularly during periods of institutional tension or political disagreement.

Ramos-Horta also noted that, as a member of ASEAN, Timor-Leste should avoid internal political disputes that could affect governance. He referred to past political deadlock, including disagreements between the presidency and government over appointments, as situations the country should avoid repeating. [Plataforma Media]

Timor-Leste: Parliament approves export promotion law to diversify economy

(ms) Timor-Leste's National Parliament has unanimously approved a new law aimed at promoting exports and reducing the country's reliance on petroleum revenues. The legislation, passed on March 24 with 56 votes in favor and no opposition, establishes a legal framework to support the export of goods and services.

The law is part of broader efforts to diversify the economy and strengthen the private sector. It introduces measures to improve competitiveness, facilitate trade, and attract investment. Key provisions include simplifying export procedures, reducing administrative requirements, and offering fiscal and regulatory incentives for exporting companies.

The legislation also includes the creation of a "one-stop shop" to assist businesses with export processes, as well as capacity-building programs targeting small and medium-sized enterprises. In addition, it supports the development of export-oriented economic zones. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Timor-Leste: Government introduces temporary fuel price caps to stabilize market

(ms) Timor-Leste's government has approved temporary measures to stabilize fuel prices and ensure supply amid ongoing global energy market volatility.

At a council of ministers meeting on March 25, officials endorsed a decree-law setting maximum retail prices for key fuels. Under the measures, gasoline is capped at USD 1.50 per liter, diesel at USD 1.65 per liter, aviation fuel at USD 2.50 per liter, and liquefied petroleum gas at USD 4.20 per kilogram.

The policy aims to protect household purchasing power, limit inflationary pressures, and support economic activity while maintaining fuel availability across the country. To implement the price caps, fuel importers will be required to submit actual import costs, which will determine state subsidies funded through the national budget.

The government also outlined steps to secure supply, including coordinated import strategies and potential exceptional market regulations if needed. Oversight will be strengthened to prevent misuse of subsidized fuel.

The measures are temporary and will remain in effect until the end of 2026, subject to review depending on global market conditions. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Timor-Leste: Finder Energy secures approval for offshore oil project

(ms) Timor-Leste's energy sector has taken a step forward after Australian firm Finder Energy received regulatory approval for a key offshore oil development project.

The approval, granted by the country's Autoridade Nacional do Petróleo, covers a development area including the Kuda Tasi and Jahal oil fields. The designated area spans around 88 square kilometres and provides the legal basis for advancing the KTJ Project toward a formal field development plan, expected to be submitted in the second quarter of 2026. If approved, the project could secure production rights for up to 25 years.

Finder Energy estimates that the KTJ Project holds around 25 million barrels of contingent oil resources, with additional potential from nearby prospects. The company plans to use a floating production, storage, and offloading vessel as a central hub, allowing future expansion and connection of additional fields. [TipRanks]

Vietnam: Government cuts fuel taxes to zero to curb prices amid global oil surge

(hn) The government has temporarily cut environmental protection and special consumption taxes on gasoline, diesel, and jet fuel to zero from March 25 to April 15 to stabilize domestic energy prices amid global volatility. Fuel products are also exempt from VAT payments, though input VAT remains deductible.

The move comes as global oil prices surge above USD 100 per barrel due to tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, increasing pressure on domestic fuel costs. While the tax cuts are expected to reduce state budget revenues by about VND 7.2 trillion (around USD 283 million) per month, they aim to ease financial burdens on businesses and consumers and ensure energy security.

Following the decision, authorities significantly lowered retail fuel prices without using the price stabilization fund. RON95-III gasoline is capped at about USD 0.96 per liter, while E5RON92 is around USD 0.92 per liter and diesel about USD 1.40 per liter. The government also plans to report to the National Assembly on broader fuel tax adjustments later in March. [Vietnamnews] [Straittimes]

Vietnam: Tax guidelines issued for crypto transactions under pilot framework

(hn) The Ministry of Finance has issued Circular 32, providing guidance on Value Added Tax (VAT), Corporate Income Tax (CIT), and Personal Income Tax (PIT) for crypto asset transactions, transfers, and trading. This guidance follows the Government's Resolution 05/2025/NQ-CP regarding the pilot crypto asset market in Vietnam.

According to the new regulations, crypto asset transfers and trading activities are classified as not subject to VAT. Other related activities not falling under this category will continue to be governed by existing VAT legislation.

Regarding Corporate Income Tax, domestic institutional investors (entities established and operating under Vietnamese laws) that generate income from crypto asset transfers must pay tax at a rate of 20 percent. Taxable income is calculated as the

selling price minus the purchase price and any relevant valid expenses. The same 20 percent tax rate applies to businesses providing crypto asset services.

Notably, foreign institutional investors established under foreign laws who transfer crypto assets through service providers in Vietnam will be subject to a tax rate of 0.1 percent of the revenue from each transaction.

For individual investors, regardless of their residency status, income from crypto asset transfers will be subject to Personal Income Tax at a rate of 0.1 percent of the transfer price per transaction.

The Circular also specifies that the timing for determining revenue and taxable income from crypto asset transfers will follow the same regulations currently applied to securities transfers. Circular 32 took effect on March 27, 2026. It will remain in force throughout the pilot phase of the crypto asset market under Resolution 05/2025/NQ-CP, or until official tax policies for this sector are formally enacted. [Vneconomy] [Thebusinesstimes]

Vietnam: Aviation authority proposes fuel surcharge as airlines face soaring jet fuel costs

(hn) The Civil Aviation Authority has proposed a temporary fuel surcharge on domestic flights for about three months starting in April, as airlines face sharply rising jet fuel prices due to global supply disruptions linked to Middle East tensions. Jet A-1 fuel prices have surged to around USD 190–USD 230 per barrel, significantly increasing operating costs in a sector where fuel accounts for up to 40 percent of expenses.

Airlines are warning of potential fuel shortages after mid-April and are preparing to cut capacity, reduce routes, and rely on more expensive spot fuel purchases. Several carriers, including major and low-cost airlines, plan to scale back domestic operations while prioritizing key routes and maintaining international presence.

Despite cost pressures, ticket prices have largely remained stable due to low demand, though many global airlines have already introduced fuel surcharges. The proposal comes alongside government measures such as temporary fuel tax cuts to ease industry pressure. [Vietnamnews] [Reuters]

Vietnam: Authorities propose stricter enforcement measures including exit bans and utility cuts for violations

(hn) Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security has proposed a range of tougher enforcement measures in draft amendments to the Law on Handling Administrative Violations, aiming to address widespread non-compliance with penalty decisions. The draft, currently under review by the Ministry of Justice, introduces stronger tools to ensure individuals and organizations fulfill their obligations.

Key proposals include temporary exit bans for individuals and heads of organizations who fail to pay fines or comply with administrative sanctions. Additional measures involve cutting electricity and water supplies to non-compliant businesses, sealing their premises, and suspending services such as vehicle registration, inspection, and driver's license issuance.

Authorities argue that some violators exploit loopholes in the current system, including traveling abroad to delay or avoid penalties, while others continue operating despite non-compliance, weakening the deterrent effect of existing regulations. By restricting essential services and mobility, the proposed measures aim to increase pressure on violators to comply.

The draft also introduces changes to asset seizure rules, allowing authorities to confiscate and auction property without requiring it to match the exact value of unpaid fines, thereby streamlining enforcement procedures.

Overall, the proposed amendments are designed to close legal gaps, strengthen enforcement mechanisms, and improve the effectiveness of administrative penalty collection. [Tuoitrenews]

Vietnam: Authorities indict U.S.-based activist in case linked to 2023 Đắk Lắk attacks

(ms) Vietnamese authorities have issued an indictment against Nguyễn Đình Thắng in connection with the June 11, 2023 attacks in Đắk Lắk province, charging him under the country's Criminal Code with terrorism-related offenses. The case originates from a series of coordinated assaults in which armed individuals targeted local government facilities, including police

stations, leading to multiple deaths and injuries. The incident was described by authorities as one of the most serious security events in recent years, prompting a large-scale investigation and arrests of numerous suspects.

According to prosecutors, Thắng, born in 1958 and formerly based in Ho Chi Minh City, is accused of playing a role in directing, inciting, and assisting those involved in the attacks. Authorities allege he contributed to planning and coordination efforts and provided support to individuals on the ground. Following the investigation, he was formally indicted, but is believed to have left Vietnam. A warrant has been issued, and officials have urged him to return, stating that cooperation could be considered in any legal proceedings.

The case is part of a broader effort by Vietnamese authorities to pursue accountability for the 2023 attacks and to dismantle networks they believe were involved. Officials have emphasized that the prosecution is based on evidence collected over the course of the investigation.

However, the indictment has drawn concern from international human rights organizations stating that Thắng, who is a U.S. citizen and leads the nonprofit Boat People SOS, is being targeted through what they describe as politically motivated legal actions. These groups argue that the case reflects wider concerns about Vietnam's handling of dissent and its treatment of activists operating abroad, including allegations of transnational repression. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam giant VinFast posts wider losses despite strong sales growth and expansion plans

(hn) VinFast reported a wider fourth-quarter 2025 net loss of VND 35.2 trillion (USD 1.34 billion), driven partly by increased impairment charges related to its planned North Carolina plant. Despite delays in the U.S. project due to uncertain EV demand, the company remains committed and targets a potential launch around 2028.

At the same time, VinFast saw strong growth in deliveries, especially in its home market, where Vietnam accounted for nearly 80 percent of its 86,557 EVs sold in the quarter. Total deliveries rose sharply year-on-year, while electric two-wheeler sales surged more than 450 percent.

The company aims to deliver at least 300,000 EVs globally this year and expand in Southeast Asia and India, while also developing range-extended EVs for markets with limited charging infrastructure. Although rising costs, including a free-charging program, continue to pressure margins, full-year revenue more than doubled to USD 3.6 billion, and VinFast expects to break even by the end of the year. [Thestar]

Vietnam: Country seeks deeper cooperation with global firms to strengthen supply chains

(hn) Vietnam is seeking to deepen cooperation with global businesses to build more efficient, resilient, and sustainable supply chains as global production networks are reshaped by digital transformation and artificial intelligence. Speaking at a meeting with leaders of more than 40 international corporations from the Asia Business Council in Hanoi on March 26, Party General Secretary Tô Lâm emphasized Vietnam's commitment to maintaining a stable, transparent, and investor-friendly environment to strengthen its role in global value chains.

He highlighted key development priorities, including institutional reform, modern infrastructure, high-quality human resources, innovation and technology, and green growth. Vietnam aims to position itself as a reliable partner in global supply chains while encouraging stronger collaboration between domestic and foreign enterprises.

Business leaders expressed confidence in Vietnam's growth potential and pledged to expand investments in areas such as AI, infrastructure, clean energy, logistics, and financial services, supporting the country's integration into evolving global supply networks. [Tuoitrenews]

Vietnam: Tri An hydropower expansion advances despite material and fuel challenges

(hn) Vietnam is pushing forward with the expansion of the Tri An hydropower plant in Dong Nai Province despite challenges related to material shortages and fuel supply. The 200MW project, expected to begin operations by the end of 2027, has seen significant progress, with most contracts signed and construction underway across key components.

Major works, including excavation at intake structures and plant foundations, are well advanced, supported by existing infrastructure at the current plant. However, land clearance remains incomplete, with around 30% of the site yet to be handed over.

The project is also facing rising fuel costs and difficulties in sourcing construction materials such as crushed stone. In response, contractors are prioritizing critical tasks and seeking government support to secure supplies.

Once completed, the expansion will add two 100MW generating units, with a total investment of nearly VND 4 trillion (about USD 151.9 million), contributing to increased energy capacity in southern Vietnam. [Tuoitrenews] [Vietnam]

Vietnam: Biofuel push gains urgency as global energy risks rise

(hn) The government is accelerating the rollout of E10 biofuel to strengthen energy security amid disruptions from Middle East tensions. Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính has pushed for implementation as early as April, ahead of the original June timeline, aiming to cut conventional petrol use by about 10 percent.

E10, a blend of 10 percent ethanol and 90 percent petrol, is part of a broader strategy to reduce reliance on imported fossil fuels, stabilize energy supply, and lower emissions. This is increasingly urgent as global oil volatility raises domestic fuel costs and inflation risks.

Domestically, fuel distributors are largely prepared, with existing infrastructure and pilot programs already underway in major cities. However, ethanol supply remains a key constraint: local production can currently meet only around 30–40 percent of demand, meaning up to 60 percent will need to be imported in the early phase.

To support the transition, authorities are working to expand domestic ethanol production, secure imports from global suppliers, and improve regulatory frameworks. Biofuels are expected to play a central role in diversifying the energy mix and enhancing long-term energy resilience. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh city fast-tracks transport links to Long Thanh airport

(hn) Ho Chi Minh City is accelerating a series of major transport projects to strengthen connectivity with Long Thành International Airport, aiming to reshape regional mobility and support long-term economic growth. Authorities are pushing faster construction and administrative approvals, focusing on an integrated network of metro lines, ring roads, expressways, and bridges.

Urban rail is a key priority, including Metro Line 2 (Bến Thành–Tham Lương) and the Bến Thành–Thủ Thiêm line, both expected to form part of a larger corridor linking the city centre to the airport. A proposed 42km metro line from Thủ Thiêm to Long Thành is also under consideration, with completion targeted around 2030.

