



Asia-Pacific Governance Watch

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1、 Government Policy and Legislation

Asia-Pacific

Call for Closer Policy Collaboration on Artificial Intelligence - ABAC Report

A recent APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) report revealed that artificial intelligence (AI) has a role to play in mitigating both the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on APEC economies. From automated health diagnostics in hospitals to smart recruitment processes in organizations, the report, titled Artificial Intelligence in APEC, finds that this technology is creating new, previously unforeseen jobs, products and services that will contribute to the post-COVID-19 economic recovery. "As we release this report, APEC economies are facing the twin threats of a global pandemic and an economic crisis that will leave its mark on our communities for years to come," said Dato' Rohana Tan Sri Mahmood, Chair of the 2020 APEC Business Advisory Council. "How APEC economies address the

accelerated rise of the digital economy and leverage new technologies like AI is one of the most pressing issues of our time,” she added. The report also examines how AI is being adopted and applied across the region and makes key recommendations calling for closer policy collaboration between business and governments.

Of the surveyed APEC economies, the report found that most already have plans, policies or programs devoted to driving or supporting AI ecosystems. In fact, the report highlights some of the AI-related innovation already underway across the region, including finding ways to help patients suffering from locked-in syndrome to communicate with the world by a team of engineers at a university in the Philippines. Another notable innovation will benefit the farming industry. A Japanese corporation is trying to improve the efficiency of farming by automatically aggregating and analyzing sensor data and satellite images to provide farmers with farm management recommendations. In addition, a group from New Zealand developed AI-powered crocodile-spotting drones to keep swimmers safe in Australian rivers, among others. “AI technologies have the potential to significantly impact businesses and communities across our economies,” Dato’ Rohana explained. “We believe that APEC can serve as an effective forum for member economies to collaborate on ways to maximize the benefits of AI and promote inclusive growth while ensuring its use in a responsible and ethical manner,” she added.

According to the report, recognizing this technology and all its capabilities is a central component of an economy’s forward-looking policy for growth, productivity and job creation, highlighting that the potential of AI extends beyond economic benefits and includes tools to address complex issues such as poverty, inequality, climate change, healthcare and ways to cope with effects of the pandemic. As AI becomes more widely accepted, adopted and used for innovation, the report suggests that APEC policymakers will need to draft new policies, revise existing ones, confront new questions, address new needs and reassess its impact. “With the cooperation of the public and private sector, a coordinated future of AI will increase the Asia-Pacific region’s competitiveness and further facilitate regional integration,” the report notes. Artificial intelligence, already well on its way to transforming the Asia-Pacific, drives social and economic growth across all key sectors. However, the pandemic, and the ensuing focus on economic recovery, brings a renewed sense of urgency to discussions around AI usage.

From <https://www.apec.org/> 01/06/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Military Releases Regulations on Officer Management

Approved by Xi Jinping, chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the CMC has released a set of interim regulations on the management of military officers on active service as well as multiple supporting regulations. The regulations, effective from Friday, uphold the Party's absolute leadership over the armed forces and focus on combat capabilities. Improving various policies such as those on the management of officers' career development and their service, welfare and support, the regulations aim to establish a career officers system with Chinese characteristics. The release of the regulations will help achieve more professional, sophisticated and scientific officer management, and will provide strong organizational guarantee and personnel support for achieving the Party's goal of strengthening the military in the new era and building world class armed forces.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/01/2021

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China Issues Guideline to Help Rural Banks Tackle Risks

China's top banking regulator has released a guideline to support rural banks in handling risks and push forward reform and restructuring. Issued by the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, the guideline urges major initiating banks to replenish capital for rural banks and help them manage non-performing loans. While calling for efforts to advance the reform and restructuring of rural banks, the guideline also encouraged qualified strategic investors to offer help in purchases and capital increases. To mitigate the mounting risks for some rural banks, the commission has urged local regulators to tailor risk management measures and stress initiating banks' responsibilities. The commission has also pledged to guide financial institutions and non-financial firms to participate in the reform and restructuring of rural banks. China had established 1,641 rural banks covering 71.2 percent of all county-level regions by the end of last September, official data showed.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/05/2021

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China to Prioritize Stability in Monetary Policy, Avoid Sudden Shifts in 2021

China will prioritize stability in its monetary policy and avoid making sudden shifts in 2021, said Chen Yulu, vice governor of the People's Bank of China (PBOC), the country's central bank, on Friday. The country's prudent monetary policy will be more flexible, precise, reasonable and moderate in 2021, Chen told a press conference. China will ensure that the growth of broad money supply and social financing basically matches nominal economic growth, aiming to provide support for economic recovery and high-quality development with moderate money supply growth, he

added. In the face of COVID-19 epidemic impacts in 2020, China continued to implement prudent monetary policy and stayed away from using measures such as quantitative easing, said Chen, adding that it has hedged the high uncertainties of the macro situation since the epidemic and kept the financial operation basically stable.

China will use a comprehensive range of monetary policy tools including reserve requirement ratio, re-lending and rediscount, medium-term lending facility and open market operations to maintain liquidity at a reasonably ample level, Chen said. He added that the country will give full play to the "drip irrigation" function of monetary policy tools and step up efforts to effectively support the real economy, while providing more financial support to technological innovation, small and micro-sized businesses, and green development. China's weighted average corporate lending rate was 4.61 percent at the end of 2020, down 0.51 percentage points from the previous year, and the target that financial institutions save enterprises 1.5 trillion yuan (about 232 billion U.S. dollars) was achieved, according to the PBOC.

To bolster the real economy, the central bank introduced the loan extension support tool and credit loan support tool. In 2020, China's banking sector deferred 7.3 trillion yuan of loans repayment and issued a total of 3.9 trillion yuan of the inclusive credit loans for small and micro businesses, an increase of 1.6 trillion yuan year on year, official data showed. Last year, the PBOC also offered a 300-billion-yuan loan via its re-lending program and a 1.5-trillion-yuan re-lending and rediscounted quota, supporting more than 600,000 enterprises affected by the epidemic, said Chen. The central bank will strengthen financial support for small and micro-sized businesses in 2021, Chen added. It will also strive to keep consumer prices stable while preventing big fluctuations in the country's asset prices through macro-prudential policies, Chen said. He warned against external risks arising from fluctuations in the international financial markets and cross-border capital flow as well as potential increase in debt risks of low-income countries.

Facing these challenges, China will focus on its domestic agenda and strengthen its economic fundamentals while enhancing its ability to forestall systemic risks, Chen said, adding that the country will also strengthen macroeconomic policy coordination with other countries to promote global recovery. When asked about the trend of RMB exchange rate, Sun Guofeng, head of monetary policy department of the PBOC, told the press conference that two-way fluctuations in the yuan will become normal. The yuan gained 6.9 percent against the U.S. dollar in 2020, Sun said, adding the exchange rate depends on factors including domestic and foreign economic situations, balance of payments and changes in the international foreign exchange market. He stressed that the central bank will keep the yuan basically stable at a reasonable and balanced level.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/15/2021

China Vows No "Policy Cliff" in 2021

China will not see a "policy cliff" in 2021 as the country aims to keep its macro policies consistent, stable and sustainable to support steady economic recovery, an official said Tuesday. "China's macro policies will be in line with the needs of sustaining stable and sound economic development, and there will be no abrupt turnarounds," Yan Pengcheng, an official with the National Development and Reform Commission, told a press conference. Yan underscored the necessity of sustaining supportive measures this year, as some micro, small and medium-sized enterprises have just managed to navigate the COVID-19 slump and still need some time to recover. Last year, China unveiled a series of special measures in response to the epidemic-induced economic fallout. These measures played an important role in stabilizing the Chinese economy amid the ravaging COVID-19 and global economic recession. But some of the temporary and emergency relief policies cannot be used as "long-term solutions," Yan noted. With the economy gradually restoring strength, more efforts are needed to stimulate the vitality of market entities via reforms and innovation, which will also provide more space for policymakers to maneuver in the face of a more complicated situation in the future, Yan added. In the key Central Economic Work Conference held last month, China's policymakers have vowed to keep macro policies consistent, stable and sustainable in 2021, with continued implementation of a proactive fiscal policy and prudent monetary policy.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/19/2021

China to Take Resolute Measures to Curb Arbitrary Charges on Enterprises

China will tighten measures and mechanisms to curb arbitrary charges on enterprises, said the State Council executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang on Wednesday. The meeting noted that in recent years, various localities and competent departments have worked hard to overhaul business-related charges. Administrative charges by the central government and government-managed funds have been cut by 70 percent and 30 percent, respectively, and local governments have scrapped a large number of charges. "The tax and fee cuts rolled out last year, as well as the policy to temporarily cut or exempt enterprises' social insurance contributions, have played a vital role in ensuring the stable operations of market entities and keeping the fundamentals of the economy stable," Li said. The meeting noted that given the current complexity in the epidemic and economic situations, market entities are still faced with many difficulties. The problem of arbitrary levy of

charges must be tackled in terms of both symptoms and root causes, to lessen the burden on enterprises, and strengthen the foundation for steady economic recovery.

Inspections targeting unwarranted charges on enterprises shall be carried out nationwide to seriously deal with such issues as arbitrarily imposing new charges, raising charging standards, and expanding charging scope and willful apportionment. Self-examinations and random inspections of fees charged by industry associations shall be carried out across the board. Law enforcement in transportation, taxation and emergency management shall be better regulated. Discretionary standards will be formulated carefully. Minor violations, first-time or occasional offenders in road traffic shall be handled more with warning than fines. A list-based mechanism, where first violation will not be punished, shall be promoted in the law enforcement in the taxation sector. The mechanism on managing fines and confiscations will be better enforced and refined. All fines and confiscated revenues shall be turned over to the state coffers, and revenues and expenditures will be managed separately. "The economy is still recovering, and the foundation is not solid. We need to let enterprises feel how much the government cares about their survival and development and resolutely curb arbitrary charges on enterprises," Li said.