At the same time, major road projects are progressing, such as Ring Road 3, Phú Mỹ Bridge 2, and the Biên Hòa–Vũng Tàu Expressway, all aimed at reducing congestion and improving regional links. Preparations are also underway for Ring Road 4 to expand the outer transport network.

Overall, the plan seeks to build a modern, multimodal transport system connecting the city center, Thủ Thiêm, Tân Sơn Nhất Airport, and Long Thành Airport. Success will depend on timely execution, coordination among agencies, and strict enforcement of project deadlines. [Vietnamnews] [Vneconomy]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Japan and EU step up coordination amid Middle East escalation

(dql/lr) Japan and the European Union (EU) agreed to intensify cooperation to support an early de-escalation of the U.S.–Israel war with Iran, signaling a shared effort to address mounting instability in the Middle East. The understanding was reached during talks between Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers' meeting in France, within the framework of their renewed strategic dialogue. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 1]

Both sides highlighted a deteriorating global security environment marked by heightened geopolitical rivalry and expressed intent to expand Japan–EU ties beyond their strong economic base into political and security domains. [The Mainichi]

In parallel, Motegi coordinated closely with key European partners. Talks with France emphasized pressure on Iran to halt destabilizing activities and deepening cooperation in defense and economic security, building on upcoming high-level exchanges. Discussions with the United Kingdom focused on advancing security ties, including collaboration on next-generation fighter jet development alongside Italy. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3]

At the same time, Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi indicated during a March 30 session of the House of Representatives' Budget Committee that Japan may pursue talks with Iran at a time deemed appropriate in light of national interests. The move comes amid stalled U.S.–Iran diplomacy and renewed U.S. threats against Iranian energy infrastructure, as well as Iran's effective disruption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

Tokyo is seeking to balance its alignment with Washington and its traditionally stable relations with Tehran, while managing rising risks to energy security and supply chains. The disruption of Gulf shipping routes—critical for Japan's oil imports—has heightened concerns over economic fallout and underscored the urgency of diplomatic engagement alongside allied coordination. [Kyodo News]

Japan backs contingency oil release amid Hormuz crisis in talks with International Energy Agency

(dql) Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has endorsed preparations for a further coordinated release of strategic oil reserves by the International

Energy Agency (IEA), underscoring Japan's acute exposure to energy disruptions stemming from the U.S.–Israel conflict with Iran. During March 26 talks in Tokyo with IEA chief Fatih Birol, she urged readiness for additional action should the crisis persist. [Prime Minister's Office, Japan]

The move comes as Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz—through which roughly one-fifth of global oil supply transits—has driven price volatility and heightened supply risks. For Japan, which imports nearly all of its crude and relies on the Middle East for over 90 percent, the situation poses immediate economic and energy security challenges.

IEA members have already initiated a historically large coordinated release exceeding 400 million barrels, including nearly 80 million barrels from Japan. Despite this drawdown, substantial reserves remain, allowing scope for further intervention. [IEA]

Beyond market measures, the crisis is also testing Japan's strategic posture. Tokyo has joined European partners in condemning Iran's actions and is under U.S. pressure to contribute to securing maritime routes. However, constitutional constraints on collective self-defense limit Japan's military options, highlighting the tension between alliance expectations and legal boundaries. [The Japan Times] [Kyodo News]

Japan funds UN police training

(lr) Japan has launched a new training initiative for United Nations police officers, reinforcing its role in strengthening rule-of-law and civilian security functions within global peacekeeping operations.

The program, funded by Tokyo, will train officers from multiple countries in areas including handling unexploded ordnance and managing weapons and ammunition, with sessions scheduled later this year in Tunisia and other locations.

It targets a key component of UN missions, where roughly 5,000 police personnel are deployed to support tasks such as restoring public order, combating crime, and assisting electoral processes—functions that increasingly extend beyond the scope of military peacekeepers. [NHK World]

Multilateral development bank considers USD 30 million loan for Mongolia's power

transmission upgrade

(fs) The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is considering a loan of up to USD 30 million to support the modernization of Mongolia's southern power transmission infrastructure. The project aims to facilitate the integration of existing and new renewable energy capacity.

The investment would finance the construction of a 214 km, 220 kV transmission line between Sainshand and Tsagaan Suvarga, southeast of the country, as well as the expansion of the Tsagaan Suvarga substation. Total project costs are estimated at USD 43.6 million.

In addition, the initiative includes establishing a National Center of Excellence in Renewable Energy to train local specialists. The project will be financed by the Mongolian government through the Ministry of Energy, with operations managed by the National Power Transmission Network. [Renewables Now]

South Korea backs UN human rights resolution on North Korea

(co) The UN Human Rights Council on March 30 adopted a resolution condemning human rights abuses in North Korea by consensus, with South Korea and 49 other countries as co-sponsors.

The resolution strongly criticizes systematic, widespread and long-standing human rights violations and abuses, calls for the release of arbitrarily detained individuals, and urges the resumption of family reunions separated by the Korean War. Pyongyang, under leader Kim Jong-un, rejected the move as a US-led effort to undermine its regime.

Despite earlier hesitation to playing an active role in the passing of the resolution due to Seoul's goal of mending relations with its northern neighbor through engagement and cautious cooperation, South Korea decided to join in order to uphold and act in line with universal human rights principles.

Seoul co-sponsered the resolution from 2008 until 2018 but opted out between 2019 until 2021. The Human Rights Council's North Korean human rights resolution has been adopted for 24 consecutive years since 2003. [Yonhap News Agency] [The Chosun Daily]

South Korea, Ukraine coordinate handling of captured North Korean soldiers

(co) South Korea and Ukraine have agreed to work toward resolving the status of two North Korean soldiers captured in the war in Ukraine in line with international law and humanitarian principles. The issue was discussed by Foreign Minister Cho Hyun and his Ukrainian counterpart Andrii Sybiha on the sidelines of a Group of Seven meeting in France.

Seoul has expressed willingness to accept the soldiers—captured by Ukrainian forces in January—after indications they prefer resettlement in South Korea rather than repatriation, while Kyiv has assured they will not be returned to Russia amid concerns they could be transferred to North Korea against their will.

The case also intersects with broader prisoner exchange dynamics, as Russia has reportedly included the two soldiers in its demands for swaps. [Yonhap News Agency]

Seoul has meanwhile reaffirmed that its support for Ukraine remains limited to humanitarian assistance and excludes lethal weapons, following warnings from Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko that bilateral ties could suffer if such support were expanded.

South Korea also raised concerns over deepening military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, describing it as a violation of UN Security Council resolutions and a threat to regional security. [The Korea Herald]

Taiwan pledges renewed regional trade bloc

(dql) Taiwan's Premier Cho Jung-tai has pledged to reinvigorate efforts to join a major regional trade agreement, following the death of a senior trade negotiator whose earlier resignation letter highlighted shortcomings in the government's accession strategy.

Speaking in the legislature, Cho said the Cabinet would review its task force, set a clearer accession timeline, and step up engagement with member states. The renewed focus comes after a period in which trade policy attention had been concentrated on negotiations with the United States.

The issue gained urgency after the passing of Vice Chief Negotiator Yen Huai-shing, who had previously

raised concerns about insufficient momentum and internal workplace issues, including alleged bullying—now subject to an official investigation.

Lawmakers stressed that 2026 represents a critical window for Taiwan's bid, with Vietnam chairing the bloc's committee, and urged more proactive lobbying of the 12 member countries. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan has missed three key opportunities to join a major regional trade agreement, prompting calls to separate its accession bid from China's to regain momentum.

The reassessment follows renewed scrutiny of trade policy after Yen's death. According to officials, Taiwan's first setback came after 2017, when continued restrictions on food imports from Japan—despite Tokyo's support—complicated its position. A second followed in 2021, when China applied before Taiwan, putting Taipei on the defensive. More recently, Taiwan's bid has been informally linked to China's bid for membership, effectively subjecting Taiwan's bid to broader political considerations surrounding Beijing.

Officials argue that Taiwan meets the bloc's high-standard requirements, citing its transparent regulatory framework and open market system, while concerns persist among some members over China's state-led model and potential supply chain risks.

Decoupling the two applications is therefore seen as critical to advancing Taiwan's bid and securing broader support, as Taipei seeks to strengthen its economic resilience and reduce dependence on China. [Taipei Times]

WTO reform talks stall as India–US divide dominates global trade meeting

(dql) Deep divisions between key players—particularly India and the United States—are hindering progress on reforming the World Trade Organization at its ministerial conference in Yaoundé, diplomats say, despite broad acknowledgment that the multilateral trading system faces a critical juncture.

Negotiations are unfolding against a backdrop of heightened global trade disruption driven by tariff volatility and geopolitical tensions linked to the Middle East conflict. While many members, including the EU and countries in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), are pushing for comprehensive reform, Washington and

New Delhi remain reluctant to endorse a detailed reform roadmap.

India has emerged as a central obstacle in several areas. It opposes extending a moratorium on customs duties for digital trade unless reconsidered, citing concerns over lost tariff revenue. It has also resisted incorporating a proposed Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement into WTO rules and rejected moves toward plurilateral decision-making, insisting on consensus-based outcomes. These positions have drawn frustration from some members, who view them as blocking progress. [Reuters]

At the same time, India is pressing its own priorities, notably a permanent solution allowing public stockholding subsidies for food security. This proposal faces strong resistance from major agricultural exporters such as the US, EU, and Australia, which fear market distortions from large, subsidized stockpile. [The Tribune]

Ukraine accuses Russia of disinformation operation involving Indian authorities

(dql) Ukraine has accused Russia of conducting a disinformation campaign in India, alleging that Moscow circulated fabricated claims about the detention of Ukrainian nationals in an attempt to influence domestic processes.

In a strongly worded statement, the Ukrainian embassy in New Delhi rejected remarks attributed to the Russian foreign ministry, asserting that allegations of Ukrainian “terrorists” were manufactured within Russian intelligence structures and passed to Indian authorities. Kyiv argued that such actions were part of a broader effort to draw India into Russia’s geopolitical agenda and showed disregard for its sovereignty and democratic institutions.

The embassy also linked the episode to wider Russian practices, citing international legal action against Vladimir Putin and sanctions on Russian-linked networks, while highlighting Moscow’s defence ties with Myanmar.

Indian authorities have so far found no evidence supporting the claims, with local police reporting no suspicious activity despite heightened surveillance. Ukraine expressed confidence in India’s legal system and called for an independent, fact-based investigation. [NDTV]

Diverging positions by Maldives on Middle East war emerge across presidential and UN statements

(lm) The Maldives has articulated differing positions on Iran and the broader Middle East war across presidential remarks and statements at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in recent days.

At the domestic level, President Mohamed Muizzu stated on March 23, following Iranian missile and drone attacks on multiple Gulf states in response to earlier strikes by Israel and the United States on Iranian targets, that Iran should direct its attacks toward Israel and the United States rather than Gulf countries, while ruling out the use of Maldivian territory for military purposes.

On March 25, at the Council, the Maldives co-sponsored a resolution describing Iran's attacks on Gulf countries as "unprovoked" and delivered a national statement focusing on these actions. References to earlier military actions by Israel and the United States were reportedly made verbally but were not included in the official written record. [The Sun 1] [Maldives Independent]

In a subsequent intervention on March 27, during an urgent debate at the same session, the Maldives condemned an aerial attack on the Shajareh Tayyebeh Girls' School in Minab, Iran, which resulted in the deaths of 168 children, describing it as a violation of international humanitarian and human rights law. The statement also referred to military actions involving Israel and the United States and called for de-escalation, civilian protection, and accountability. [The Sun 2]

These positions have been articulated alongside continued economic engagement with Gulf partners, including a USD 100 million bond rollover and exposure to a USD 500 million sovereign Islamic bond.

Maldives moves toward ICJ action and formally rejects UK–Mauritius Chagos deal

(lm) The Maldives is preparing to pursue a formal case at the International Court of Justice and has explicitly stated that it does not recognize the United Kingdom's plan to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius, marking an escalation of the dispute.

President Mohamed Muizzu confirmed that the government has lodged formal objections with the United Kingdom, including written communications on November 8, 2024 and January 18, 2026, and direct engagement with UK officials. The Maldives argues that it holds prior sovereign rights over the archipelago based on historical and geographical proximity and has indicated willingness to allow continued operation of the Diego Garcia military base under a separate arrangement with the United States.

The United Kingdom agreed in May 2025 to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius while retaining long-term access to the base. However, the Maldivian government stated it “does not recognise” the transfer and is assessing legal avenues to challenge the arrangement.

The dispute is linked to overlapping maritime claims. In 2023, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea delimited a contested maritime area of 95,563 square kilometers between the Maldives and Mauritius, allocating 47,232 square kilometers to the Maldives and 45,331 square kilometers to Mauritius.

The current situation follows a 2019 advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice, which found the United Kingdom’s separation of the archipelago from Mauritius unlawful and called for the end of British administration, a position later endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly.

The United Kingdom maintains that sovereignty over the archipelago is a matter between London and Mauritius, while the agreement itself has not yet been fully implemented in UK law. [The Independent] [BBC]

Pakistan emerges as central intermediary in Middle East war

(lm) Pakistan has intensified and structured its diplomatic engagement in the Middle East war between March 24 and 31, combining mediation efforts, regional coordination, and economic adjustments to position itself as a central intermediary.