Charges in key areas will continue to be revamped. The new government-managed funds that charge corporate fees must observe rigorous legal procedures. All maturing funds must be canceled if conditions permit, and charging standards shall be lowered regarding those that cannot be canceled for the time being. Dynamic management of administrative charges shall be strengthened. The charging standard that notably exceed the service costs will be reduced, and administrative charges that involve general management functions will be abolished. Oversight on charges at seaports shall be stepped up. Mandatory service charges and pricing irregularities will be duly investigated and dealt with, including those in customs declaration, freight forwarding, logistics, warehousing, cargo handling, inspection and quarantine processes. Revision of relevant laws and regulations shall be accelerated, including those on the administrative punishment of price-related violations. Undue administrative penalties shall be revised or repealed in a timely manner to provide institutional safeguards against arbitrary charges on enterprises.

The meeting also urged the collection of statutory taxes and fees in an orderly manner, and ensure no undue burden shall be added to enterprises and the general public. No localities should require, on their own, that previous arrears be paid off in a lump sum, and ensure that the transfer of fee-collection responsibility shall not add to the financial burdens on enterprises, smaller businesses in particular. Provincial authorities shall keep the current way of payment collection unchanged. Reform on government functions shall be deepened, and the procedures for social insurance payment optimized, to expand the scope of zero-contact services. Online services shall be made available for business-related charges by the end of July, and mobile terminal services for individual-related items by the end of this year. Innovative

measures shall be adopted to ensure convenience for vulnerable groups such as the elderly and people with severe disability in making these payments. Monitoring and analysis of the collection of social insurance premiums shall be enhanced, and any problem identified will be dealt with in a timely manner. Oversight and inspection shall be stepped up to strictly hold all violations accountable.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/21/2021

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China's Securities Regulator to Strengthen Regulation, Risk Prevention

China's securities watchdog said on Thursday that it would toughen regulations and risk prevention in 2021. Efforts will be made to maintain the normalization of initial public offerings (IPO) and refinancing activities, and optimize the mechanism of commodity and financial futures, according to a work conference of the China Securities Regulatory Commission. While tightening the information supervision of companies to be listed, the commission will unveil stricter measures to prevent disorderly capital expansion. Stressing steady efforts to apply the registration-based IPO system to all markets, the commission said it will seek more delisting approaches. The commission also vowed tight monitoring of market liquidity and financial leverage.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/28/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: Legislation on Compensating Virus-Hit Small Biz Picks Up Steam

The government and the ruling party's push for legislation on compensating small businesses for their losses incurred by COVID-19 restrictions has picked up steam in recent days after President Moon Jae-in called for institutionalized compensation for them. But how to finance the huge budget needed to compensate the victims remains a major stumbling block to tackle, along with the potential controversy over how to set the standards for the compensation and measure the size of losses incurred by each business. On Wednesday, the ruling Democratic Party (DP) officially began an internal process to enact a law on financially compensating the self-employed and small merchants ordered to suspend or cut down business operations under state-imposed social distancing requirements. The DP had a plenary party meeting via a video link to collect opinions of its lawmakers on the matter and will hold another meeting Thursday to discuss details of the legislation plan.

The move came two days after Moon instructed the government to review ways to institutionalize compensation for those people "within a certain range that (state) finance can afford," bringing to an end an apparent discord within the government. The call represented Moon's first public message on whether relevant legislation is necessary, which has emerged as a hot political issue ahead of the April 7 mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan. Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun renewed his call on the finance ministry for related legislation the following day. "Within the limit of the national financial capacity, the related government bodies should review (the legislation) through sufficient consultation, especially in consideration of the opinions from the affected businesses themselves," Chung instructed Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki during their meeting Tuesday.

The government and the ruling party began discussing the compensation issue two weeks ago and the prime minister first instructed the finance ministry last Thursday to take measures to legally enable compensations for the victimized business owners. Owners of cafes, fitness studios, karaoke rooms, cram schools and other businesses took a crushing blow as they have been ordered to close or limit business operations as part of the government's social distancing guidelines aimed at containing the latest wave of mass coronavirus infections. The finance ministry initially responded negatively toward the move, citing budget constraints. But after the repeated call from the prime minister, Hong explained that the finance ministry has recognized the need to institutionalize compensation measures and had been reviewing it before the president delivered the instructions.

"We will move forward with the measures by discussing the specifics thoroughly with the ruling party," Hong said. Currently, several related bills are pending at the National Assembly, including a proposal by DP lawmaker Min Byoung-dug, which calls for redeeming 70 percent of sales losses suffered by businesses ordered to close. It also requires compensations to cover 60 percent of the sales losses inflicted on businesses whose operations were restricted as part of social distancing. But compensations such as those proposed by Min would detrimentally cripple the state budget spending and inflate government debt, especially after the government drew up four rounds of COVID-19 response extra budget last year, said critics. A rough calculation indicates that the country may need nearly 25 trillion won (US\$22.6 billion) each month to fulfill the compensations under Min's legislation proposal. The accumulated government expenditure would reach up to 100 trillion won if the compensation is to cover four months.

As the debate on the compensation scheme continued, Kim Chong-in, the leader of the main opposition People Power Party, renewed a proposal to set aside a 100 trillion-won budget to deal with the coronavirus aftereffects. Kim's proposal calls on the government to reconfigure its 558 trillion-won budget for this year to reserve the 100 trillion-won spending for the coronavirus response. "The economy would be able to normalize only when the president, with a stronger determination, thoroughly

overcomes this crisis," the main opposition party leader said during a party event Tuesday. Industry insiders and experts, meanwhile, agreed that the envisioned legislation would help lay out the legal grounds to compensate for private losses incurred by public health protection measures against COVID-19 as well as potential outbreaks of other contagious diseases in the future. But the legislation needs to leave the specifics of the compensation, such as its scope or coverage, in the hands of government bodies in charge, they noted.

"Considering other situations following the COVID-19 pandemic, a standing law, rather than a temporary act, would be better in laying the ground and system for compensations," professor Lee In-ho of Seoul National University said. "Related government bodies can then step in to draw up detailed compensation schemes in accordance with the situational (need)," he noted. Apparently conscious of the controversy over the legislation initiative, the DP has veered toward an option that would leave it up to government bodies to decide details regarding who to compensate and how much. "It would be more effective administratively to let (government bodies) decide the specifics through enforcement ordinances," the party's policy committee chief Rep. Hong Ihk-pyo said during a radio interview Monday. "(Through the legislation) the party is considering the (compensation) payment before the end of March or early April at the latest," he added.

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NORTH KOREA: Moon Reaffirms Commitment to Engagement with North Korea

President Moon Jae-in reaffirmed his commitment to reviving the stalled nuclear talks with North Korea at a meeting Thursday, where he was briefed by his security aides on major initiatives this year to improve inter-Korean relations and South Korea's ties with the outside world. At the briefing, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it would work closely with the Biden administration to help restart nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang. Senior-level talks with the US to discuss North Korea will be arranged once President Biden's security team is set up, it added. The ministry discussed expanding exchanges with China. A senior ministry official said the government will again push for a state visit by President Xi Jinping once the coronavirus situation stabilizes. The visit was pushed back last year due to the pandemic.

The ministry said it would work to improve ties with Japan as well, amid a rekindled diplomatic feud over the unresolved legacies of the two countries' past such as the "comfort women" and forced labor issues. Meanwhile, the Unification Ministry in charge of inter-Korean affairs said it would restore communications with Pyongyang.

The North demolished the inter-Korean liaison office at the border and cut hotlines in June last year to protest the cross-border launch of anti-North propaganda leaflets. The ministry also said it will ask the National Assembly to ratify the Panmunjom Declaration signed by Moon and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un at their first summit in April 2018. The parliamentary approval is seen as a signal to Pyongyang that Seoul is serious about honoring the peace deal.

The Ministry of National Defense stressed upholding the 2018 inter-Korean military pact, which calls for the two neighbors to stop aggression work for peace on the peninsula. It added it will try holding regularly military talks with the North to discuss implementing the pact. They have not met since signing the pact. The ministry said it would work to ensure a smooth takeover of the wartime operational command Seoul intends to reclaim from Washington by May next year. But the two allies missed out on joint drills last year that were supposed to test Korea's readiness, rendering the timeframe impossible to meet. President Moon also opened his first National Security Council meeting this year shortly before the briefing, where he asked his aides to take the initiative in expanding South Korea's foreign relations on the back of a strong South Korea-US alliance.

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South-East Asia

CAMBODIA: Launching 3-Year Economic Diplomacy Strategy

Cambodia on Monday launched a three-year economic diplomacy strategy (2021-2023), aiming at enhancing ties in trade, investment, tourism and culture between the kingdom and friendly countries. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said the strategy would serve as a roadmap for ministries and institutions to strengthen their work efficiency in economic diplomacy to help support economic growth, reduce the country's reliance on external aid, and enhance the country's interest in the region and in the world. "The strategy mainly focuses on four goals: promoting international trade, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), enhancing tourism, and promoting cultural exchange including the promotion of Cambodian food," he said at the launching ceremony in Phnom Penh. Sokhonn said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation would act as a coordinator to help relevant ministries and institutions to attract FDI, to increase bilateral and multilateral trade volumes, and to attract tourists through promoting cultural value abroad. He is confident that the strategy will contribute to supporting the kingdom's economic growth, which has been hit hard by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Sokhonn, the pandemic has seriously hit the kingdom's manufacturing industry, tourism, transportation and real estate. At the event, a book featuring Cambodian food entitled "The Taste of Angkor" was also

launched.

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MYANMAR: Launching Nationwide COVID-19 Vaccination Program

Myanmar launched a COVID-19 vaccination program across the country on Wednesday. The vaccination program started with medical staff who are working in the frontline in the country's regions and states. Myanmar recently received the first batch of 1.5 million doses of Covishield vaccine, which will be enough for 750,000 people. Frontline health workers and volunteers are given priority to be inoculated from Wednesday, followed by parliamentarians from Friday, according to a statement from the Health and Sports Ministry. As the first phase of the program, over 3,800 medical staff of public health department and hospitals are being vaccinated in Myanmar's capital of Nay Pyi Taw on Wednesday. About 25,459 medical staff and health workers dealing with COVID-19 patients and those from the public health department of Yangon region will be vaccinated from Wednesday, said Tun Myint, deputy director-general of Yangon Region's Public Health Department. "The vaccine is a light relief for us, frontline medics, as it may help decrease the infections in number," he said. He also urged the public to continue non-pharmaceutical interventions even after getting inoculated. Vaccines will be distributed to the public since Feb. 5, along with the members of union-level and regional or state-level governments, the statement said. The priorities will be given to the elderly, people with underlying diseases and people residing in the high density of population. The vaccines will be given in two doses and the second dose will follow 28 days after the first shot. According to the ministry, about 2 million doses of Covishield vaccine will arrive in the country in the first week of next month, followed by many more batches. The COVID-19 was first detected in Myanmar on March 23 last year and the number of positive cases reached 138,368, while its death toll was recorded at 3,082 as of late Tuesday.

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MALAYSIA: Gov't Signs Deal for 12 Mln Doses of Sinovac's COVID-19 Vaccine

The Malaysian government signed a deal on Tuesday to procure 12 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine CoronaVac developed by Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac. The vaccines would be supplied through Malaysia's leading pharmaceutical company Pharmaniaga following the signing of an agreement between the company and Malaysia's Health Ministry, the Health Ministry said in a statement. The 12 million

doses will cover six million people or 18.75 percent of Malaysia's total population, as part of its immunization program, said the statement. Sinovac's vaccines are expected to be supplied to Malaysia in stages from April after obtaining approval from Malaysia's National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA) and Drug Control Authority (DCA), it added. Earlier this month, Pharmaniaga signed a partnership with Sinovac for the supply of the latter's COVID-19 vaccines to Malaysia, involving a fill and finish process of the vaccines by Pharmaniaga. Pharmaniaga group managing director Zulkarnain Md Eusope said in a statement on Tuesday that the company is very pleased with Sinovac's preliminary results from the phase 3 clinical trial results in several countries. "... we are very confident that CoronaVac is safe, efficacious and of high quality for the use of Malaysians," he said. The Pharmaniaga official added that the storage and distribution condition of this vaccine is between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius, which is a common vaccine temperature catered by Pharmaniaga's existing facilities as well as storage facilities at government hospitals and clinics.

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PHILIPPINES: Regulator Approves AstraZeneca Vaccine for Emergency Use

The Philippines' Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has authorized the emergency use of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, FDA head Enrique Domingo said on Thursday. "Based on the totality of evidence available to date, including data from adequate and well-known controlled trials, it is reasonable to believe COVID-19 vaccine AstraZeneca may be effective to prevent COVID-19," Domingo said in a virtual press conference. AstraZeneca is the second vaccine maker authorized by the Philippines for emergency use. The Philippines also approved on January 14 emergency use of Pfizer Inc and BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine. The Philippines is in talks with at least seven vaccine makers to procure 148 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines this year. It aims to vaccinate 50 to 70 million people, or more than 60 percent of the total population this year, to achieve herd immunity. The Philippines now has 518,407 confirmed COVID-19 cases, including 10,481 deaths.

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THAILAND: Approving Economic Support Plan amid COVID-19

Thailand's cabinet of ministers on Tuesday approved an economic support plan worth over 210 billion baht (about 7 billion U.S. dollars) to aid low-income earners and businesses affected by COVID-19. Under the plan, the government will offer some 31.1 million people 3,500 baht per month for February and March, said an

official attached to the Government House. Eligible recipients will include farmers, self-employed workers and other low-income earners, and they will have to download and register the App Rao Chana (We Win) from Jan. 29 to obtain the grant, according to the official, who only spoke on condition of anonymity. The money will not be handed out in cash, but used to pay via the App for the purchase of goods and services at restaurants, food shops, retail stores, hotels and servicing shops throughout the country, the official said. The goods will exclude alcoholic beverages. Those who currently hold state welfare cards, have joined the government's co-payment campaign and earn less than 300,000 baht per year are also eligible for the grant. Thailand has so far confirmed 12,594 infections, with more than 8,000 of these cases reported since mid-December and 61 of the country's 77 provinces and regions having active cases. The Bank of Thailand said though the latest outbreak spread faster compared with last year, the economic impacts would be milder as the government has been imposing more flexible restrictive measures, with fewer businesses being suspended.

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VIETNAM: HCM City Approves Transport Infrastructure Plan

The People's Committee of HCM City has approved an infrastructure development project for the 2021-30. Of note, the city will propose breakthrough solutions and develop appropriate plans to develop a modern, highly connected transport system. The plan aims to reduce traffic congestion and accidents, and meet the needs of socio-economic development. It includes solutions for management policies, transport infrastructure, and capital and investment policies. The city will mobilise capital to speed up the progress of projects such as the ring roads No 3 and No 4, Cát Lái Bridge and Cần Giở Bridge. At a meeting last week, Lê Hòa Bình, deputy head of the city's People Committee, directed the Department of Transport to coordinate with departments, and People's Committees of 24 districts and other units to implement the project. The department will be responsible for advising the People's Committee, assigning responsibilities to all levels and sectors, and ensuring the progress, consistency, quality and efficiency of the project.

Annually, the Department will report to the People's Committee on the progress of the project, in addition to coordinating with departments, agencies and units to propose adjustments to comply with regulations. Recently, the city completed a number of major transport projects, and plans to complete many others by 2025 that will ease congestion at its gateways and improve connectivity with neighbouring provinces. In addition, works on many long-stalled infrastructure projects in HCM City will resume this year. The projects include Long Kiểng Bridge in Nhà Bè District, Tang Long and Nam Lý bridges in District 9, the upgrading and expansion of projects at Lương Định Của and Nguyễn Văn Hườnng streets in District 2, and road No 9 in

Hóc Môn District. The management boards of these projects are coordinating with the municipal Department of Transport and other departments and agencies to simplify procedures, improve bidding quality, and enhance the supervision of projects to promptly eliminate obstacles.

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Việt Nam Achieves Poverty Reduction Goals

Việt Nam has gained impressive achievements in poverty reduction in recent years under the leadership of the Party and the Government, but more will be done to ensure these efforts leave sustainable impacts. Under the leadership of the Party and the Government, localities nationwide have implemented solutions and programmes to help local people develop suitable livelihood models to escape poverty and improve their lives, especially in 2016-2020. The Mường Nhé Nature Reserve in the northern province of Điện Biên started to implement a project to develop the livelihood based on the forest in five communes in the buffer zone of the forest. The project of planting Sa nhân tím (*Amomum longiligulare* T.L.Wu), a valuable species of medical plants, was first conducted in Sín Thầu Commune, the westernmost area of the country. Initially, local people were reluctant to join the project as they were unaware of the economic benefits gained from growing the plant. Pờ Dẩn Sinh, a Hà Nhì ethnic resident in Tả Kớ Khừ tribal village of the commune, was a pioneer in implementing this project. Sinh, a former Party Secretary and Chairman of the People's Committee of Sín Thầu in 2000-2015, set an example for locals. Witnessing his success, the local residents followed suit. Sa nhân tím is a valuable plant that can be used as traditional medicine, spice and a source of aromatic material.

Việt Nam is rich in wild *Amomum Longiligulare* and at least four species are commonly used in the country including *Amomum Longiligulare* T.L.Wu. The demand for this plant is increasing while the amount of the plant collected is decreasing. The medical plant is easy to take care of and can be sold at a good price. Planting this in mountainous areas also helps the forest as the plants have a high moisture level, helping to prevent fires as well as soil erosion in the forest. Local farmers can harvest the first crop after about two years with a hectare yielding about 100kg of fruits. Dried fruits can be sold at VNĐ500,000 (\$21.7) per kilo. The success in Sín Thầu had a ripple effect. Local residents in other localities including Nậm Pồ, Mường Chà, Điện Biên, Tuần Giáo and Tủa Chùa started planting this species and earned income. The programmes and solutions to alleviate poverty have had positive results in the district. After five years of implementing the national target programme on sustainable poverty reduction, the rate of the poor households in the district decreased from 74.02 per cent in 2015 to 58.43 per cent in 2020. Mường Nhé District in Điện Biên is only one of the localities across the nation working to help local residents develop

suitable livelihoods to improve their life.

The Party and State have identified sustainable poverty reduction and ensuring social security as an important goal in the development process, which is clearly shown in the documents of the Party, the resolutions of the National Assembly, and strategies, plans, schemes and programmes of the Government. The National Steering Committee on National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction during 2016-2020 has been assisting Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc in directing and co-ordinating ministries, agencies and localities to resolve issues related to mechanisms and policies to realise poverty reduction objectives. All 63 provinces and cities of Việt Nam have also released several policies regarding poverty reduction to support poor households. Bắc Kạn Province has issued policies to encourage poor households to develop plants and breeds that are suitable with the local climate, soil and bring high economic benefits. Hà Nội has supported those who are unable to escape poverty while HCM City has constructed a sustainable poverty reduction strategy within its overall socio-economic development plan. With such persistent efforts, milestone achievements have been attained with more than 6 million people escaping poverty in 2016-2019. Roughly 2 million people were also removed from the list of those living under the poverty line in the same period. The number of poor households decreased 40.66 per cent in Si Ma Cai District and 39.96 per cent in Mường Khương District in Lào Cai Province, and 34.51 per cent in Mù Cang Chải District in Yên Bái Province.