The first phase began around March 24–28 with indirect mediation. Pakistani officials confirmed that Islamabad is serving as a relay channel for communication between the United States and Iran, including the transmission of a U.S.-backed 15-point proposal, which was subsequently rejected by Tehran. Parallel reporting suggested that a direct US–Iran meeting in Pakistan could take place, though this

remains unconfirmed. Some unverified reporting also indicated possible Pakistani efforts to preserve diplomatic channels, including alleged messaging to discourage escalation targeting senior Iranian leadership. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

In parallel, Pakistan expanded its diplomatic outreach. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and senior officials engaged regional partners including Malaysia, Türkiye, Jordan, and Gulf states, alongside consultations with China's ambassador in Islamabad. [Arab News 5] [Arab News 6]

The second phase took shape on March 29, when Pakistan hosted foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Egypt in Islamabad. The consultations focused on de-escalation and restoring maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, a key global energy chokepoint handling roughly 20 percent of oil and gas flows. Discussions included proposals to stabilize shipping and facilitate negotiations, though no formal outcomes were announced. [Daily Mirror] [Arab News 7]

A third phase followed on March 31, when Pakistan's deputy prime minister and foreign minister traveled to Beijing. China and Pakistan agreed to strengthen coordination on the Iran situation and support diplomatic efforts. China remains a key strategic partner, particularly through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, a major infrastructure initiative linking western China to the Arabian Sea. [Arab News 8]

Alongside diplomacy, Pakistan implemented targeted economic and logistical measures. On March 29, Iran agreed to allow 20 additional Pakistani-flagged vessels to transit the Strait of Hormuz at a rate of two ships per day, partially easing severe disruptions to shipping. Earlier, on March 24, Pakistan introduced temporary export concessions valid until June 21, waiving standard banking requirements for selected goods exported to Iran by land and enabling transit onward to Central Asia and Azerbaijan, reducing reliance on Afghan routes affected by recent tensions. [Arab News 9] [Arab News 10]

Pakistan's intermediary role is supported by structural factors. It maintains working relations with the United States, Iran, China, and Gulf states, shares a border with Iran, and has established security and political linkages across these actors. At the same time, Pakistan is directly exposed to the conflict through energy dependence on the Strait of Hormuz and

broader economic pressures linked to disrupted trade and rising fuel costs. [Arab News 11] [Arab News 12]

Sri Lanka denies it extended formal invitation to Iranian naval vessel

(lm) Sri Lanka has reiterated that no formal diplomatic invitation was extended to the Iranian naval vessel *IRIS Dena*, an Iranian warship returning from a multinational naval exercise in India, amid conflicting accounts following its sinking off Sri Lanka's coast earlier in March.

IRIS Dena was struck and sank on March 4 in international waters during the ongoing Middle East war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, resulting in significant casualties, after which Sri Lankan authorities conducted rescue operations for survivors. The incident has formed the backdrop to subsequent diplomatic and political tensions.

The government stated that any invitation for the vessel's visit was limited to a routine, informal exchange between naval commanders and was not formalized at the diplomatic level. This contrasts with statements by Iran's ambassador, who described the visit as based on an official invitation extended to Iranian vessels. [EconomyNext] [Daily Mirror 1]

Opposition figures have cited the Iranian account to challenge the government's position, including unverified claims regarding delays in granting entry to the vessel, and argued that the handling of the issue risks undermining relations with Iran. [Daily Mirror 2]

At the same time, the government acknowledged Iran's willingness to supply fuel but stated that Sri Lanka lacks the necessary shipping capacity to import fuel directly, limiting its ability to utilize such offers. [Daily Mirror 3]

Cambodia, EU deepen partnership on transition from least developed status, demining and agribusiness

(dql) The European Union (EU) has reaffirmed its commitment to expand cooperation with Cambodia, focusing on supporting the country's transition out of Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2029 and its longer-term ambition to reach upper-middle-income status by 2030.

During the 13th Cambodia–EU Joint Committee meeting, EU officials highlighted nearly three decades of development assistance and endorsed continued engagement through initiatives such as the Global Gateway Strategy and Team Europe.

Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn welcomed the steady expansion of ties, underscoring their role in advancing socio-economic development and improving living standards. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia]

Both sides reiterated their intention to strengthen cooperation within the ASEAN–EU framework and to promote peace, stability, and sustainable development. [Cambodianess]

Separately, Cambodia has called on the EU to maintain support for mine clearance, particularly along the Thailand border where contamination has intensified after the 2025 clashes.

The appeal was made during talks in Phnom Penh between senior Cambodian mine action officials and EU representatives, which focused on ongoing cooperation in humanitarian demining. Cambodia highlighted its internationally recognized progress but warned that newly identified unexploded ordnance in border areas—" left behind by the Thai military"—continues to pose serious risks, with hundreds of villages affected.

The EU reaffirmed its commitment to supporting mine clearance efforts and broader cooperation under international frameworks, including initiatives advanced during Cambodia's hosting of the Ottawa Convention review process. [Khmer Times]

In addition, the EU has launched a USD 2.3 million program to strengthen Cambodia's agribusiness sector, focusing on improving export standards and value chains as the country advances toward middle-income status.

The initiative will fund the establishment of a National Agricultural Laboratory to enhance testing capacity in line with international (ISO) standards, aiming to boost compliance with global trade requirements. It also includes co-financing and technical support for 29 SMEs in key sectors such as cashew, pepper, and mango, targeting production expansion and market access. [EEAS] [Kiripost]

Malaysia urges expansion of potential Middle East ceasefire to Lebanon

(dql) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has called for any ceasefire in the ongoing Middle East conflict to be expanded to include Lebanon, highlighting the escalating humanitarian toll from Israeli military operations in the country. The appeal was conveyed during a phone call with Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, amid reports of more than 1,000 deaths and mass displacement affecting around one million people.

Anwar reaffirmed Malaysia's support for Lebanon's sovereignty, condemned attacks on civilian infrastructure, and urged all parties to de-escalate and return to negotiations. He also stressed the urgency of addressing the deteriorating humanitarian situation.

The discussion included Malaysia's appreciation for Lebanon's role in ensuring the safety of Malaysian peacekeepers deployed under the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), underscoring Kuala Lumpur's ongoing engagement in regional security efforts. [Bernama]

The escalation in Lebanon reflects spillover from the wider Israel–US–Iran confrontation, with renewed hostilities between Israel and the Iran-aligned Hezbollah group since early March triggering cross-border fire, airstrikes and ground operations in southern Lebanon.

Malaysia currently has more than 500 personnel deployed in southern Lebanon under the Malaysian Battalion (MALBATT) as part of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), with their operations and any decisions on deployment or withdrawal governed by the UN mandate rather than Kuala Lumpur. [The Star]

At the same time, Malaysia reached an agreement with Indonesia to step up diplomatic efforts to reduce tensions in the Middle East, safeguard civilians, and create conditions for renewed negotiations, following talks between Anwar and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto in Jakarta.

Anwar said the meeting provided a platform to align positions on managing the broader fallout of the conflict, particularly its impact on global energy security and economic stability. Both leaders stressed the need to protect critical supply chains and maritime chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz. [Free Malaysia Today]

Philippines expands defense ties with France while resuming talks with China amid ongoing tensions in disputed waters

(ms) The Philippines has taken a dual-track approach to rising tensions in the South China Sea, strengthening defense partnerships with allies while simultaneously resuming diplomatic talks with China.

Manila and Beijing recently held a new round of consultations, the first since early 2025, aimed at addressing maritime disputes and exploring cooperation in areas such as energy and trade. Philippine officials reiterated their position on upholding international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, while raising concerns over incidents involving Filipino vessels and fishermen.

Despite the talks, tensions remain high. Recent encounters between Chinese and Philippine ships near disputed areas in the Spratly Islands have included accusations of dangerous maneuvers and near-collisions, highlighting the risk of escalation in one of the world's most contested waterways.

The South China Sea is a critical global trade route, with more than USD 3 trillion (EUR 2.8 trillion) in annual commerce passing through it. China claims most of the area, overlapping with the exclusive economic zones of several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines. A 2016 international tribunal ruling rejected China's claims, but Beijing has not recognized the decision.

Alongside diplomatic engagement, the Philippines is strengthening its security posture. On March 26, it signed a visiting forces agreement with France, enabling joint military training and expanding cooperation with European partners.

The agreement adds to Manila's existing network of defense arrangements with countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, reflecting a broader strategy to deter potential aggression while maintaining open channels with China. [Indonesia Business Post] [Inquirer] [Naval News] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Vietnam: Trilateral mechanism boosts border security cooperation among three

neighbors

(hn) Vietnam, China, and Laos have officially launched a trilateral law enforcement cooperation mechanism in Yunnan Province, marking a significant step toward strengthening coordination in shared border areas, particularly the “Green Triangle” region. The initiative brings together border authorities from the three countries to enhance joint management and address growing cross-border challenges.

The mechanism focuses on tackling transnational crimes such as smuggling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal migration, and arms trafficking. It establishes a framework for closer cooperation through information sharing, joint intelligence verification, coordinated investigations, and, when necessary, joint operations targeting criminal networks operating across borders.

In addition to enforcement efforts, the three sides agreed to expand joint patrols, coordinated campaigns, legal awareness programs, and professional training. Regular meetings will be held on a rotating basis, and coordination will be strengthened during major holidays and political events.

Built on principles of sovereignty, mutual benefit, and practical cooperation, the initiative aims to improve border governance, maintain security and order, and facilitate safer cross-border movement. It also reflects a broader commitment to regional stability and the development of peaceful, cooperative, and sustainable border areas. [Vietnamnews] [Vietnamplus]

Arakan Army abducts Bangladeshi fishermen near Myanmar border

(lm) Armed members of the Arakan Army—a Myanmar-based ethnic armed group operating primarily in Rakhine State along the Bangladesh–Myanmar border—abducted 13 Bangladeshi fishermen and seized three fishing trawlers near the mouth of the Naf River, a key boundary waterway between the two countries, on March 28. The fishermen were reportedly returning from sea when they were taken near Shahporir Island, a coastal area bordering Myanmar.

According to local accounts, the Arakan Army has abducted at least 500 Bangladeshi fishermen over the past two years, with approximately 300 later released. Around 200 individuals are still believed to remain in captivity. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh and South Korea agree to expand trade and investment cooperation

(lm) Bangladesh and South Korea held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Yaoundé, Cameroon, to advance trade cooperation and mutual investment. The meeting brought together senior officials led by Bangladesh's Ministry of Commerce and South Korea's trade leadership.

Bangladesh highlighted its trade strategy ahead of its graduation from Least Developed Country status—a category of low-income countries with preferential trade access—including efforts to diversify markets and pursue free trade and economic partnership agreements. It noted ongoing negotiations with multiple partners, including South Korea, and expressed interest in joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a major Asia-Pacific trade framework. Bangladesh also invited increased South Korean investment, citing existing engagement in sectors such as ready-made garments.

South Korea characterized Bangladesh as a promising economy and indicated interest in expanding trade and investment cooperation, noting potential growth in sectors including manufacturing, shipbuilding, and steel. [BSS News]

Bangladesh seeks French support for police reform and security cooperation

(lm) Bangladesh's Ministry of Home Affairs requested French support for police reform and law enforcement capacity building as part of efforts to strengthen internal security institutions and improve law and order.

During a meeting between the Home Minister and the French Ambassador to Dhaka, discussions covered counter-terrorism, mob control, forensic cooperation, legal assistance, and the restructuring of the Rapid Action Battalion, an elite paramilitary unit. The government stated the force will be retained but subject to legal review and possible renaming while continuing operations with existing personnel. It added that reforms are being implemented in phases to enhance operational capacity and build a more "people-friendly" police force, and acknowledged earlier challenges in controlling mob violence, stating

that incidents have declined since the current administration took office.

France signaled interest in expanding cooperation and highlighted ongoing support for the Criminal Investigation Department's forensic capabilities. The government also requested technical assistance for specialized units and approved further engagement between French officials and senior Bangladeshi security leadership. [Dhaka Tribune]

Russian naval ships arrive in Bangladesh for four-day goodwill visit

(lm) Two Russian Navy vessels arrived at Chittagong Port, Bangladesh's main seaport in the southeast, on March 24 for a four-day goodwill visit. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh's army chief visits United States for official engagements and bilateral talks

(lm) Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff has departed for an official visit to the United States. The visit includes participation in engagements recognizing the role of Bangladeshi troops in United Nations peacekeeping operations, in which Bangladesh is one of the largest contributors globally. The program also includes planned bilateral discussions with U.S. counterparts. [Dhaka Tribune]

Japan proposes expanded education and employment pathways to Bangladesh

(lm) A Japanese delegation expressed interest in expanding higher education and employment opportunities for Bangladeshis during a March 29 meeting in Dhaka with State Minister for Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Md Nurul Haque, proposing language and cultural training to facilitate access to study and work in Japan. Both sides agreed to move toward a Memorandum of Understanding to formalize cooperation. [Dhaka Tribune]

Brunei-India diplomatic outreach intensifies across culture, economy, and

public engagement

(dql) India has stepped up diplomatic engagement with Brunei through a series of high-level meetings in March, signaling a broad-based effort to deepen bilateral cooperation across cultural, economic, and institutional domains.

Indian High Commissioner Ramu Abbagani held talks with Brunei's Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, focusing on expanding cultural and people-to-people ties. Parallel engagements included discussions with senior officials from the Ministry of Finance and Economy on trade and economic cooperation, as well as meetings with cultural authorities to advance joint initiatives. [The Hawk]

India to upgrade defense presence in Cambodia

(dql) India is set to establish a defense attaché office at its embassy in Phnom Penh, marking a step-up in security engagement as both sides move to deepen bilateral defense cooperation ahead of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2027.

During a March 21–23 visit, India's Secretary (East) P. Kumaran held talks with Cambodian counterparts, including Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, covering a broad agenda spanning political ties, trade and investment, connectivity, capacity building, and cultural cooperation. Both sides highlighted steady progress in relations since their 70th anniversary in 2022 and signaled intent to expand cooperation across defense and security domains. [Cambodianess]

China sanctions Japanese lawmaker over Taiwan ties

(dql) China has imposed sanctions on Japanese lawmaker Keiji Furuya, a senior figure close to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, in response to his engagement with Taiwan.

The measures bar Furuya from entering mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macao, and prohibit him from conducting activities with Chinese entities. Beijing accuses him of supporting "Taiwan independence" through repeated visits and political exchanges, including recent talks with Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te. [China Daily] [Taiwan Today]

Furuya, who leads a bipartisan Japan–Taiwan parliamentary group, dismissed the sanctions as inconsequential and defended such exchanges as consistent with shared democratic values. The move follows a pattern of Chinese responses targeting foreign politicians seen as challenging its “one-China” principle.

The development comes against a backdrop of increasingly strained Japan–China relations, particularly after Takaichi signaled that a Chinese attack on Taiwan could constitute a direct security threat to Japan, potentially justifying military involvement. [ABC News]

Taiwanese opposition leader to visit China

(ms) Taiwan’s main opposition leader Cheng Li-wun has accepted an invitation from Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit China in April, leading to controversy between the highly divided political camps on the island.

Cheng, chairperson of the Kuomintang (KMT), said she had “gladly accepted” the invitation and would lead a delegation to China from April 7 to 12, with planned stops in Beijing, Shanghai, and Jiangsu province.

She described the visit as an effort to promote dialogue and reduce tensions, stating that cross-strait relations are “not destined for war” and should instead pursue a path of peaceful engagement. The trip would mark the first visit by a sitting KMT leader to China in nearly a decade.

The visit comes at a time when official communication between Beijing and Taiwan’s government remains limited. China considers Taiwan a part of its territory and has refused to engage with President Lai Ching-te’s administration, which it labels as “separatist.” Instead, Beijing has maintained contacts with opposition figures, particularly the KMT, which traditionally supports closer ties with the mainland.

Cheng has said her approach is based on the “1992 consensus,” a framework long supported by the KMT that acknowledges one China while allowing differing interpretations. Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party rejects this position, arguing it undermines the island’s sovereignty.

The announcement has drawn criticism from political opponents, who have called on Cheng to clearly represent Taiwan’s democratic system and interests

during the visit. The trip also comes amid domestic debate over defense spending, with the opposition-controlled legislature delaying approval of a proposed USD 40 billion (TWD equivalent) defense package.

The timing is also significant internationally, as it precedes a planned visit by U.S. President Donald Trump to Beijing, where Taiwan is expected to be a key topic.[Focus Taiwan] [Japan Times] [Reuters 1]

At the same time, military developments continue to shape the broader context. A recent report indicates that China has deployed large numbers of retired J-6 fighter jets converted into attack drones at several air bases near the Taiwan Strait, primarily in Fujian and Guangdong provinces. Analysts estimate that more than 200 such drones could be positioned close to the front line, with potentially hundreds more available. These systems are not among China's most advanced unmanned platforms, but are designed to be used in large-scale, coordinated waves to overwhelm air defense systems. Experts say they could function similarly to cruise missiles in the early stages of a conflict, forcing Taiwan and its allies to expend costly interceptor missiles against relatively inexpensive targets [Reuters 2]

Chinese direct flights to North Korea resume as cross-border links gradually reopen

(ms) China has resumed direct passenger flights between Beijing and Pyongyang, marking a step toward restoring cross-border links with North Korea after years of disruption.

An Air China flight arrived in Pyongyang on March 30, the first regular service on the route since it was suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. The resumption follows the recent reopening of passenger train services between the two countries, signaling a gradual normalization of travel and logistical connections.

The weekly flight, operated by a Boeing 737, departs Beijing in the morning and returns the same day. Chinese diplomatic officials were present at the airport to receive passengers, underscoring the political significance of the move.

However, the route appears limited in scale. Reports indicate low passenger numbers, with only a small group on the initial flight, and bookings for future services remain uncertain. North Korea continues to

maintain strict controls on foreign entry, with tourism largely suspended except for limited and highly regulated visits.

China remains North Korea's largest trading partner and key political ally. The reopening of transport links suggests closer engagement between the two countries, though analysts note that economic activity and people-to-people exchanges are likely to recover gradually given ongoing restrictions. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China launches trade probes into US measures amid renewed tensions

(ms) China has launched two investigations into United States trade practices, signaling renewed strain in relations between the world's two largest economies despite an ongoing effort to stabilize ties.

The probes, announced by China's Ministry of Commerce, will examine US measures that Beijing says disrupt global supply chains and restrict trade in green products. The move comes in response to recent US Section 301 investigations targeting China and other economies over alleged unfair trade practices.

Section 301 investigations are a key tool in US trade policy, often used to justify tariffs or other restrictions. The latest US probes focus on issues such as industrial overcapacity and forced labor concerns, raising the possibility of new trade barriers against Chinese exports.

Chinese officials said preliminary evidence suggests Washington has restricted Chinese goods from entering the US market, limited exports of advanced technology, and constrained investment in key sectors. They also cited measures affecting renewable energy cooperation and the rollout of green technologies.

Beijing warned that such actions could harm Chinese companies and may violate World Trade Organization rules as well as bilateral agreements. The investigations, which could take up to six months, provide a legal basis for potential countermeasures.

The developments come ahead of a possible summit between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping, as both sides seek to manage a fragile trade truce following years of tariff disputes. [Bloomberg] [Global Times] [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

Chinese universities acquire restricted AI chips despite US export controls

(ms) Chinese universities, including institutions linked to the military, have acquired servers containing restricted US artificial intelligence chips, raising concerns about the effectiveness of export controls.

Procurement records show that at least four universities purchased servers produced by US-based Super Micro Computer equipped with Nvidia A100 chips, which have been subject to US export restrictions since 2022. The controls were introduced over concerns that advanced AI technology could enhance China's military capabilities.

Among the institutions involved are universities associated with China's defense sector, including members of the so-called "Seven Sons of National Defense," which are known for research in aerospace, robotics, and military technologies.

The purchases come amid a broader US effort to limit China's access to high-performance semiconductors. However, the findings suggest that restricted technology continues to reach China through indirect channels or intermediaries.

Separately, US prosecutors have charged individuals linked to Super Micro with smuggling billions of dollars' worth of AI-related equipment to China, highlighting enforcement challenges in global supply chains. [CNBC] [Financial Times] [Reuters]

China calls for expanded EU trade ties while urging limits on export controls

(ms) China has signaled willingness to expand imports from the European Union while urging the bloc to ease restrictions on high-tech exports and avoid politicizing trade relations.

Commerce Minister Wang Wentao made the remarks during talks with EU Trade Commissioner Maros Sefcovic on the sidelines of a World Trade Organization meeting.

Wang said China is prepared to "actively" increase imports from Europe and called for dialogue to manage trade frictions. He also raised concerns over recent EU measures, including regulations affecting

subsidies and technology, warning they could disrupt supply chains and bilateral cooperation.

The EU and China are among the world's largest trading partners, but relations have grown more complex amid disputes over market access, industrial policy, and security concerns.

Both sides expressed support for reforming the World Trade Organization and maintaining a rules-based multilateral trading system. Officials agreed to continue discussions through new working groups and dialogue mechanisms. [Global Times] [Reuters]

Netherlands Trade Minister plans China visit despite sanctions and strained ties

(ms) Dutch Trade Minister Sjoerd Sjoerdsma has announced plans to lead a trade mission to China despite being on a Chinese sanctions list, highlighting ongoing efforts to maintain economic ties amid political tensions.

Sjoerdsma made the remarks after meeting Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao on the sidelines of a World Trade Organization meeting in Cameroon, where both sides agreed to continue economic and trade consultations.

The minister has been under Chinese sanctions since 2021, when he supported a parliamentary motion accusing China of human rights violations against Uyghurs in Xinjiang. He has also backed closer relations with Taiwan, an issue that remains highly sensitive for Beijing.

Despite these tensions, Sjoerdsma said he intends to visit China with a Dutch business delegation, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a "balanced relationship" that allows cooperation while acknowledging political differences.

Relations between China and the Netherlands have been strained in recent years, particularly over technology and security issues. In 2025, Dutch authorities moved to take control of semiconductor company Nexperia from its Chinese parent, adding to diplomatic friction.[Reuters] [Dutch News]

China criticizes Czech resolution on Dalai Lama succession as interference

(ms) China has criticized the Czech Republic after its Senate passed a resolution supporting Tibetan authority over the selection of the next Dalai Lama, calling the move interference in its internal affairs.

In a statement, China's foreign ministry said the resolution "grossly interfered" in domestic matters and reiterated that Tibet-related issues fall under China's sovereignty. Beijing maintains that it has the final authority over the succession of the Dalai Lama, a position it has reinforced through recent legislation on ethnic unity.

The Czech Senate resolution, adopted on March 25, urged support for the Tibetan people's right to determine the next spiritual leader independently. The move follows growing engagement between Czech officials and the Dalai Lama, including recent meetings and parliamentary visits.

The question of succession remains highly contentious. China insists that the selection of the next Dalai Lama must follow state-approved procedures, while the current Dalai Lama has said his successor will be chosen outside Chinese control. The issue is shaped by past disputes, including the case of the Panchen Lama, a senior Tibetan religious figure. In 1995, a boy recognized by the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama disappeared shortly after his selection and has not been seen publicly since, with Chinese authorities later appointing an alternative figure.

Tibet remains a sensitive political issue for China. Beijing views the Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since 1959, as a separatist figure, while his supporters describe him as a religious leader advocating cultural and spiritual autonomy. [Reuters] [Tibet.net]

Chinese ships turn back from Strait of Hormuz despite assurances

(ms) Two Chinese-operated container ships have turned back while attempting to exit the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz, underscoring ongoing risks to global shipping despite assurances from Iran that some vessels could pass safely.

The ships, operated by China's COSCO, attempted to transit the strait but reversed course shortly after, according to ship-tracking data. The incident marks one of the first attempts by a major shipping company to navigate the route since the outbreak of conflict involving Iran in late February.

Iran has said it would allow passage for vessels from certain countries, including China, but has also warned that access would be conditional and subject to its control. The Strait of Hormuz is a critical global chokepoint, through which a large share of the world's oil and gas shipments passes. Disruptions have already reduced traffic and affected exports from major energy producers in the Gulf.

The situation has raised concerns in China, which is heavily dependent on imported energy. Continued instability could affect supply chains, increase transport costs, and contribute to global price volatility. [Reuters] [Times of India]

China expands ties across Africa with new deals in Congo, Kenya, and South Africa

(ms) China is expanding its economic and political engagement across Africa through new agreements in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, and South Africa, underscoring its growing influence on the continent amid increasing competition from Western countries.

In Congo, Beijing has deepened its involvement in the mining sector through a new cooperation agreement focused on critical minerals such as cobalt, copper, and lithium. The country is the world's largest producer of cobalt, a key component in electric vehicle batteries. Chinese companies already dominate much of the sector, and the latest deal includes provisions on investment protection, geological data sharing, and efforts to expand local processing of raw materials.

In East Africa, Kenya has finalized negotiations on a bilateral trade agreement with China that would grant up to 98 percent of its exports duty-free access to the Chinese market. Kenyan officials say the deal is aimed at boosting exports and addressing trade imbalances, as imports from China significantly exceed Kenyan exports.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, senior officials from both countries have reaffirmed commitments to deepen cooperation across sectors including infrastructure, energy, and development. The talks highlighted shared interests as members of BRICS and emphasized expanding economic collaboration and investment.

Together, these developments reflect China's broader strategy in Africa, combining access to natural resources, trade expansion, and political partnerships. The continent is central to Beijing's long-term

economic planning, particularly in securing supply chains for energy transition materials and opening markets for Chinese goods.

At the same time, China's role is increasingly contested. The United States and its allies are pursuing competing agreements, especially in the minerals sector, as part of efforts to diversify supply chains and reduce reliance on Chinese dominance. [China Global Television Network] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

India eases curbs on Chinese imports for critical sectors

(dql) India has authorized key state-owned firms, including Bharat Heavy Electricals and Steel Authority of India, to procure selected critical equipment from China, marking a further relaxation of restrictions imposed after the 2020 border clashes—a deadly confrontation between Indian and Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh that left at least 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers dead.

The move allows limited imports of essential components for power, steel and coal-related projects, amid mounting shortages and delays.

Under the revised rules, designated companies can source specific categories of equipment from Chinese suppliers, while Chinese bidders in state tenders are no longer required to undergo prior political and security clearance. The decision follows earlier steps to ease investment restrictions and facilitate business engagement, including simplified visa procedures and resumed connectivity. [Reuters]

The policy shift reflects a pragmatic adjustment driven by supply chain pressures and capital constraints, as well as broader global trade realignments linked to U.S. tariff policies. Despite ongoing strategic rivalry, New Delhi appears to be recalibrating its economic approach to China to sustain industrial capacity and infrastructure development.