Once calculated, the poverty rate in Việt Nam is expected to stand at 2.75 per cent in 2020. By achieving this, the rate of the poor households will have decreased by 1.43 per cent a year, meeting the targets set by the National Assembly and the Resolution of the 12th National Party Congress. What is more, Việt Nam attained the UN's Millennium Development Goals on poverty reduction 10 years ahead of schedule and was hailed as a global model in the task. Despite the impressive results, there are limitations that need to be tackled in poverty reduction. According to the National Steering Committee on National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction in 2016-2020, poverty alleviation is still not sustainable with a high rate of poor households and the increasing gap between the rich and poor as well as among the groups. The poverty rate among ethnic minority groups is still high. In addition, some mechanisms and policies for poor areas, mountainous areas, and ethnic minority areas are ineffective. In late 2020, the Government set new poverty standards for 2021-2025. With this new standard, the country will have about 4.5 million households with income below the poverty line, equivalent to more than 17 million people, which is a huge challenge for the country. However, this will serve as a basis for more accurate and comprehensive identification of poor households, near-poor households and other beneficiaries of national poverty reduction and social security policies. The national multidimensional poverty line in 2021-2025 will also serve as the basis for making policies, mechanisms and solutions to achieve multidimensional, inclusive and sustainable poverty reduction.

Việt Nam Aims to Become a Socialist-Oriented Developed Nation by Mid-21st Century

Việt Nam will strive to become a socialist-oriented developed nation by the middle of the 21st century, Party leader Nguyễn Phú Trọng has said in the opening session of the 13th National Party Congress in Hà Nội on Tuesday. Speaking while presenting the 12th tenure Party Central Committee's report on documents submitted to the Congress, Party General Secretary and State President Nguyễn Phú Trọng said the goal was one of the overall objectives in the political report for the 2021-2025 tenure and beyond. Other objectives include enhancing the Party's leadership, ruling capacity and effectiveness, building a clean and strong Party and political system in all aspects to consolidate people's trust in the Party, State and the socialist system, while also promoting innovation, aspirations for developments and national unity. The report also has targets for pushing the đổi mới (renewal) policy forward, national industrialisation and modernisation and defending the homeland as well as maintaining peace and stability. It determines concrete goals based on the principles of ensuring scientificness and practicality and making appropriate changes in each stage of national development by making use of international experience and globally-recognised development standards.

Specifically, by 2025, Việt Nam hopes to become a developing nation with modernity-oriented industry and surpass the low-middle-income level. By 2030, it aims to be a developing nation with modern industry and upper-middle-income level. By 2045, the country is set to become a developed nation with a high-income level. The past tenure saw Việt Nam's economic growth rate being kept at quite high rate, about 5.9 per cent, with stable macroeconomic foundation and strong growth in exports and social investment. In 2020, the country has also received widespread recognition for its competent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, keeping the infection and death number low which allows the economy to resume and grow, Trọng said. Despite the many achievements, Việt Nam is still facing difficulties and challenges. Economic growth rate still not yet to match the true potentials, the autonomy and resilience of the economy are not high enough. The State economic sector, especially State-owned enterprises, are still operating inefficiently, facing numerous difficulties and bottlenecks. The domestic private sector and the foreign-invested sector are enjoying rapid but not sustainable development, according to the report.

Tasks and solutions

According to Party General Secretary and President Trọng, the 13th National Congress is a key milestone so it's essential to properly implement tasks and

solutions set in the documents submitted to the Congress to bring the country to a new state of development with several priorities, including the building and rectification of the Party and State, as well as building a socialist rule-of-law State and a pure and strong political system. There must be harmonisation between the Party building and rectification, as well as between Party building and protection, Trọng said. He stressed the need to persistently pursue and creatively develop Marxism-Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh Thought and raise the leadership and effectiveness of the Party. The fight against corruption would be continued, while "self-evolution" and "self-transformation" within the Party would be curbed. Attention would be paid to renewing and perfecting the organisational apparatus of the political system in parallel with the consolidation and improvement of the quality of Party organisations at the grassroots level and the contingent of Party members. The State's capacity and efficiency will be improved in terms of institutions and in the implementation of the Party's guidelines and resolutions. The work of the Fatherland Front and socio-political organisations are set to be renewed while the rights and interests of youth members and the people will be well protected.

Economic goals

The report also reveals that Việt Nam will aim to transform its economic growth paradigm with a stronger focus on industrialisation and modernisation, science and technology development, innovation and high-quality human resources development. As part of the transformation efforts, Vietnamese enterprises will be encouraged to participate in new industries, agriculture will be restructured towards eco-farming, modern rural areas and civilised farmers, the sea economy will be pursued sustainably and in line with upholding the country's sea and island sovereignty and the service sector will receive due attention. Another goal is to carry out synchronised measures to soon perfect the socialist-oriented market mechanism; improve governance and management capacity and efficiency; better handle the relationship between the State, market and society, and between businesses and the public; and resolve bottlenecks that hamper the growth of the country, especially institutions and policies. Efforts will be expended to enhance inter-sectoral, intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity and links and promote the participation into global value chains or production networks to open up new development spaces.

The role of State-owned enterprises will be upheld in the opening of supply chains and value chains, especially in key sectors and industries that the State needs to control, but the private sector will still enjoy every favourable condition to grow fast, sustainably, and strongly in terms of scale and quality. The focus in the policy to attract foreign investment will shift from quantity to quality, where projects with modern technology, high added value, modern governance models, and strong ties to domestic economic sectors will be prioritised. The digital economy and digital society will be pursued robustly to create breakthroughs in the economy's productivity, quality, efficiency and competitiveness. According to the report, the Party and the State will strive to inspire patriotism, pride, resilience, humanitarianism,

solidarity, social consensus and the ambition to develop the country among all Vietnamese people; build mechanisms and policies to promote the contributions of all Vietnamese people. The development of the Vietnamese culture will involve both the promotion of the values of the nation with the acquisition of humanity's quintessential cultural values so culture will serve as the spiritual foundation and an inner source of strength for the country's socio-economic development and international integration. Social policies will be ensured to promote social equity and improve the quality of life and happiness of Vietnamese people, multidimensional poverty reduction efforts will be continued comprehensively and sustainably and the delivery of basic social services will be ensured and enhanced – especially for the poor and disadvantaged groups in society.

Security and defence priorities

Regarding security and defence, the goals in the report are the maintenance of the country's independence and autonomy; strengthening national defence and security capacity; improving the quality and efficiency of foreign affairs and international integration; defending the country's independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity; and maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for national development. The military is hoped to become streamlined, capable, and robust by 2025, with the setting up of modern forces by 2030 and building a modern military starting from 2030, while the police forces are set to become capable and modern people's security forces by 2030. Security tasks involve the timely detection and effective handling of complex security and order issues, and timely suppression of various types of crimes – especially organised crimes, transnational crimes, high-tech crimes and drug rings. Foreign affairs and international integration will be promoted, with stronger ties between Party diplomacy, State diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy; building a modern diplomatic foundation with a focus on defence and security diplomacy to protect the country from afar, on economic diplomacy to boost economic development (aiming to take full advantage of the opportunities brought about by international integration, especially free trade deals), and on expanding cultural diplomacy to promote the image and brand value of Việt Nam to the world.

National unity

The report also sets promoting national unity, socialist democracy, strengthening legislation and ensuring social discipline as important goals. Việt Nam will aim to harmoniously handle the relationship between the interests of different social classes while ensuring that all ethnic groups are equal and united, respect and support each other. The focus will be on effectively implementing ethnic and religious policies, with special policies to deal with difficulties for ethnic minority groups and to ensure religious solidarity and national unity. All plots and activities aiming to destroy national unity and hinder national development will be strictly dealt with. The role of the people will be promoted, with citizens central to the country's development strategy. Several key principles will be upheld, including socio-political proactiveness,

the rights and responsibilities of people to take part in building and promoting the Party, building a socialist law-governed State, Fatherland Front and socio-political organisations, building a contingent of Party members, officials and public servants; having a mechanism to promote potential, strength and innovation ability, and mobilising people to take part in economic development and social development management. Ensuring open and transparent information and the right to be informed and access to information for people from all walks of life is another goal, as is effectively implementing direct democracy and representative democracy, particularly democracy at the grassroots level. The report also aims at speeding up the completion and construction of a united, synchronous, modern, feasible, transparent and stable legal system that is easy to access and of high international competitiveness, ensuring the rights and legitimate interests of people, promoting innovation and ensuring requirements for sustainable economic and social development and national defence and security.

Effective use of land and resources

In terms of land and natural resources, the report aims for tightening their management and effective use, while enhancing environmental protection and implementing measures to adapt to climate change. It also calls for building strategies and completing the management mechanism system to effectively use resources with a focus on land, water and minerals, which will require building legal system, policies and mechanism to supervise resources and environment and climate change, forecasting and giving warnings about natural resources, pollution and environmental disasters and diseases. Violations of natural resources and environmental regulations will be prevented and strictly punished. International co-operation in sharing information, studying, managing, exploiting and effectively and sustainably using natural resources will be promoted, as will efforts to ensure biosecurity, environmental security, water security, food security and energy security. Another target is the harmonious settlement of the relationship between economic development and environmental protection. This includes developing the green economy with low waste, low carbon and greenhouse gas emission reduction and encouraging the development of circular economy models. Improving climate change resistance and resilience of the infrastructure system and the economy while taking smart solutions to adapt to climate change in agro-forestry and fishery and other economic sectors are also mentioned.