India–US trade talks resume amid tariff uncertainty and global tensions

(dql) Indian Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal held talks with US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer on the sidelines of the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference, describing the exchange as constructive

and focused on advancing bilateral trade agreement (BTA) negotiations. [The Tribune]

The discussions come at a delicate juncture. Progress on the India–US trade pact has been slowed by shifts in US tariff policy following a Supreme Court ruling that invalidated key elements of former President Donald Trump's earlier tariff regime. In response, Washington introduced a temporary 10 percent tariff across countries, complicating the previously agreed framework under which US duties on Indian goods were expected to fall to around 18 percent (see AiR No. 6, February/2026, 2).

Indian officials have since indicated that any final agreement must reflect the new tariff baseline and India's revised competitive position in the US market.

As a result, the anticipated signing of the first phase of the deal—originally targeted for March—has been delayed, and planned negotiations on the legal text were postponed. The uncertainty is further compounded by broader geopolitical instability, including the ongoing US–Israel conflict with Iran, which has disrupted global trade conditions and energy markets. [Hindustan Times]

India holds high-level defense talks with United States to advance strategic partnership

(dql) India and the U.S. have held senior-level discussions in New Delhi aimed at strengthening defense cooperation and coordinating on regional security issues.

On March 26, Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri met US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge A. Colby on the sidelines of the India–US Defence Policy Group meeting, focusing on expanding defense collaboration and reinforcing the broader strategic partnership. Colby also held talks with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, with both sides exchanging views on the evolving geopolitical landscape. [News On AiR]

The US side underscored India's growing strategic importance, highlighting its role in maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and its capacity to shape regional dynamics. At the same time, Washington acknowledged India's emphasis on strategic autonomy and a "national interest-first" approach to foreign policy. [India New England News]

On March 25, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh and Colby co-chaired the 18th Defence Policy Group, focused on expanding co-production, technology sharing, and strengthening the bilateral defense partnership.

A key area of focus is a prospective agreement to jointly manufacture F414 jet engines in India for future indigenous fighter aircraft, alongside broader cooperation in areas such as maritime security, long-range precision systems, and anti-submarine warfare. At the same time, delays in the delivery of F404 engines by General Electric remain a point of concern for India's defense production timelines. [The Tribune]

India coordinates with France on Hormuz security amid Middle East tensions

(dql) On March 26, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met France's Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot in Abbaye des-Vaux-de-Cernay, France, on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers' meeting, focusing on the security implications of the West Asia conflict, particularly risks to energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France]

Both sides agreed to maintain close coordination to ensure the safety of the critical maritime route, as ongoing tensions involving Iran, the US, and Israel continue to disrupt global energy supply chains. The talks also underscored India's growing engagement with G7 processes, with leaders welcoming Prime Minister Narendra Modi's participation in the upcoming Evian Summit. [Business Standard]

Jaishankar additionally held bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Canada, Japan and South Korea, signaling continued efforts to strengthen partnerships with key Indo-Pacific and G7-linked partners. [The Sentinel]

Iran allows Indian vessels to transit Strait of Hormuz amid conflict

(dql) Iran has permitted Indian-flagged vessels to transit the Strait of Hormuz despite ongoing regional tensions, signaling a selective approach to maritime access based on geopolitical alignment.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi confirmed in a March 26 interview that India is among a group of "friendly nations" granted passage, alongside China, Iraq,

Pakistan and Russia. The move formalizes earlier arrangements under which Indian vessels continued operations through the critical energy corridor.

Several Indian tankers have already crossed the strait following diplomatic engagement, with additional LPG shipments expected in the coming days. [The Tribune]

At least 18 Indian-flagged vessels carrying crude oil, LPG, and other energy cargo remain stranded or delayed near the Strait of Hormuz as conflict-linked disruptions continue to constrain maritime traffic through the key Gulf chokepoint. The ships are part of a larger cluster of Indian-linked vessels affected by heightened security risks, insurance constraints, and operational uncertainty following the escalation of hostilities involving Iran. [NDTV]

Indonesia President visits Japan yielding major deals as strategic ties deepen

(ms) Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's first official visit to Japan has produced USD 22.6 billion in business agreements, underscoring the growing economic importance of the relationship even as broader questions remain about how Jakarta is balancing multiple partnerships across Asia.

During the visit, Prabowo attended the Indonesia-Japan Business Forum in Tokyo, where 10 memoranda of understanding and commercial agreements were announced between Indonesian and Japanese companies. The deals span sectors including clean energy, oil and gas, geothermal power, semiconductors, aviation leasing, financial inclusion, and trade promotion. Indonesian officials said the package reflected strong confidence in Indonesia's economic prospects and its push to modernize key industries.

Among the most significant agreements were partnerships linked to the Abadi gas field in the Masela Block, upstream oil and gas opportunities in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, and studies related to the Rajabasa geothermal project. Other agreements focused on semiconductor development and cooperation between Japanese trade institutions and Indonesia's sovereign wealth structures.

Talks between Prabowo and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi have resulted in an agreement to advance concrete cooperation in economic and security fields, underscoring the growing strategic alignment between the two countries.

The discussions covered a broad agenda, including Japan's support for developing Indonesia's artificial intelligence workforce and enhancing the operational capabilities of its navy and coast guard. Both sides also agreed to strengthen cooperation on resilient energy supply chains—particularly liquefied natural gas—as well as disaster prevention and improvements to Indonesia's investment environment.

Prabowo also met Japanese Emperor Naruhito at the Imperial Palace. According to Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono, the discussion did not touch on politics and instead focused on long-standing bilateral ties and people-to-people relations. The emperor reportedly emphasized the importance of maintaining close communication and ensuring proper treatment of Indonesians living in Japan.

The symbolism of the visit matters because Japan has long been one of Indonesia's most important economic partners, with a record of infrastructure financing and industrial investment. At the same time, the trip comes as Indonesia pursues a broad foreign and economic strategy that includes multiple defense, energy, and industrial relationships with countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, and others. One recent analysis argued that while Jakarta is expanding partnerships quickly, the longer-term political and institutional framework needed to sustain them remains less clear. [Antara 1] [Antara 2] [The Interpreter] [Kyodo News]

Russian warships arrive in Jakarta for joint naval drills

(ms) A group of Russian naval vessels has arrived in Jakarta for joint drills with the Indonesian Navy, in a move that highlights Indonesia's continued effort to maintain defense ties with a wide range of partners.

The Russian detachment, which docked at Tanjung Priok port, includes the corvette *Gromky*, the submarine *Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky*, and the tugboat *Andrey Stepanov*. According to Russian and Indonesian officials, the visit will include joint maneuvering and communications exercises, as well as meetings between commanders, ship tours, and ceremonial events.

Indonesia described the visit as part of long-standing naval cooperation between the two countries. Officials from both sides said the activities are intended to support friendship and contribute to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

The presence of a submarine gives the visit added significance. Port calls by foreign warships are common, but the arrival of an undersea combat vessel tends to draw greater attention because submarines are closely associated with deterrence, intelligence gathering, and maritime power projection.

For Indonesia, the drills fit into its broader foreign policy approach of engaging multiple major powers without entering formal alliances. Jakarta has expanded defense contacts not only with Russia, but also with countries such as the United States, China, Japan, Australia, and South Korea, reflecting its traditional non-aligned posture.

For Russia, the visit offers a visible sign that its navy can still maintain a presence in Southeast Asia despite wider geopolitical pressures elsewhere.

The exercises are not expected to alter the regional military balance. Still, they carry diplomatic weight by showing that naval visits and limited drills remain an important tool of strategic signaling in the Indo-Pacific. [Anadolu Ajansi] [Antara] [Defence Security Asia]

Japan–China tensions deepen amid policy recalibration and embassy incident

(dql/lr) A recalibration of Tokyo's official language on China and a sensitive embassy breach in the capital highlight the continued strain in bilateral ties, following Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks in November linking a Taiwan contingency to Japan's security response.

Japan downgrades China wording in Diplomatic Bluebook

Japan's upcoming Diplomatic Bluebook—the foreign ministry's annual foreign policy report—is set to recalibrate its language on China, describing it as "an important neighboring country" rather than "one of the most important bilateral relations," signaling a more cautious and calibrated approach as ties remain strained.

While moderating its headline phrasing, the report maintains a critical stance, highlighting China's coercive behavior toward Japan. At the same time, it removes explicit reference to "Japan's security" in relation to stability in the Taiwan Strait—an apparent effort to avoid further provoking Beijing.

Beyond China, the report adopts a firmer tone on other regional issues, condemning Iran's attacks on

civilian infrastructure and its effective blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, while emphasizing the importance of nuclear non-proliferation. It also points to improving Japan–South Korea relations, alongside continued concerns over North Korea's abductions, cyber activities, and weapons programs. [The Mainichi]

Self-Defense Forces officer's breach of Chinese embassy compound

Seaparately, a security incident in Tokyo added a further point of friction between the two countries. Japan has conveyed its regret to China after a member of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force was arrested for unlawfully entering the Embassy of China in Tokyo, prompting a formal protest from Beijing and adding to already strained bilateral relations.

Japanese authorities identified the suspect as 23-year-old second lieutenant Kodai Murata, recently commissioned and stationed at Camp Ebino in Miyazaki Prefecture. According to investigators, he traveled to Tokyo, purchased a knife, and climbed over the embassy wall—injuring himself—before being detained by embassy staff. He reportedly told investigators he sought to convey objections to China's criticism of Japan and had contemplated a drastic act if rebuffed. The Defense Ministry said there had been no prior indications of problematic behavior and confirmed cooperation with the police investigation.

China accused Japan of failing to properly control its military personnel and to ensure the security of Chinese diplomatic missions, while Chief Cabinet Secretary Minoru Kihara described the incident as "extremely regrettable" and said security around the embassy had since been reinforced. [Kyodo News] [Japan Today] [Gazette & Herald]

China sanctions Japanese lawmaker over Taiwan ties

In the latest development, China imposed on March 30 sanctions on Japanese lawmaker Keiji Furuya, a senior figure close to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, in response to his engagement with Taiwan.

The measures bar Furuya from entering mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macao, and prohibit him from conducting activities with Chinese entities. Beijing accuses him of supporting "Taiwan independence" through repeated visits and political exchanges, including recent talks with Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te. [China Daily] [Taiwan Today] [ABC News]

Japan deploys troops to Philippines for first time since World War II

(dql) Signaling a deepening role in regional security cooperation, Japan will deploy combat-capable Self-Defense Forces (SDF) personnel to the Philippines for the first time since World War II, marking its transition from observer to full participant in the annual Balikatan military exercises, expected to be one of the largest ever despite ongoing U.S. military operation in the Middle East.

Several hundred Japanese troops—potentially up to around 1,000—are expected to join U.S., Philippine, and allied forces in the drills starting April 20, which will span multidomain operations including cyber, coastal defense, space, and evacuation scenarios. The deployment represents a significant expansion from Japan's previous limited participation and reflects growing operational integration among partners.

The move is enabled by last year's Japan–Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which provides the legal framework for troop deployments and logistical support, facilitating closer defense cooperation and interoperability. It also aligns with broader efforts by Manila to diversify its security partnerships beyond the United States, reflected in last week's signing of a visiting forces agreement with France, marking its first such defense pact with a European partner. [Anadolu Ajansı]

The exercise is widely seen as part of collective efforts to strengthen deterrence amid rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in relation to China's activities in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. The integration of Japanese forces into joint operations alongside U.S. and Philippine units underscores an emerging networked security architecture centered on the "first island chain." [The Japan Times] [Naval News]

Iran clears release of Malaysian oil tankers after regional diplomatic outreach

(bo) Amid heightened tensions and shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran has agreed to release Malaysian oil tankers and their crews following diplomatic engagement with regional leaders.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the arrangement was secured after talks with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian as well as counterparts in Turkey, Egypt,

and other Gulf states, allowing the vessels to resume their journey.

He noted that Malaysia remains in a comparatively stronger position due to domestic production by state energy firm Petronas, which produced around two million barrels per day last year. However, he warned that wider disruptions are likely to push up prices and affect supplies of food, fertiliser, oil, and gas.

In response, the government announced tighter controls on subsidized fuel, including reduced quotas and new diesel purchase limits in Sabah and Sarawak to curb hoarding and smuggling. [Malay Mail]

China, Mongolia central banks discuss currency swap, digital payments cooperation

(fs) Governor of the People's Bank of China Pan Gongsheng met Governor of the Bank of Mongolia S. Narantsogt to discuss strengthening strategic cooperation between the central banks of both countries. The talks focused on enhancing existing financial mechanisms and adapting to evolving economic conditions.

A key topic was the extension and improved use of the bilateral currency swap agreement in place since 2011, which supports liquidity, promotes trade in national currencies, and contributes to regional economic integration. Narantsogt and Gongsheng also explored aligning its implementation with international best practices.

The discussions further addressed modernizing cross-border payment systems by transitioning to digital infrastructure, including potential cooperation to reduce transaction costs and increase efficiency. [iToim]

On a separate development, Chairman of the ruling Mongolian People's Party (MPP) and Speaker of the Mongolian parliament Uchral Nyam-Osor met Liu Haixing, Head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC)—the party's global political liaison arm—, on March 24 to discuss strengthening ties between both parties.

Nyam-Osor noted Mongolia's intention to enhance cooperation over the next five years in areas such as renewable energy, infrastructure, environmental protection, carbon markets, and the digital economy.