Changes in implementing strategic breakthroughs

Party General Secretary Trong said during the implementation of these key tasks and solutions, there was a need to focus investment on resources and to pay attention to leadership to create changes in implementing the three strategic development breakthroughs put forward by the 11th and 12th National Party Congresses, which would be supplemented at this year's congress to match the new development period. These efforts would include completing institutions key to the development of the socialist market-oriented economy. The priority would be on

completing the legal system, mechanism and polities to create a favourable, healthy and equal business and investment environment and promoting innovation; mobilising and effectively managing and using all resources for development, particularly land and finance; enhancing decentralisation and supervision and examination. Another focus would be developing human resources, particularly high-quality human resources, based on improving education and training quality with a connection with a mechanism to employ, use and well treat talented people; and promoting scientific and technological research, transfer and application. In addition, it would be important to build a modern infrastructure system in terms of socio-economy, environment, national defence and security, giving priority to the development of key national projects relating to transport and climate change adaptation; and paying attention to developing information and telecommunications infrastructure, creating a national digital transformation platform, developing the digital economy and digital society.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/27/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: EESL Inks MoU with NHAI for Solar Power & Energy Efficiency Projects

In an effort to establish clean energy infra at National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) establishments, Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) signed a pact with NHAI for establishing solar projects, LED lighting and EV charging stations. EESL inks MoU with NHAI for solar power & energy efficiency projects According to an official statement, "The MoU will facilitate the implementation of energy efficiency projects, renewable energy projects and e-mobility services as a part of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, reduce emissions and achieve sustainable development all across toll plazas, highway lighting and other NHAI establishments." EESL will be establishing solar power projects at NHAI buildings/ structures/ vacant land parcels. It will also set up EV charging infrastructure at toll plazas and at NHAI buildings. The Highway Authority likely to avail project management consultancy services for energy-efficient LED lighting from EESL. We have signed an MoU with @NHAI_Official to establish various clean energy & energy efficiency interventions at NHAI structures, in the presence of Chairman, EESL- Shri Rajeev Sharma and Member of Operations, NHAI- Shri R K Pandey @MinOfPower @PIB_India @nitin_gadkari pic.twitter.com/9Mxsme04b8— EESL India (@EESL_India) January 8, 2021. As reported by a national daily, Saurabh Kumar, Executive Vice Chairperson, EESL, said that energy demand is on the rise and India is heading towards a sustainability-driven future by adopting energy efficiency initiatives.

India Inks MoU with Japan to Enhance Cooperation in Field of ICT

Union Minister for Communication, Electronics and IT, Ravi Shankar Prasad, on January 15, inked an MoU with Internal Affairs and Communication Minister of Japan, Takeda Ryota to enhance cooperation in the field of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). The MoU was exchanged through a video conference today. India inks MoU with Japan to enhance cooperation in field of ICT. Department of Telecom, Government of India and Ministry of Communications, Government of Japan will enhance mutual cooperation in the field of 5G technologies, telecom security, submarine optical fibre cable system to islands of India, spectrum management, smart cities, high altitude platform for broadband in unconnected areas, disaster management and public safety, etc. Also, as per the agreement, Government of India organisation such as C-DOT and ITI Ltd along with industry partners from Japan will also be a part of this cooperation. The IT Minister cited the timely execution of connecting Andaman & Nicobar Islands with submarine optical fibre cable as an excellent example of successful cooperation between India and Japan. He also shared the rapid adoption of innovative technologies by India during the COVID-19 pandemic such as AarogyaSetu app, use of Aadhaar Enabled Payment System for doorstep disbursement of cash by India Post, digital hearings in Courts, etc. Further, he highlighted that during the pandemic, due to lucrative policies like PLI and SPECS large amount of investments have come to India in the field of electronics manufacturing. The minister urged the Japanese electronics industry to invest in India and avail the benefits of the new technologies. He also highlighted the potential that India holds for Japanese investors in the field of 5G and 5G-based services, Internet of Things, digital health technologies etc.

MeitY to Table Proposal for AI-based Programmes & Policy for Cabinet's Approval

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) is finding artificial intelligence a potential solution to address problems such as language barrier commonly faced issue by the Indians. The ministry expects to get a nod from the cabinet in a month to launch programmes based on the next-generation technology, said senior government officials. According to Abhishek Singh, CEO, MyGov and National e-Governance Division (NeGD), the ministry will soon reach out to the cabinet with a policy to launch AI-based programmes. However, Amitabh Kant, CEO, NITI Aayog, in a statement said that though the details are not to be discussed

publicly yet the ministry is expected to table the proposal for the policy within 60 days. He also mentioned the RAISE 2020 Summit, a conference on AI which Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate today in the evening. As per the view of Ajay Sawhney, Secretary, MeitY, "AI will bring tremendous opportunity for India if the talent pool that the country has is used to solve various problems by using the technology." Adding on, said that there are 22 regional languages and people who know only a particular language are unable to communicate with others. "This is one of the many other problems that artificial intelligence can address," Sawhney said. National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence (NSAI) highlighted the potential of AI in boosting India's annual growth rate by 1.3 percentage points by 2035 and identified priority sectors for the deployment of AI with government's support.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: How WhatsApp's Updated Privacy Policy to Affect Users?

Baku Transport Agency (BTA) is working to include option of filling up balance of 'BakiKart' travel cards by non-cash methods, Spokesman for BTA Mais Aghayev told Trend on Jan.12. According to Aghayev, work in this direction has been active since 2020. BakiKart is used in Baku to pay for public transport services. Meanwhile, Aghayev noted that all 320 buses to be imported by Azerbaijan from Turkey will function through contactless payments. "It's also planned to transfer to contactless payment a number of remaining buses, which still function through cash payments. In order to ensure the convenience of citizens, in order to provide them with high-quality and safe services in the field of passenger transportation, the BTA bus fleet is being updated, due to which another 320 new buses of Turkish production will be delivered to Azerbaijan.

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Azerbaijan to Launch ICT Program Based on International Experience

Azerbaijan's Innovation Agency has announced the launch of the Online Startup School program, which includes over 30 fundamental topics with a team of experienced mentors and more than 30 educational materials in the Azerbaijani language, a source in the agency told Trend. The program's main goal is to support entrepreneurship and start-up movements in various regions of Azerbaijan. "Besides,

the program is based on the development of Azerbaijani youth's knowledge related to the creation of start-ups, management, and development of technology business in accordance with modern and international standards," the agency added. The Online Startup School program was developed in the Azerbaijani language based on the international experience of the American company (venture fund) 'Y Combinator' and Steve Blank, a famous American entrepreneur who founded 8 successful startups. Those willing to participate in the training program, which will last 2.5 months and consist of many important topics - developing own ideas and concepts, conceptualization, customer market analysis, financial planning, team building, and a number of other issues - must register before January 25, 2021, via linking to <https://forms.gle/VoqNNz38AiVB4stX8>.

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Azerbaijan Developing New Bills

A new bill will be developed in Azerbaijan, Trend reports. This issue has been included in the plan of activity of the Committee on Labor and Social Policy of the Azerbaijani parliament at the spring session of 2021. Providing information about the plan at the meeting, head of the parliamentary committee Musa Guliyev stressed that the bill "On tourism" is planned to be discussed at the spring session and the work on the preparation of the bill "On charitable activity" will also continue.

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Azerbaijan's Parliament to Approve New Document on Visas Between Azerbaijan and Turkey

A new document on mutual visa exemption between Turkey and Azerbaijan will be approved at the plenary session of the Parliament of Azerbaijan, which will take place on February 1, Trend reports. The document 'Protocol No. 1 between the governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan on amendments to the agreement signed in Baku on February 25, 2020, on the mutual exemption from visas between the government of Azerbaijan and the government of Turkey' will be submitted for approval. According to the amendment, the use of a passport will be mandatory for persons entering Azerbaijan and Turkey from third countries. The document stated that the use of passports is mandatory for representatives of the parties when entering from the territories of third countries and on the territory of the parties. Other border crossing documents specified in Appendices 1 and 2 of the Agreement are used only for direct travel from the territory of one side to the other.

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KAZAKHSTAN: President Signs Environmental Code

Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed the Environmental Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazinform has learnt from the press service of Akorda, Trend reports. The text of the Code is set to be published in the press.

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Law on Public Councils Expands Rights and Responsibilities of Members – Kazakh Information Minister

The law on public councils significantly expands the rights and responsibilities of the members of the Public Council, provides for their involvement in the work of quasi-State sector as well as procurement commissions, Aida Balayeva, Kazakh Minister of Information and Social Development, shared on her Facebook account, Trend reports citing Kazinform. Today Head of State Kassym-Jomart Tokayev signed a number of amends to the Law on Public Councils, bringing activities of such public institutions that have been functioning in the country since 2015 to a new qualitatively level, her Facebook post reads. She said that during the extensive discussions, all the proposals and comments made by experts, public figures and international organizations have been taken into account. «The law significantly expands the rights and responsibilities of the members of the Public Council, provides for their involvement in the work of quasi-State sector as well as procurement commissions, paving the way for openness and accountability in the quasi-State sector. The law also makes it possible to strengthen mechanisms to establish public councils. The councils are allowed the freedom to decide upon the consideration of draft regulatory legal acts and appeals in accordance of their priority and importance. Notably, today the Kazakh Head of State, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, signed the law on amends and additions to some legislative acts regulating public councils.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Virus Plan Needed for Boarding Schools

Governments must start planning for students returning to school across state borders to avoid the chaos of 2020, a Nationals senator has warned. NSW Nationals senator Perin Davey was inundated with concerns last year from families seeking exemptions for students to cross borders to attend school. She said the uncertainty caused unnecessary stress on students and their families. "We also had the

ridiculous scenario where some small regional schools had their operations thrown into turmoil because they had teachers living on the wrong side of a border, yet less than 50km away," Senator Davey said on Wednesday. She was concerned confusion already reigns on the NSW-Victorian border because the closure was put in place before some local government area exemptions and agricultural workers permits were devised. "I heard of a group of grape pickers packing up and leaving their jobs in NSW when just four days later the Victorian government announced an agricultural worker permit," she said. "We cannot leave the planning for school communities to the last minute. Families need to know what they need to do to ensure their children can go to school," she said. She has called for a consistent and clear approach across states.

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Abbott Rails Against Damage of Virus Rules

Former prime minister Tony Abbott has warned coronavirus health measures could threaten Australia's way of life while launching a strike against turning to experts for answers. The recently appointed Institute of Public Affairs fellow has released a video address to the right-wing think tank questioning the impacts of pandemic rules. While acknowledging the nation's strong health performance, Mr Abbott voiced some concerns. "For a full year we've let a virus dominate our lives and in the process put safety before freedom, prudence before courage and avoiding danger before accepting risk," he said. "Even though courage, conviction and character remain vital to our success as a people." The former prime minister said national security, economic prosperity and social cohesion would remain priorities after the virus threat passes.