Liu welcomed the visit and underscored the significance of advancing inter-party cooperation, including exchanges among youth, women, and labor groups. He also highlighted opportunities arising from China's latest development strategy and called for implementing agreements reached by the two countries' leaders. [Montsame]

Japan, Mongolia extend early childhood development project

(fs) Ambassador of Japan to Mongolia Masaru Igawahara and director of the Save the Children Mongolia office Mitsuaki Toyoda signed an agreement in Ulaanbaatar to extend a project supporting early childhood development, implemented under Japan's Grant Support for NGOs program. The initiative aims to improve coordination and effectiveness of local institutions assisting children with developmental delays and disabilities.

The project, funded with USD 664,555 and running until March 2027, focuses on enhancing early detection systems, strengthening intervention services, and expanding resources in Ulaanbaatar, Selenge, and Bayankhongor. [Open.kg]

Mongolia, South Korea to increase critical minerals cooperation

(fs) Head of the Trade Negotiations Department at the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Resources of South Korea Kwon Hee-jin met a group of Mongolian officials, led by State Secretary of the Ministry of Economy and Development of Mongolia Batkhuu Idesh to discuss accelerating negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The agreement is expected to strengthen cooperation, particularly in critical minerals supply chains.

Talks, which have undergone four rounds since their launch, have stalled since November 2024 due to Mongolia's concerns over market liberalization and disagreements on rules of origin. Hee-jin urged both sides to bridge these differences and proposed incorporating critical minerals cooperation into the agreement.

Hee-jin highlighted Mongolia's significant reserves of copper, molybdenum, and rare earth elements, describing the country as a key partner for supply

chain diversification. He added that Mongolia represents an emerging market for Korean businesses and reaffirmed Seoul's commitment to advancing CEPA negotiations. [Akipress]

Mongolia, USA review progress of child protection partnership

(fs) Officials from the United States and Mongolia held the fifth Annual Bilateral Dialogue to assess progress under the U.S.-Mongolia Child Protection Compact (CPC), highlighting achievements and remaining challenges in combating human trafficking. The United States has provided USD 6.5 million in assistance through the program, supporting organizations such as World Vision and The Asia Foundation, which fight against human trafficking in Mongolia.

Through the CPC, Mongolia has introduced standard procedures for identifying and reporting trafficking cases, established eight child-friendly spaces, strengthened legal frameworks, and created a national rehabilitation center for child victims.

Participants highlighted enhanced cooperation with law enforcement to address trafficking networks. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to advancing anti-trafficking efforts and protecting vulnerable children. [GoGo]

Mongolia, Luxembourg strengthen parliamentary ties

(fs) Chairman of the Standing Committee on Security and Foreign Policy of the Mongolian Parliament Temuulen Ganzorig met a parliamentary delegation from Luxembourg led by Member of the Chamber of Deputies and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee Gusty Graas on March 24.

Graas welcomed the visit as an opportunity to advance cooperation, particularly in healthcare. Both sides highlighted progress in a long-term cardiovascular health initiative implemented over 25 years, as discussions continued on strengthening inter-parliamentary collaboration. [Montsame]

Mongolia, United Kingdom deepen cooperation, aim for comprehensive

partnership

(fs) The 16th Mongolia-United Kingdom Roundtable Meeting was held on March 23 in Ulaanbaatar, co-chaired by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia Amartuvshin Gombosuren and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Indo-Pacific in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom Seema Malhotra. Both sides highlighted the steady development of bilateral relations and emphasized the importance of enhancing political dialogue and advancing ties toward a comprehensive partnership.

Discussions focused on expanding cooperation in trade, investment, education, culture, and people-to-people exchanges. The parties agreed to strengthen collaboration in areas including civil society, English language education, critical minerals, and infrastructure projects such as the Ulaanbaatar metro. They also exchanged views on climate change, energy transition, and preparations for the COP17 to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which Mongolia will host in August 2026. [Montsame]

On the sidelines, Mongolian Prime Minister Gombojav Zandanshatar met Malhotra, reaffirming Mongolia's commitment to strengthening ties with the United Kingdom. Zandanshatar highlighted cooperation in education and research, while Malhotra underscored opportunities in mining, renewable energy, and urban transport. [Open.kg]

Belarus, North Korea formalize alignment with cooperation pact

(dql) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko concluded a summit on March 26 in Pyongyang with the signing of a friendship treaty and a series of sectoral agreements spanning diplomacy, agriculture, education, and public health, signaling a step-change in bilateral relations. [KCNA]

During the visit—the first by a Belarusian president since diplomatic ties were established in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—Lukashenko also instructed officials to open a Belarusian embassy in Pyongyang and accelerate a visa waiver agreement, moves aimed at institutionalizing closer engagement.

The two sides emphasized converging positions on international issues, including the war in Ukraine and developments in the Middle East, and highlighted

expanded cooperation across multiple sectors. Kim was invited to visit Belarus in return.

Framed by both sides as the start of a new phase in relations, the summit combined political signaling with symbolic gestures, including an exchange of gifts, alongside the formalization of ties through the cooperation treaty.

The meeting brings together two heavily sanctioned regimes aligned with Russia amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. North Korea has provided direct military support to Moscow, including troop deployments, while Belarus has facilitated Russian operations by granting access to its territory and hosting Russian tactical nuclear weapons. [Reuters] [BBC] [The Korea Times]

China, Pakistan plan investor conference and launch joint naval exercise

(lm) Pakistan and China have agreed to hold a business conference to address security concerns of Chinese investors, while also conducting a joint naval exercise as part of ongoing bilateral cooperation.

The planned conference follows a meeting between Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong in Islamabad. Pakistani authorities said the engagement will take place in two phases, first with Chinese businesses already operating in the country and then with prospective investors. The government also announced the establishment of a "Special Protection Unit" to enhance security for Chinese nationals in Islamabad. China remains Pakistan's largest investor, with over USD 65 billion committed under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. [Arab News 1]

Separately, the two countries launched the "Sea Guardian IV" naval exercise in Karachi, running from March 25 to April 2. The drills involve harbor and sea-phase activities, including coordinated patrols, gunnery exercises, and professional exchanges between the two navies, following the arrival of a Chinese naval vessel at Karachi port. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan-Afghanistan ceasefire collapses after Eid pause despite limited de-escalation efforts

(lm) A temporary pause in hostilities between Pakistan and Afghanistan during Eid al-Fitr (March 18–24) collapsed shortly after, with military operations resuming on March 25 and clashes continuing through March 29–31 despite parallel diplomatic and local de-escalation initiatives.

On March 25, Pakistani authorities initially indicated that the ceasefire would hold conditionally, depending on the absence of cross-border attacks from Afghan territory, while reaffirming the right to respond. Later the same day, a security official confirmed the resumption of operations under a campaign described as Operation “Ghazab Lil Haq,” targeting militant leadership and infrastructure in areas under Afghan Taliban control. Pakistan maintains that Afghan territory is being used by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, a militant group distinct from but aligned with the Afghan Taliban, an allegation Kabul denies. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

The escalation follows fighting that began in late February and has since developed into the most severe confrontation between the two countries in decades. It has involved repeated cross-border exchanges as well as Pakistani airstrikes inside Afghanistan. Islamabad has stated that more than 700 militants and Afghan Taliban members have been killed since the start of its campaign, while Afghan authorities dispute aspects of these claims, particularly regarding civilian casualties. Afghan officials reported additional civilian casualties from Pakistani strikes on March 25, while United Nations preliminary assessments from earlier incidents indicate higher casualty levels, though figures remain under verification. [Arab News 3]

On March 29, Afghanistan’s foreign minister signaled willingness to de-escalate in a call with the United Arab Emirates, stating that Kabul seeks dialogue with Pakistan and has taken “serious measures” to prevent its territory from being used for attacks. The same day, Afghan authorities accused Pakistan of shelling areas near Asadabad in Kunar province, reporting one fatality and multiple injuries; Pakistan did not immediately respond. [Arab News 4] [Arab News 5]

Despite ongoing hostilities, limited de-escalation efforts are underway. A jirga - a traditional assembly of tribal and political elders - is scheduled to convene in Peshawar on April 1 to propose confidence-building measures and encourage dialogue, with calls for a corresponding forum on the Afghan side. On March 31, Pakistan temporarily reopened the Torkham border crossing—closed for months due to clashes—to allow controlled repatriation of detained Afghan nationals,

while trade and transit remain largely restricted pending further talks. [Arab News 6] [Arab News 7]

China-Seychelles deepen development cooperation during high-level visit marking 50 years of diplomatic ties

(lm) Seychelles and China have reaffirmed and expanded their bilateral partnership during a high-level visit by Han Zheng, Vice President of China, marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations established shortly after Seychelles' independence in 1976. The visit formed part of a broader African tour and concluded in Seychelles.

During the visit, China confirmed a grant of USD 14 million to support priority development projects. Discussions covered cooperation in infrastructure, housing, health, education, and maritime security. Seychelles reiterated its commitment to the "One China" policy, while both sides emphasized coordination on regional and international issues and expanded economic engagement, including access to zero-tariff arrangements for African countries.

The visit also included the launch of a China-funded housing project, comprising approximately 140 residential units across different categories aimed at addressing domestic housing shortages. Construction is expected to take around 22 months, with Chinese companies implementing the project and additional details, including total cost, still under finalization.

Anniversary events highlighted the scope of long-standing cooperation, including Chinese support for key public infrastructure such as the National Assembly building, the Palais de Justice, and national broadcasting facilities. [Seychelles News Agency 1, in French] [Seychelles News Agency 2, in French] [Seychelles News Agency 3]

Singaporean Prime Minister meets Hong Kong leaders and business figures to strengthen ties

(ms) Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has concluded a three-day visit to Hong Kong, meeting political leaders and business figures as part of efforts to strengthen cooperation between the two financial hubs.

During the visit, Wong held talks with Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee and other senior officials, focusing on expanding collaboration in areas such as trade, innovation, and youth engagement. He also met business leaders and representatives from the private sector to discuss regional economic developments.

Wong described the trip as “short but meaningful,” highlighting the importance of closer ties in an increasingly uncertain global environment. He emphasized that while Singapore and Hong Kong are competitors in areas such as finance and trade, cooperation could benefit both economies.

The visit comes as both cities seek to maintain their roles as major Asian financial centers amid shifting global economic conditions and geopolitical tensions.

Bilateral ties between Singapore and Hong Kong remain significant, with strong trade, investment, and people-to-people links. [South China Morning Post] [The Strait Times]

US Navy minesweeping ships arrives in Singapore for logistics stop amid Middle East tensions

(ms) Two United States Navy vessels configured for minesweeping operations have arrived in Singapore, raising questions about their deployment as tensions continue in the Middle East.

The ships, USS Tulsa and USS Santa Barbara, were previously assigned to support mine countermeasure operations in the Persian Gulf, a critical region for global oil shipments. Their current presence in Singapore places them far from their original operational area, where concerns remain over potential naval mines and disruptions to maritime traffic.

US officials said the vessels are conducting scheduled maintenance and logistics activities, noting that Singapore serves as a long-standing hub for US naval operations in the Indo-Pacific.

The move follows escalating instability around the Strait of Hormuz, a key global shipping route, where attacks have disrupted commercial traffic. While naval mines have not been widely deployed, they remain a significant risk in any prolonged conflict.

Analysts say the redeployment highlights shifting operational priorities and logistical challenges, as well

as the strategic importance of Singapore as a support base for US naval forces. [TWZ]

Singaporean businessman arrested in Zimbabwe in cross-border gold fraud case

(ms) A Singaporean investment figure has been arrested in Zimbabwe in connection with a multimillion-dollar gold fraud investigation spanning several countries.

Yong Khong Yoong Mark was detained by Zimbabwean authorities and charged with fraud, money laundering, and illegal possession of gold. The arrest followed a police stop near Harare and a subsequent search of his residence, where small quantities of suspected gold were recovered.

The case is linked to allegations that a foreign investor was defrauded of about USD 1.5 million (SGD 2.0 million) through a mining investment scheme. Yong has been granted bail of USD 1,500 (SGD 2,000) and is awaiting further court proceedings in Zimbabwe.

Separately, Singapore's High Court has upheld a global asset freeze of USD 38.6 million (SGD 51.7 million) against Yong and associates in a related civil case involving alleged fraudulent gold investments.

The broader case involves claims of over USD 77 million (SGD 103 million) tied to cross-border schemes across Africa and offshore entities, highlighting the growing complexity of international investment fraud investigations. [The Online Citizen]

South Korea protests Japanese textbooks over disputed island claims

(co) Amid persistent tensions between South Korea and Japan over historical interpretation and territorial disputes, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 24 summoned a senior Japanese diplomat to protest newly approved high school textbooks reiterating Japan's sovereignty claims over Dokdo (Takeshima in Japan), a group of islets in the Sea of Japan.

Seoul condemned the materials for distorting historical facts and called for immediate corrections, particularly criticizing narratives that downplay wartime forced labor and the sexual slavery of "comfort women."

The textbooks were approved by Japan's education authorities for use from 2027, continuing a pattern seen in previous reviews. [Hankyoreh]

The Dokdo islets dispute is a long-standing territorial row between South Korea and Japan over a group of small islets in the East Sea. South Korea controls the islets, but Japan claims them as part of its territory based on historical claims.

Canada, South Korea step up supply chain coordination, advance submarine deal talks

(co) South Korea and Canada held "two-plus-two" working-level talks between foreign and industry officials to strengthen coordination on supply chain resilience and broader geoeconomic risks.

The two sides discussed closer cooperation to address supply chain disruptions and rising trade protectionism, including plans to establish a bilateral early warning system through their diplomatic networks.