"That will only get harder to the extent we've become conditioned to have experts give us all the answers and to have governments then tell us what to do," he said. The Howard government health minister suggested the "pursuit of safety" was a mirage. Mr Abbott believes the nation's way of life is under threat, pointing to rules against people sitting in the front seat of taxis, which he considers a mark of being Australian. "But like so much, that's currently against the rules along with singing, dancing and having too many friends and family around for a barbecue," he said. "Thanks to the pandemic, we're now told to form orderly and socially distanced queues - as if we were English." The former prime minister was born in London and has been working for the British government as a trade adviser. Mr Abbott acknowledged coronavirus was potentially deadly.

"But it takes a fair dose of virus hysteria and health despotism for Australians to be barred from Victoria without first getting a visa," he said. The ex-Liberal leader said lives had been saved but businesses ruined, families separated and old people

forced to spend their final days in isolation. He also hit out at "absurd" rules like compulsory face masks while driving in a car alone which featured in Brisbane's three-day mini-lockdown. NSW Police cleared Mr Abbott of breaking coronavirus during Sydney's northern beaches lockdown after he was seen cycling in a zone he did not live in. Mr Abbott also questioned whether Australia's military was ready to put troops' lives on the line to defend Taiwan if China launched an invasion. On education, he said Indigenous, Asian and sustainability perspectives were embedded in every element of school curriculum.

"James Cook, Arthur Phillip and people like Sir John Monash and Lord Florey to name just a few of our heroes, where's the push to put them on their well-deserved pedestal?" Mr Abbott said his IPA role would look at cultural issues "upstream of politics" to renew the country. "That won't come from deconstructing our history or our heroes. Or by imported fads of sports stars taking a knee," he said. "After a lost year it is time for a reset - but not a politically correct woke reset that seems to be brewing."

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Minister Denies Rushing Environment Bill

Australia's environment minister concedes people are wary of legislation governing development approvals that is silent on national standards. But Sussan Ley insists those standards will come in time and is pressing ahead regardless. Ms Ley denies the government is rushing through its environmental approval "streamlining" bill. The legislation is designed to create a single-touch system that empowers states to approve projects under nationally consistent guidelines. "Rushing is probably not the word I would use. We needed to get our skates on and start a really long reform process," she told ABC radio on Friday. "But we all knew the act was deficient, we all knew the act wasn't working, so that was a first important step to change." The Senate is considering the legislation after the government used its lower house numbers to gag debate and push the bill through.

However, crossbench senators scrutinising the bill are concerned it does not contain environmental standards. "I totally accept that people do need to have a look at the standards," Ms Ley said. "There is a streamlining bill before the parliament now but I anticipate further pieces of legislation and regulation to implement standards. "That gives the architecture, it sets the framework, and of course we will introduce standards and give people a good look at them." National cabinet met late last year and agreed to progress the standards as a matter of priority. The Morrison government has released the final report into a review of Australia's environmental laws conducted by former competition watchdog chairman Graeme Samuel. His report found the environment had suffered from two decades of failure by

government to improve protections designed to ensure the survival of Australia's wildlife and unique places.

Mr Samuel also found developers had been strangled in red tape. He has called for a major overhaul of environmental laws, including a new set of environmental standards and the establishment of an independent monitoring body. His report warned of dire consequences if the recommendations were ignored or cherry-picked. But the government has already rejected the idea of an independent regulator, instead suggesting the watchdog can sit inside the department. Ms Ley insisted she wanted to see a strong and independent cop on the beat. "Exactly how and where it lives within government is a matter for discussion," she said. "I'm very comfortable we will work through to a strong model that provides the assurance that absolutely underpins our standards and our agreements with the states." Ms Ley denied the federal government was dumping responsibility for approving projects onto the states. "We're not handing anything over to the states. We're accrediting them against our strong national standards," she said. "We're not handing control of environmental protection over to them. We're retaining that by way of commonwealth oversight."

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2、 Government System and Civil Services

Asia-Pacific

A New Role for Cities in Global and Regional Migration Governance

The recent policy paper written by Janina Stürner and published by the Robert Bosch Stiftung offers a fantastic assessment and analysis of how cities are taking initiative in constructively addressing global migration issues in partnership with national governments, international organizations, civil society, and business. Stürner's paper highlights the key expertise and insight of cities and what they have to offer national and international policy forums on migration. GMF Cities looks forward to using and building on this work with practitioners and experts as part of our new Cities Managing Migration project. And we are happy to announce that Stürner, as well as her colleague Christiane Heimann at the Friedrich-Alexander-University of Erlangen-Nürnberg in Bavaria, were just named new GMF non-resident fellows in support of this key project

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ADB Calls for Far-Reaching Reforms to Build Resilient Education Systems amid COVID-19

Governments and stakeholders in Asia and the Pacific should initiate far-reaching reforms to strengthen the resilience of education and training systems as they deal with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, according to a new guidance note from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). “With the right resources, strengthened capacity, and deliberate actions, the region can put its education systems on a new and positive path as we settle into a new normal post-COVID-19,” said ADB Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department Chief Sector Officer Robert Guild. “Powered by knowledge, skills and human capital, the recovery in education will also help to support the recovery in other sectors.” COVID-19 and Education in Asia and the Pacific calls for developing countries to identify critical policy reforms, such as revamping teacher professional development, and concrete actions to improve the quality, relevance, and inclusion of education systems over the long-term. Framed as the three Rs—Response, Recovery, and Rejuvenation—the note outlines specific responses from the kindergarten level to higher education (K-12), and for technical and vocational education and training.

Education and training systems have experienced unprecedented disruptions due to COVID-19 with an estimated 1.7 billion students affected by school closures worldwide. Technology has enabled distance and personalized learning and will continue to be instrumental to education post-COVID-19. While education technology tools can be a game changer, the note stresses that ensuring students achieve high-quality learning must remain the central objective. To address inequalities in digital access, the note advocates expanding access to affordable and reliable internet connectivity for households and education and training institutions, including through partnerships with telecommunications providers. Big data can improve teachers’ ability to assess students and introduce greater transparency and accountability by linking education delivery with learning data.

“Developing countries were already grappling with a learning crisis given that students were not learning enough,” said ADB Education Sector Group Chief Brajesh Panth. “The pandemic has exacerbated inequities and widened learning gaps. To turn the crisis into an opportunity, we must find new ways of supporting managers, teachers, and parents. We must improve planning, coordination, and partnerships—ensuring quality and resilient education systems and learning for all.” As governments grapple with the costs of health and economic recovery, it is vital to protect education budgets. Investing in reskilling and upskilling of workers who lost jobs during the pandemic will play a critical role in accelerating the economic recovery by getting people back in labor markets. ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region.

East Asia

CHINA: Moving to Improve Business Environment by Streamlining Procedures

The State Council, China's cabinet, has made arrangements to optimize the country's business environment by streamlining administrative procedures and strengthening regulation. A better business environment will further vitalize market entities, and play a crucial role in facilitating steady economic recovery amid complex situations, according to a statement issued Monday after a State Council executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang. While reviewing the nationwide implementation of a guideline for improving the business environment, the meeting announced targeted measures to streamline administrative procedures, improve services and enhance regulatory effectiveness. A third-party assessment was conducted on the implementation of the guideline in nine provinces, according to the meeting, and the results showed that the implementation has yielded positive results. Last year, despite extremely difficult conditions, more than 20 million new market entities were established, bucking the downward trend and maintaining a high level of vitality, which could not have been achieved without a constantly improving business environment, said the meeting.

The meeting stressed further efforts in pressing ahead with reforms to streamline administration and delegate power, improve regulation, and upgrade services, including innovative measures such as "one integrated license." More work will be done to promote fair competition, make the bidding for government projects more market-oriented and improve oversight efficiency, according to the meeting. The meeting passed the draft stamp tax law, which will bring stamp duty on securities trading into legal norms. Besides appropriate simplification of tax items and tax cuts, the draft law has canceled stamp duty on items such as licenses, and also made clear that the current preferential stamp duty policy remains unchanged. The meeting also passed the draft amendment to the regulations on grain circulation management, in a bid to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of grain producers, traders and consumers and to ensure food security. The draft amendment strictly regulates policy-based grain management and specifies measures to prevent and reduce grain losses and waste.

China to Simplify Government Service Hotline System

China is planning to simplify the government service hotline system to improve service efficiency and quality. According to a guideline issued by the General Office of the State Council, the country will cancel or merge several existing service hotlines by the end of 2021. Hotlines that are not dialed frequently will be integrated into the unified service hotline "12345", which will serve as a gateway for callers to contact specific service departments. Manual service will be available around the clock through the week. Hotlines with a large number of callers will be retained alongside emergency phone lines, according to the guideline. The guideline urges departments to categorize the existing hotlines, push forward hotline simplification in an orderly fashion and maintain service quality.

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China to Boost Rural Vitalization through Four Key Tasks: Official

China will focus on four key tasks to achieve rural vitalization, Liu Huanxin, vice minister of agriculture and rural affairs, told a press conference on Wednesday. The country will improve its supply of grain and other important agricultural products, focusing on the seed industry and arable land, he said. More should be done to improve rural industries, such as the agricultural product processing industry, to provide more jobs in rural regions, he continued. Water supply, logistics, power grid and transport infrastructure will be upgraded and rural public education, hospital and culture services will be enhanced, he said. The fourth task is boosting rural governance, as this is crucial for rural vitalization, he noted. Building on a major victory in poverty alleviation, China is ready for a new stage of agricultural and rural development. The country is shifting its rural work focus to all-round rural vitalization.