Seoul also promoted its bid for Canada's patrol submarine project, valued at around KRW 60 trillion (USD 41.4 billion), as part of efforts to expand strategic and industrial cooperation. A South Korean consortium led by Hanwha Ocean and HD Hyundai Heavy Industries—two major defense contractor and submarine builders—is competing with Germany's ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems for the contract. [The Korea Times]

To underscore the bid and its naval ambitions, South Korea in June will dispatch a submarine across the Pacific for the first time to participate in bilateral drills close to Victoria, Canada's west coast. The journey, with additional stops in Guam and Hawaii, will mark the longest deployment ever undertaken by a South Korean submarine. [Korea Bizwire]

US force posture shifts raise alliance coordination concerns in South Korea

(dql) Recent U.S. decisions on force posture transparency and nuclear planning structures are fueling concerns in Seoul over alliance coordination.

U.S. posture review secrecy

Uncertainty over U.S. force deployments has intensified in Seoul after the Pentagon—in a significant departure from precedent—opted not to publish its Global Posture Review, a key document guiding overseas troop positioning. [POLITICO]

The decision has fueled speculation that Washington may seek greater "strategic flexibility," potentially allowing U.S. forces stationed in South Korea to be redeployed to other regions.

Experts, however, assess that while the move reflects a broader shift in US alliance management—encouraging partners to assume more responsibility for their own defense—it is unlikely to trigger immediate reductions in US Forces Korea (USFK). Instead, adjustments are expected to focus on recalibrating force composition, such as rotating units or substituting capabilities, while maintaining overall deterrence. [The Korea Herald 1]

USFK establishes dedicated nuclear integration unit

Against this backdrop, USFK has created a specialized "J10 Strategic Integration Element" to incorporate US strategic, including nuclear, capabilities into alliance planning, marking a structural shift in how deterrence coordination is conducted on the Korean Peninsula.

Operational since mid-2025, the unit functions as a hub for nuclear planning expertise and as a liaison with US Strategic Command. Unlike previous arrangements, where such planning was embedded within the Combined Forces Command (CFC)—the binational military command structure that integrates South Korean and U.S. forces for the defense of South Korea—the new structure introduces a US-managed channel that may handle key elements of planning prior to allied consultation.

Analysts warn that this could reduce South Korea's role in early-stage operational design, shifting from joint planning toward a model in which US-developed options are later integrated into the alliance framework. This comes despite existing mechanisms such as the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), established under the 2023 Washington Declaration to bring South Korea closer into U.S. nuclear planning discussions and enhance bilateral coordination on nuclear deterrence.

The development also coincides with South Korea's efforts to expand its own strategic capabilities and prepare for the eventual transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON)—currently exercised under the US-led Combined Forces Command, despite

South Korea holding peacetime command authority. This dynamic highlights latent tensions within the alliance, as Seoul's push for greater operational autonomy proceeds alongside indications that Washington may seek to retain influence over key strategic planning domains. [The Korea Herald 2]

South Korean foreign minister discusses Hormuz security, alliance coordination with U.S. official

(co) South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho Hyun held talks with U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Allison Hooker on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers' meeting in Paris last week, focusing on security developments in the Strait of Hormuz and follow-up measures to bilateral summit agreements.

Cho raised concerns over disruptions to the key maritime corridor for global energy supplies, stressing the need for de-escalation and safe navigation to protect supply chains, including for Korean vessels.

Washington acknowledged Seoul's participation in international efforts to secure maritime transit, including its alignment with statements criticizing Iran's effective blockade of the waterway. The two sides also agreed to advance working-level discussions on implementing trade and security commitments, while reaffirming coordination on North Korea-related issues ahead of U.S. President Donald Trump's planned visit to China. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea, Ukraine address fate of captured North Korean soldiers at foreign ministers' meeting

(dql) South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Hyun and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha agreed to handle the case of two North Korean soldiers captured in Ukraine in line with international law and humanitarian principles, following talks held on March 27 on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers' meeting in France.

The two soldiers, captured while fighting alongside Russian forces, have reportedly expressed a preference to resettle in South Korea rather than be returned. Seoul has indicated its willingness to accept them, while Ukraine has reassured that they will not be transferred to Russia, amid concerns they could

ultimately be repatriated to North Korea against their will. The issue is further complicated by reports that Moscow has sought their inclusion in prisoner exchange negotiations.

The meeting reflects broader diplomatic coordination between Seoul and Kyiv, as South Korea expands its engagement on Ukraine-related security issues while participating in G7 discussions alongside key partners, including the United States and France. [Yonhap News Agency]

Iran conditions Hormuz transit for South Korean vessels on prior coordination

(dql) Iran has indicated that South Korean ships may continue transiting the Strait of Hormuz, but only subject to advance coordination with Iranian authorities, underscoring tightening control over a critical global energy chokepoint amid the escalating Middle East conflict.

Speaking in Seoul on March 26, Iran's ambassador Saeed Koozechi described South Korea as a "non-adversarial" country but stressed that passage now requires prior consultation with Iranian military and government entities. The remarks come as dozens of South Korean vessels with around 180 crew members remain in or near the strait, with Tehran requesting detailed information on stranded ships through diplomatic channels.

South Korea has urged Iran to guarantee safe navigation, with Foreign Minister Cho Hyun and members of the National Assembly's foreign affairs committee raising the issue directly with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Ambassador Saeed Koozechi, respectively, earlier last week.

South Korea is highly exposed to disruptions in the waterway, through which roughly 55% of its energy imports from Gulf states are transported.

Iran has signaled preferential treatment for "friendly nations," including China, Russia, and India, suggesting a more selective approach to maritime access under current conflict conditions. [Yonhap News Agency] [The Korea Herald]

Sri Lanka and Cuba explore expanded cooperation in education and agriculture

(lm) Sri Lanka and Cuba have held discussions to deepen bilateral cooperation, focusing on education, agriculture, and sports, during a meeting between Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya and Cuban Ambassador Patricia Lazara Pego Guerra in Colombo on March 26.

Both sides reaffirmed longstanding diplomatic ties and discussed expanding collaboration in education through exchange programs and capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening human resource development. In agriculture, talks focused on knowledge sharing and technical cooperation to promote sustainable farming practices, while sports was identified as an additional area for engagement. [Daily Mirror]

Taiwan accuses China-linked actors of disinformation campaign targeting energy security

(dql) Taiwan has accused China-linked actors of amplifying disinformation about the island's fuel supply following disruptions linked to the Iran conflict, in what authorities describe as an effort to undermine public confidence and exploit external shocks.

According to reports, multiple social media accounts circulated claims that Taiwan's liquefied natural gas (LNG) reserves would be depleted within weeks and that widespread power outages were imminent. The government has rejected these assertions, stating that supply remains stable, with secured LNG shipments extending into mid-June.

Officials said the campaign reflects broader "cognitive warfare" tactics, using geopolitical tensions to stoke fear and erode trust in critical infrastructure. Law enforcement agencies are monitoring both overseas sources and domestic collaborators involved in spreading false information.

While Taiwan anticipates higher energy costs and some supply strain as the conflict persists, authorities maintain that near-term energy security is not at risk. LNG remains central to the island's energy mix, accounting for nearly half of consumption, with supplies sourced from Qatar, the United States, Australia, and Russia. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan suspends retaliatory measures against South Korea amid tentative movement on naming dispute

(dql) Taiwan has paused planned retaliatory steps against South Korea after Seoul signaled adjustments to its electronic arrival system, easing immediate tensions in a dispute over Taiwan's designation in official immigration platforms. [Yonhap News Agency]

The measures—set to take effect after a March 31 deadline—were part of a tit-for-tat escalation triggered by South Korea's listing of Taiwan as "China (Taiwan)" in a newly introduced digital entry system. Taipei had protested the wording for months, viewing it as undermining its sovereignty, and had begun downgrading South Korea's own designation in official Taiwanese documents while threatening further reciprocal changes.

Taiwan's foreign ministry said Seoul had informed it of updates to the system aimed at improving travel procedures, though no clear commitment or timeline was provided regarding the contested naming. Taipei nevertheless opted to hold off on additional countermeasures while expecting a "proper response." [Focus Taiwan]

U.S. allows Taiwan's arms payment deferrals amid budget deadlock

(acl) The United States has agreed to defer initial payments for Taiwan's planned arms purchases, including High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), as political deadlock in the legislature delays approval of defense funding.

Defense Minister Wellington Koo said on March 30 that the first HIMARS payment—originally due at end-March—could be postponed to around May, when Washington is expected to finalize the roughly USD 4 billion contract, part of a broader USD 11.1 billion package.

Taipei is also seeking deferrals for three additional systems under the same package facing similar constraints, with initial payments totaling about USD 79 million. [Focus Taiwan]

The move follows the signing of binding purchase agreements despite unresolved competing supplementary budget proposals from the ruling and opposition camps. The impasse follows repeated

opposition blocking of a Cabinet-proposed NTD 1.25 trillion (USD 40 billion) special defense budget approved in November 2025, with the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) leveraging their legislative majority against the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to prevent its advancement.

Against this backdrop, Raymond Greene, the director of the American Institute in Taiwan—Washington's de facto embassy—stated that the United States expects Taipei to raise defense spending to 5 percent of GDP and urged lawmakers to quickly approve a stalled special defense budget.

Greene said the push reflects broader U.S. expectations that allies share more of the security burden and stressed that timely approval of the budget would demonstrate Taiwan's commitment to strengthening its defense capabilities. [Taiwan News 2]

U.S. senators visit Taiwan to strengthen security ties, urge special defense budget approval

(acl) A bipartisan delegation of U.S. senators arrived in Taiwan on March 30 to reinforce security ties and urge swift passage of a special defense budget stalled in the legislature. Co-led by Senators Jeanne Shaheen and John Curtis, the group emphasized that sustained Taiwanese defense spending is essential for deterrence and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

In meetings with President Lai Ching-te, the delegation discussed the Cabinet's USD 39.6 billion defense proposal, which combines U.S.-supplied systems with expanded domestic capabilities, including large-scale drone and unmanned vessel production.

The visit comes amid continued legislative gridlock following the failure to reconcile competing budget proposals from the ruling party and opposition blocs, underscoring growing U.S. pressure on Taipei to resolve internal funding disputes and accelerate defense preparedness.

Their call for lawmakers to pass the special defense budget bill follows a three-day joint legislative session that concluded on March 26 without reaching consensus on three competing proposals, including the Kuomintang's USD 11.9 billion and the Taiwan People's Party's USD 12.5 billion plans. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2] [Reuters]

Thai military warns of response to renewed provocations along Cambodia border

(lm) Thailand has intensified security measures along both land and maritime boundaries with Cambodia following reported ceasefire violations, while addressing compensation for casualties from earlier clashes.

Along the land border in Trat province in eastern Thailand bordering Cambodia, Thai forces have reported intermittent incidents over the past week, including gunfire from the Cambodian side, which authorities described as breaches of the ceasefire agreement reached on December 27, 2025. Tensions are concentrated in contested areas including Ban Tha Sen–Thmor Da and Ban Nong Ri, also known as Ban Sam Lang, where a disputed structure linked to Cambodian actors remains under Thai control. Thai authorities also identified the broader Thmor Da area as a growing hub for scam operations reportedly connected to Chinese-backed networks. [Bangkok Post 1]

At sea, the Royal Thai Navy has increased monitoring in the Gulf of Thailand after more than 20 Cambodian fishing vessels were detected operating inside Thai waters. Authorities stated that some vessels were engaged in fishing and transporting seafood, but the scale and pattern of activity have raised concerns about potential state-linked use. A task force based in Trat has deployed 12 patrol vessels to monitor activity. The increased maritime focus follows the closure of land border checkpoints, which has shifted some cross-border movement to sea routes. [Bangkok Post 2]

These developments follow two rounds of Thai–Cambodian border clashes in 2025 that resulted in 43 Thai military fatalities and multiple injuries. On March 31, the army confirmed that families of soldiers killed in the second round of fighting are to receive compensation of THB 10 million, equivalent to approximately USD 290,000, per case, pending cabinet approval. Existing benefits, including royally granted financial assistance, war risk compensation, and special pensions, have already been disbursed, while additional payments remain under review following submission to the Budget Bureau and the prime minister.

The compensation framework also provides THB 8 million, approximately USD 232,000, for civilian fatalities and tiered financial support for injuries. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand and Australia expand pharmaceutical cooperation to reduce import dependence

(lm) Thailand and Australia have expanded cooperation on pharmaceutical manufacturing through the *Biologics and Pharmaceuticals Manufacturing in Thailand for Equitable Access to Medicines (BPM TEAM)* program, backed by around USD 1.16 million over four years. The initiative focuses on strengthening domestic production capacity, as Thailand currently imports more than 95 percent of active pharmaceutical ingredients. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste and India establish bilateral consultation mechanism

(ms) Timor-Leste and India have agreed to establish a bilateral consultation mechanism aimed at strengthening cooperation and policy coordination between the two countries.

The agreement was formalized on March 27 in Dili through a memorandum of understanding signed by Timor-Leste's Foreign Minister Bendito dos Santos Freitas and Indian Ambassador Madan Kumar Ghildiyal.

The mechanism will create a structured platform for regular dialogue between senior officials, focusing on key areas such as trade, education, health, and technical cooperation. It will also include exchanges on regional and global issues of mutual interest. [Government of Timor-Leste]

China tightens import rules, posing new challenges for Vietnam's food exports

(hn) Vietnam's agricultural and food exports to China will be affected by new, stricter regulations from China's General Administration of Customs (GACC), effective June 1. The rules tighten requirements on registration, declarations, and supply chain control for a wide range of products, including meat, seafood, dairy, grains, and processed foods.