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China's Central SOEs Report Rising Profits in 2020 amid Reforms

Despite disruptions due to the COVID-19 epidemic, China's centrally-administered state-owned enterprises (SOEs) reported profit growth in 2020 amid reforms to make their operations more efficient. Net profits of the country's 97 central SOEs expanded 2.1 percent year on year in 2020 to 1.4 trillion yuan (215.77 billion U.S. dollars), with around 80 percent of central SOEs reporting rising profits, Peng Huagang, spokesperson for the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) of the State Council, told a press conference Tuesday. The growth was hard-won, said Peng, noting that the central SOEs saw their profits

plummet more than 60 percent in the first four months last year when the country was yet to emerge from the impact of COVID-19. "We had experienced ups and downs in 2020 but managed to achieve good results," Peng said.

The central SOEs raked in 30.3 trillion yuan in combined revenues last year, down 2.2 percent year on year, narrowing by 9.6 percentage points from the decline seen in the first quarter last year, SASAC data showed. In December alone, central SOEs saw their revenues rise for the fifth straight month to 3.7 trillion yuan, an 11.7-percent expansion from a year ago. The recovery came as the country stepped up efforts to boost the SOEs via ownership reforms and market-oriented operations. In 2020, the country started to implement a three-year action plan for SOE reform, which is expected to take reform in state-owned assets and firms to a new level. Among the measures, a national fund totaling 200 billion yuan was established last year to facilitate the mixed-ownership reform of SOEs. By introducing private investors as stakeholders of the SOEs, the reform is expected to optimize corporate governance of the firms and enhance operational efficiency.

The companies have become more cost effective amid the reforms. In 2020, the sales and management costs of the central SOEs saw year-on-year declines, while the ratio of profits to costs increased 0.2 percentage points from a year earlier. Tuesday's data also showed that China's central SOEs reported improved solvency and better debt structure. The average debt-to-asset ratio of the central SOEs stood at 64.5 percent by the end of last year, down 0.5 percentage points from the previous year, achieving the country's deleveraging target for SOEs, Peng said. China has set a timetable for SOE deleveraging as part of efforts to defuse financial risks. The average debt-to-asset ratio of SOEs should be reduced by 2 percentage points by the end of 2020 compared with that at the end of 2017, according to guidelines released in September 2018. The SASAC will strive to build on the deleveraging results and keep the debt-asset ratio of most firms stable, the SASAC said, vowing further efforts to forestall major debt risks.

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China to Toughen Supervision of Non-bank Payment Institutions

China's central bank has released a draft for comments of regulations aimed at strengthening anti-monopoly supervision of payment services by non-bank institutions. The draft clearly defines the scope of the relevant market and the criteria for determining market dominance, in a bid to maintain the fair order of market competition. If a non-bank payment institution meets certain conditions in terms of market share, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) can provide early warning of a range of measures, including regulatory interviews, according to the draft. It can also call for agencies to review whether the institutions have a dominant market position.

If non-bank payment institutions fail to follow the principles of safety, efficiency, honesty and fair competition, and the healthy development of the payment service market is seriously affected, the PBOC can suggest that the State Council's anti-monopoly law-enforcement agencies stop market dominance abuse and centralization by splitting the institutions based on payment business types. The draft also requires payment institutions to deposit their reserves in the PBOC or qualified commercial banks and specify the corresponding prudent oversight measures to protect the users' rights and interests.

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Xi Stresses Strict Party Governance for 14th Five-Year Plan Period

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, has stressed the importance of leveraging the guiding and safeguarding roles of strict Party governance in every respect to ensure the development goals and tasks of the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025) are fulfilled. Xi, also Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks on Friday when addressing the fifth plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). The year 2020 was extraordinary in the history of the People's Republic of China, Xi said as he summarized the year's achievements in Party construction. "People feel deeply that in stormy times the strong leadership of the Party and the authority of the CPC Central Committee are what they can always count on," Xi said. The CPC Central Committee is satisfied with the progress made in improving Party conduct, building a clean government and combating corruption, he added. Xi underscored the importance of improving political judgment, understanding and execution in implementing full and strict governance over the Party.

NO ALTERNATIVE

On fighting corruption, historic achievements have been made but the situation remains challenging and complex, Xi said. "Corruption, as the biggest risk to the Party's governance, still exists," Xi said, adding that old and new types of corruption have become intertwined and corruption is increasingly covert and complex. In 2020, 18 centrally-administrated officials were investigated. Also, 1,229 fugitives were brought back and 2.45 billion yuan (378 million U.S. dollars) retrieved from overseas in the first 11 months of 2020. In the first 11 days of 2021, China's top anti-graft body announced punishments for seven centrally-administrated officials who were accused of taking bribes, signifying that the country's war on corruption is taking steady steps in the new year. "The struggle between corruption and anti-corruption efforts will continue to exist for a long period to come," Xi said. "There is no alternative but to forge ahead in the anti-corruption fight against all odds."

HIGHLIGHTED REQUIREMENTS

Xi stressed constantly improving Party conduct, building clean government and combating corruption. The governance over the Party must always be strict, so that the CPC can lead and ensure the smooth sailing of the great ship of socialism with Chinese characteristics, he said. Xi demanded strong political oversight to ensure the implementation of the CPC Central Committee's major decisions and plans. "We must resolutely continue the fight against corruption," Xi said, stressing the need to build the systems and measures to ensure that officials do not dare to be, are not able to be, and do not want to be corrupt. Xi demanded efforts to resolutely curb the practice of formalities for formalities' sake and bureaucratism. Continuous efforts must be made to address corruption and misconduct that affect people's immediate interests, to boost their sense of gaining, he added.

Xi stressed the need to improve the Party and state supervisory systems, and integrate supervision into the country's development during the 14th Five-Year Plan period. Discipline inspection and supervision agencies should take the lead in strengthening the Party's political building. They must also be subject to the strictest constraint and oversight, Xi said. Members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang, Wang Huning and Han Zheng attended the meeting. Zhao Leji, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and head of the CCDI, presided over the meeting. Xi's important speech serves as the major guidance for advancing strict Party governance in every respect, Zhao said while presiding over the meeting. Zhao called on Party organizations at all levels and Party members and officials to study and implement the guiding principles of Xi's speech, and earnestly implement the plans made at the CCDI session. Zhao also delivered a work report to the session on behalf of the standing committee of the CCDI.

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Chinese Premier Chairs Symposium to Solicit Opinions on Draft Gov't Work Report, Five-year Plan

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Friday presided over a symposium for soliciting opinions on a draft government work report, as well as the draft 14th Five-Year Plan and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035. Li, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, heard suggestions on the two documents from non-Communist parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, as well as personages without party affiliation. Pooling wisdom from these groups on the two documents is conducive to the scientific and democratic decision-making of the government, Li said. Facing various challenges and uncertainties, China will keep its macro policies

consistent, stable and sustainable, Li said, adding that the country would step up reform and opening up to address the needs of market entities and the people. Representatives at the symposium offered suggestions on issues including tapping the country's consumption potential and strengthening pollution control. Vice Premier Han Zheng, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, attended the symposium.

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JAPAN: Aso Vows to Revive Virus-Hit Economy, Promote Structural Reforms

Japanese Finance Minister Taro Aso pledged Monday to rejuvenate the economy badly hit by the spread of the novel coronavirus and advance structural reforms for the future after the pandemic. In his speech on the first day of this year's ordinary Diet session, Aso said the government will prevent the number of coronavirus infections from rising further "while supporting employment and business." Aso went on to say Japan will try to realize "a transformation of the economic structure and a virtuous cycle of the economy toward a post-coronavirus period." At the same time, he warned of downside risks, saying the Japanese economy is still in a "severe condition," amid a third wave of coronavirus infections that led the government earlier this month to declare its second state of emergency in Tokyo and some other areas.

Reiterating the government's target of bringing its primary balance -- tax revenue minus expenses other than debt-servicing costs -- into the black by fiscal 2025, Aso gave assurances that efforts to cut expenditures will continue. He also asked his fellow lawmakers to cooperate for a swift passage of the country's largest-ever 106.61 trillion yen draft budget for the next fiscal year. Along with the third extra budget for fiscal 2020 through March, with actual fiscal spending of 15.43 trillion yen, the government needs to secure the passage of the annual budget in the Diet session. The budgets will finance the government's latest economic package worth 73.6 trillion yen, featuring measures including those aimed at pushing Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's key policies of digitalization and carbon reduction.

In a separate speech, Yasutoshi Nishimura, minister for economic and fiscal policy, said he believes the policies will develop inventive ideas, encourage investment from the private sector and serve as Japan's "New Deal programs" to help it open the way for the future. "With the spirit that the year 2021 will be the final opportunity for us to push through drastic reforms of our country's economy and society, we will do our best so that Japan can take a big step," Nishimura said. The world's third-largest economy saw an annualized real 29.2 percent shrinkage in the April to June period from the previous quarter. But the economy showed a sharp rebound the following

quarter, expanding an annualized real 22.9 percent, after the first state of emergency over the virus -- which prompted people to stay at home, companies to scale back operations and shops to close -- was fully lifted in late May. Economists now predict Japan will experience a negative economic growth rate again in the January to March period due to the ongoing state of emergency after moderate growth in the previous quarter.

From <https://japantoday.com> 01/19/2021

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Japanese Govt Coordinates Opinions on Extending State of Emergency

The government has begun coordinating opinions with the aim of extending the coronavirus state of emergency by a range of two weeks to about a month for most of the 11 prefectures, including Tokyo, where it is now in effect. The state of emergency is currently set to last until Feb. 7. As local medical service systems, particularly in major urban areas, remain under pressure, the government has concluded that it is necessary for requests for people to refrain from nighttime outings and dining together at restaurants to be kept in place longer. Prefectures subject to the possible extension include Tokyo and its three neighboring prefectures of Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa; Osaka and its two neighboring prefectures of Hyogo and Kyoto; and Fukuoka. Meanwhile, the government is also considering lifting the state of emergency for Tochigi Prefecture, where the infection situation has been improving.