The updated system introduces stricter oversight, with some products no longer eligible for automatic registration renewal and a dynamic list that may

change based on risk and safety assessments. Registration requirements are also expanded to include overseas storage facilities such as cold warehouses, while inaccurate or false declarations may lead to shipment rejection or penalties.

The regulations distinguish between authority-recommended and self-registered enterprises, with stricter validity requirements for the latter. Overall, the changes reflect China's shift toward comprehensive supply chain management and traceability. Vietnamese authorities plan to issue guidance to help businesses adapt to the new rules. [Vietnamnews]

Bulgaria and Vietnam boost local-level cooperation under comprehensive strategic partnership

(hn) Vietnam's Ambassador to Bulgaria, Nguyễn Thị Minh Nguyệt, attended the Veliko Tarnovo city festival and held talks with Mayor Daniel Panov to promote cooperation between localities of the two countries. The visit underscored the growing importance of locality-to-locality engagement as a key pillar of the Vietnam–Bulgaria Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, recently upgraded during high-level exchanges.

During the meeting, the ambassador highlighted the steady development of traditional friendship and multifaceted cooperation, and affirmed the embassy's role in facilitating partnerships between Veliko Tarnovo and Vietnamese provinces and cities. The Bulgarian side welcomed closer ties and expressed interest in expanding cooperation in culture, tourism, education, trade, and labor exchange, while also proposing joint tourism promotion activities and stronger links between businesses.

The engagement, held alongside a major cultural festival attended by senior Bulgarian leaders, reflects efforts to deepen people-to-people and subnational cooperation. It is expected to open new avenues for collaboration and further strengthen bilateral relations at both national and local levels. [Vietnamnews] [VoiceofVietnam]

Russia and Vietnam deepen strategic cooperation in metro development and nuclear energy

(hn) A trilateral working session between Moscow, Hà Nội, and Ho Chi Minh City, held during Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's official visit to Russia (March 22–25), highlighted renewed momentum in strengthening cooperation on sustainable urban transport infrastructure. Discussions focused in particular on the development of metro systems in Vietnam's two largest cities.

Moscow officials emphasized their extensive experience in designing, constructing, and operating one of the world's most advanced and heavily utilized metro networks, including expertise in complex engineering environments and modern technologies. They expressed readiness to share knowledge and collaborate closely with Vietnamese partners. Leaders from Hà Nội and Ho Chi Minh City, in turn, showed strong interest in applying Moscow's practical models to accelerate metro projects that are currently under construction or in the planning stage. The session also explored concrete cooperation programs aimed at enhancing technical capacity and promoting sustainable urban transport, reinforcing ties under the Vietnam–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. [Vietnamnews]

At the same time, Vietnam and Russia reached new agreements to deepen energy cooperation, with a strong focus on nuclear power development and liquefied natural gas (LNG) supply. These discussions covered both long-term strategic collaboration and immediate measures to meet Vietnam's rapidly growing energy demand.

A key highlight is Russia's expected involvement through its state-owned nuclear corporation Rosatom —in the construction of the Ninh Thuan 1 nuclear power plant in Khánh Hòa province. The project is planned to include two VVER-1200 reactor units with a combined capacity of 2,400 MW, based on the design used at the Leningrad-2 nuclear facility. An intergovernmental agreement has outlined the core terms, scope, and technical framework for this cooperation.

This partnership comes as Vietnam faces rising electricity demand, driven by its position as a regional manufacturing hub and its ambitions for sustained economic growth. Nuclear energy is increasingly being reconsidered as a stable, low-emission source that can complement renewables and strengthen energy security. Vietnam aims to bring its first nuclear power plants online by around 2030 and has accelerated preparations since reviving the Ninh Thuan project in late 2024, including engaging international partners, assigning state firms as lead investors, and introducing

special policies to fast-track implementation. [Businesstimes]

Notably, on March 23, both countries formally signed an agreement to cooperate on building a nuclear power plant in Vietnam. The deal was welcomed by Pham Minh Chinh and Mikhail Mishustin as a symbolic milestone in advancing peaceful nuclear energy cooperation and strengthening bilateral ties.

Beyond nuclear energy, additional agreements were reached in oil and gas, energy, and transport, further contributing to energy security. Both sides acknowledged the progress achieved in recent years and agreed to expand collaboration into new, clean, and renewable energy sectors.

More broadly, Vietnam and Russia reaffirmed their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, highlighting steady progress across trade, investment, defense, and people-to-people exchanges. They also committed to elevating science and technology cooperation - particularly in artificial intelligence and research - and encouraged greater Russian participation in infrastructure projects such as metro systems in major Vietnamese cities.

Finally, both sides underscored the importance of strengthening cooperation in education, culture, and tourism, with plans for cultural exchanges and language programs to deepen mutual understanding between their people. [Worldnuclear] [Bangkokpost]

Vietnam opens embassy in Ireland, marking new milestone in bilateral ties

(hn) Le Thi Thu Hang and Neale Richmond held political consultations in Dublin to strengthen bilateral relations, marking 30 years of diplomatic ties (1996 – 2016).

Both sides highlighted growing cooperation in trade, education, science, and innovation, alongside expanding cultural, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges, with increasing numbers of Irish visitors. Trade reached nearly USD 4.1 billion in 2025, supported by the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement.

They agreed to deepen collaboration in higher education, agriculture, and development cooperation, while enhancing high-level exchanges and coordination at international forums. Ireland reaffirmed support for Vietnam's development and

both sides pledged to facilitate investment, including progress on the EVIPA.

Additionally, the two countries committed to promoting tourism, strengthening cultural ties, and cooperating on regional and global issues, emphasizing peaceful dispute resolution and adherence to international law. [Vietnamnews] [VoiceofVietnam]

Australian navy ship visits Vietnam as defense ties deepen

(hn) HMAS Toowoomba, an Anzac-class frigate of the Royal Australian Navy, arrived at Tien Sa Port for a port visit to Da Nang from March 28 to early April. The ship and its crew were officially welcomed by local authorities, military commands, and border guard representatives.

The visit highlights the growing defense cooperation between Vietnam and Australia, particularly after the two countries upgraded ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2025. It follows a recent visit by Vietnam's naval ship 016-Quang Trung to Australia, where it joined the Kakadu Exercise and an international fleet review marking the 125th anniversary of the Royal Australian Navy. Notably, this is the first time naval vessels from both countries have conducted official visits to each other at nearly the same time.

During their stay, Australian officers are scheduled to hold courtesy meetings with local leaders, attend official receptions, and participate in cultural and sports exchanges, reinforcing people-to-people and military ties. The visit also reflects long-standing cooperation, including Australia's support in training over 5,000 Vietnamese military personnel and assisting Vietnam's participation in UN peacekeeping missions.

The frigate itself is a modern, multi-role warship capable of air defense, anti-submarine warfare, and surface combat operations. It is equipped with advanced missile systems, torpedoes, naval artillery, and can operate a Seahawk helicopter.

Overall, the visit underscores Australia's commitment to strengthening regional partnerships and promoting peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific while deepening its defense relationship with Vietnam. [Tuoitrenews] [Vietnam]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

1 April 2026 @ 9:30-11:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Regional Shockwaves: Long-Term Implications of the U.S.-Israel-Iran War

This hybrid event examines the far-reaching regional and global consequences of a rapidly escalating U.S.–Israel–Iran war, including widening conflict dynamics, threats to energy security, and growing instability across the Middle East. It convenes leading experts to assess the war's long-term implications for regional security and the evolving policies of the United States and other international actors. For more information and registration, please see [Carnegie].

1 April 2026 @ 10:00-11:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Belfer Center, USA

Middle East Dialogues: A Conversation with Nasser Alkidwa

Featuring Nasser Alkidwa, member of the Palestinian National Council and former Foreign Minister of the Palestinian Authority, this online event explores the ongoing war in the Middle East, regional diplomatic dynamics, and the prospects for coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis. For more information and registration, visit [Belfer Center].

1 April 2026 @ 1:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, United Kingdom

How is the US-Israel war on Iran impacting energy and the global economy?

This webinar examines the energy and economic consequences of the U.S.–Israel war on Iran, including disruptions to global energy markets, risks to supply and trade flows, and rising inflationary pressures. It will

assess the broader implications for global economic stability and geopolitical fragmentation, while also exploring how Gulf economies are responding to these challenges and adapting to an increasingly volatile environment. For more information and registration, visit [Chatham House].

3 April 2026 @ 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., (GMT-4), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA

Adapting Under Fire: Ukraine's Race to Reinvent Modern Defense

This webcast explores how Ukraine has rapidly transformed its military since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, highlighting lessons from real-time adaptations in air defense, battlefield training, and the development of drone and counter-drone technologies. This event features Ukrainian air defense operators, examining evolving threats, frontline-driven innovation, and what Western militaries need to understand about modern drone warfare and defense ecosystems. For more information and registration, please see [CSIS].

7 April 2026 @ 3:00-4:15 p.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

The CPV's 14th National Congress: Key Outcomes and Implications

This webinar presents the key findings of *The State of Southeast Asia: 2026 Survey Report*, offering timely insights into how regional opinion leaders perceive strategic developments, major power rivalry, and ASEAN's resilience amid rising economic and geopolitical uncertainty. It will discuss the survey's implications for Southeast Asia's strategic outlook, with

a presentation by Joanne Lin and moderation by the Institute's Director and CEO.

For more information and registration, visit [ISEAS].

7 April 2026 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Stimson Center, USA

A Conversation with H.E. Ambassador Duarte Lopes: Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean

This event examines the growing strategic importance of North Africa and the Mediterranean as key corridors linking Europe, Africa, and the wider Atlantic system, amid evolving challenges in migration governance, energy connectivity, maritime security, and regional stability. This fireside chat with H.E. Ambassador Duarte Lopes discusses Europe's engagement with North Africa and the Sahel, Mediterranean security dynamics, and Portugal's role in advancing EU–Africa partnerships. For more information and registration, visit [Stimson Center].

7 April 2026 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

US-Turkish defense relations and the upcoming NATO Summit

This webcast examines the evolving dynamics of U.S.–Turkish defense relations amid renewed diplomatic momentum, persistent challenges over defense procurement and Syria policy, and shifting regional security conditions linked to the conflict with Iran. Th discussion explores the implications of these developments for bilateral ties and the strategic significance of the upcoming NATO Summit in Ankara. For more information and registration, visit [Atlantic Council].

7 April 2026 @ 1:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

Argentina's turning point: Accelerating economic takeoff

This webcast examines Argentina's economic transformation at a pivotal moment, focusing on

reform progress, macroeconomic stabilization, and strategies to enhance competitiveness, investment, and global market integration. It convenes policymakers, investors, and experts in Buenos Aires to explore the country's reform trajectory and opportunities for deeper U.S.–Argentina cooperation across key sectors. For more information and registration, visit [Atlantic Council].

Recent Book Releases

Carl Benedikt Frey, ***How Progress Ends: Technology, Innovation, and the Fate of Nations***, Princeton University Press, 552 pages, published September 16, 2025. For a review, see [The Arts Fuse].

Sara B. Hobolt, James Tilley, ***Tribal Politics: How Brexit Divided Britain***, OUP Oxford, 256 pages, published March 26, 2026. For a review, see [LSE].

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, ***The Battle of Manila: Poisoned Victory in the Pacific War***, Oxford University Press, 504 pages, published February 3, 2025. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Aly Dramé, ***The Institutionalization of Islam in Southern Senegal: Intermarriage, Qur'anic Education, and Jihad***, University of Michigan Press, 270 pages, published July 21, 2025. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

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 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 **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].

Human Rights Watch (HRW) seeks an **Associate Director** – Development and Outreach. The deadline for application submission is April 12, 2026. For more information, see [HRW].

Human Rights Watch (HRW) seeks a Chief Operating Officer. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [HRW].

Save the Children International seeks a Director – Grant Finance & Compliance. The deadline for application submission is April 8, 2026. For more information, see [Save the Children].

Save the Children International seeks a **Chief Operating Officer**. The deadline for application submission is April 3, 2026. For more information, see [Save the Children].

The **Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF)** seeks a **Chief Representative**, Spain. The deadline for application submission is April 13, 2026. For more information, see [EJF].

The **EFTA Surveillance Authority (ESA)** seeks a **Legal Officer** – Internal Market Affairs (General). The

deadline for application submission is April 12, 2026. For more information, see [ESA].

The **EUnited - European Engineering Industries Association** seeks an **Environment & Sustainability Officer**. The deadline for application submission is April 17, 2026. For more information, see [EUnited].

The **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)** seeks a **Deputy Director – Japan Chair**. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [CSIS].

The **Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)** seeks a **Program Coordinator or Program Manager** – Economics Program and Scholl Chair in International Business. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [CSIS].

The **Center for American Progress** (CAP) seeks Chief Economist. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [CAP].

The **Center for American Progress** (CAP) seeks **Director, Economic Analysis**. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [CAP].

The **Hoover Institution at Stanford University** seeks a **Senior Research Program Manager**. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [Stanford University].

The **Hoover Institution at Stanford University** seeks a **Social Science Research Professional**. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis, until the position is filled. For more information, see [Stanford University].

The **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** seeks a **Program and Research Manager** – Sustainability, Climate, and Geopolitics Program. The deadline for application submission is April 2, 2026. For more information, see [Carnegie].

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