Within the government, there are opinions that the state of emergency can also be lifted for Aichi and Gifu prefectures, depending on the infection situation over this weekend, while others say that a state of emergency should also be declared for Okinawa Prefecture, where the virus is spreading among the populations of outlying islands. Yasutoshi Nishimura, minister in charge of economic revitalization and the coronavirus response, said at a press conference on Friday, "The occupancy rate of hospital beds remains tight." He added, "We will hold a meeting of the Advisory Committee on the Basic Action Policy at an appropriate time next week and decide on the government's response." Then, taking the experts' discussion into account, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga will finalize the government's response concerning an extension of the state of emergency declaration. Should the state of emergency be extended, Nishimura will give advance notice to the Committee on Rules and Administration of both houses of the Diet, with Suga expected to hold a press conference to seek public understanding on the extension.

An advisory board of experts for the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry is scheduled to hold its meeting on Monday. The government is expected to move ahead with the procedure for having the state of emergency extended as early as Tuesday. Among

the experts, a cautious view prevails about the full lifting of the state of emergency, with concern that relaxing restrictions on people's behavior now would cause a resurgence in the spread of the virus. For the state of emergency to be lifted, it is considered necessary for six indexes, including the number of new infections and the occupancy rate of hospital beds for treating virus patients, to improve to the equivalent of "Stage 3" from "Stage 4," the most serious level. According to statistics compiled by the Cabinet Secretariat as of Thursday, the number of new infections per 100,000 people in the last seven days stood at 13 in Tochigi Prefecture, falling short of even the benchmark for "Stage 3." The occupancy rate of hospital beds designated for use in dealing with a peak of infections stood at 38% in Kyoto Prefecture and 48% in Kanagawa and Tochigi prefectures, all them equivalent to "Stage 3," in which the occupancy rate is higher than 20%.

A seriously ill patient is defined, according to a central government yardstick, as one who is being treated at an intensive care unit at a hospital. But the Tokyo metropolitan government defines seriously ill patients only as those who require either a ventilator or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO). The number of patients with serious symptoms stood at 567 (as of Wednesday) according to the central government standard, but at 147 (as of Friday) according to the Tokyo metropolitan government standard. Therefore, if the number of seriously ill patients in Tokyo were calculated by the central government yardstick, the occupancy rate of hospital beds designated for use in dealing with a peak of infections would top 100% in Tokyo. But according to an announcement by the Tokyo metropolitan government on Friday, the occupancy rate of hospital beds stood at 55%.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 01/30/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: PM Warns Against Discrimination in Covid-19 Vaccinations, Pledges Transparency

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun on Friday warned against any discrimination in administering COVID-19 vaccines, pledging the government's efforts to keep the upcoming national vaccination campaign fair and transparent. "There shouldn't be any discrimination based on the level of status, wealth disparity, nationality, sex or others when administering the vaccines," the prime minister said during an interagency meeting on COVID-19 vaccines and treatment. The remarks came as all eyes are on who will be the first to receive the vaccine shot in the runup to next month's launch of a free national COVID-19 vaccination campaign. A day earlier, the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency announced a brief outline of the upcoming vaccination plan under which front-line medical workers will get the first vaccinations in late February, followed by the general public in the latter half of this year.

"The government will carry out the vaccination under the two principles of fairness and transparency," the prime minister noted. He added that the government will "fairly" determine the order of priority and timing of vaccinations, as well as the type of vaccines to be administered, "thoroughly based on scientific grounds." The entire process of the vaccination campaign, starting from the purchase of vaccines through their transportation and storage to the management of the post-vaccination situation will be transparently open to the public in order to secure their trust, Chung also stated. All necessary information on the vaccination plan, including the type of vaccine to be administered to each individual, as well as the place and time of the vaccine shots, will be promptly given as soon as it is available, he said, promising a "safe and systematic" implementation.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/29/2021

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South-East Asia

PHILIPPINES: President Names New Armed Forces Chief of Staff

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte named Army chief Lieutenant General Cirilito Sobejana as the new chief of staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said on Wednesday. Roque expressed confidence that Sobejana "will continue to modernize our military and undertake reform initiatives to make the AFP truly professional in its mandate as the protector of the people and the state." Sobejana was awarded the Medal of Valor, the highest military award, for leading troops in a deadly clash with around 150 Abu Sayyaf terrorists in the southern Philippine Basilan province in 1995. Sobejana is the eighth military chief under Duterte. He will replace General Gilbert Gapay, who will retire on Feb. 4 after serving for six months. Sobejana served as commander of the AFP Western Mindanao Command before he was appointed as chief of the Philippine Army in 2020. Sobejana, a member of the Philippine Military Academy Class 1987, will lead the AFP until he retires on July 31, when he reaches the mandatory retirement age of 56.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com/> 01/27/2021

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VIETNAM: Privatisation Plan Missed, Pressure to Improve SOEs Efficiency

The privatisation of State-owned enterprises (SOEs) failed to meet the plan set for the 2016-20 period, causing pressure to improve the operational efficiency of SOEs in the next five-year period. According to a recent report by the Ministry of Finance, a

total of 178 SOEs had privatisation plans approved in the 2016-20 period, with a total asset value of more than VNĐ443.5 trillion. Among them, only 37 were on the Government's list of 128 must-be-privatised SOEs, meeting just 28 per cent of the target. This means that 91 SOEs failed to complete the privatisation plan. Among them, 13 were under the management of Hà Nội People's Committee, 38 under HCM City, six under the Committee for Management of State Capital at Enterprises and four under the Ministry of Industry and Trade. According to the ministry's Corporate Finance Department, the bottleneck was due to problems in verifying land assets. Việt Nam embarked on the SOE restructuring process from the 1990s. In the first 10 years, 577 SOEs were privatised. In 2001-05, 2,735 SOEs were privatised, another 646 in 2006-2010 and 508 in 2011-15.

In 2020, only one SOE was privatised, the lowest figure over the past three decades. According to Nguyễn Hồng Long, Deputy Head of the Steering Committee for Enterprise Innovation and Development, the disappointing privatisation results in 2016-20 created significant pressure for the next period in restructuring and improving SOE efficiency. Long said with the issuance of new regulations about privatisation towards improving transparency and ensuring the maximum benefits for the State, many SOEs must spend time reviewing their privatisation plan, which takes more time. In the 2016-20 period, many SOEs had large scale operations with complicated financial situations and land ownership, thus privatisation, especially in evaluating their assets, was not easy, Long said. Long stressed that privatisation was not the final target. "The final target was to restructure SOEs and improve their operational efficiency through diversifying ownership which would help renovate operations and governance models. "Privatisation needs to be hastened in the next decade," Long said, adding that privatisation remained the most effective solution to improve the efficiency of SOEs and the economy. Deputy Minister of Finance Huỳnh Quang Hải said that it was necessary to continue reviewing the existing regulations to raise solutions to tackle problems and bottlenecks which were hindering the privatisation process. At the same, accountability must be increased, he added.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/19/2021

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CPV Ensures Democracy Through Public Feedback on Draft Documents

Collecting public feedback on the draft documents to be submitted to the upcoming 13th National Party Congress is a vivid illustration for the Communist Party of Việt Nam (CPV)'s efforts to ensure democracy in the Party, said Vice Chairman of the Party Central Committee's Commission for Mass Mobilisation Nguyễn Phước Lộc. In a recent interview with the Vietnam News Agency ahead of the 13th National Party Congress, Lộc said that the Party Central Committee's Commission for Mass Mobilisation had teamed up with the Việt Nam Fatherland Front and socio-political

organisations at the central level to hold 24 meetings to collect public feedback on the draft documents, with a view to engaging the whole community in policies to develop and protect the nation. This showed the close relationship between the Party and the people as well as the nation's solidarity, he stressed. The draft documents to be submitted to the 13th National Party Congress focused on the central role of the Vietnamese people in the cause of national construction and development, he said, adding the people's ownership right is promoted in various fields, from Party building and rectification, economic development to all-people national defence building.

Promoting democracy and the people's ownership rights would make significant contributions to consolidating the people's complete faith in the Party, State and socialist regime, Lộc said. The draft Political Report pointed out several missions and solutions to improve democracy and ensure the people's ownership rights, including the effective implementation of representative democracy and direct democracy, Party members' example setting in democracy implementation and compliance of the current regulations, and promotion of the people's central role in the national development strategies. He said the public had special interest in measures to ensure the smooth implementation of the Party's guidelines and policies, spoke highly of the country's corruption prevention and control, while recommending specific and practical solutions to the fight against corruption to build a strong and pure Party and State. People also contributed various measures to the country's three breakthrough programmes for the sustainable development of the country, he said. Touching on the Party's mass mobilisation work, Lộc stressed that it must be operated in a new form with a view to encouraging people from all walks of life to contribute more to the nation's development goals. The mass mobilisation commission would work to promote the role of the Fatherland Front and socio-political organisations, strengthen patriotic emulation campaigns, and exercise democracy.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/26/2021

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Việt Nam Focus on Digital Transformation and Administrative Reform

Việt Nam is one of the first countries in the world to issue a programme or strategy on National Digital Transformation, putting the country on par with others more advanced in the world, said Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, Minister of Information and Communications as the 13th Party Congress continued discussion of draft documents. Hùng said that this was good news for Việt Nam to fully exploit opportunities brought about by the technology revolution. "Digital transformation is a comprehensive transformation from real space to digital space, allowing the entire operation to be put into digital space," he said. "This movement is taking place at a rapid rate under three pillars: digital government, digital economy and digital society.

Like exploring new lands, the expanding cyberspace will open up a new development space for the country.” Hùng said digital transformation has far-reaching impacts, covering all socio-economic sectors and fields, contributing to increasing labour productivity, transforming operating models, and doing business in the direction of innovation which would enhance the country's competitiveness. One of the goals of the national digital transformational programme, approved by Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, is to make the digital economy account for 30 per cent of the country's GDP by 2030.

Việt Nam will be among the world's top 50 countries in terms of e- government and labour productivity, increasing by 8 per cent annually at the same time. To achieve the goals, Hùng said, it was necessary to have a good command of digital infrastructure and digital platforms, thereby mastering the national network space based on “Make in Viet Nam” products. Digital infrastructure plays a decisive role in the development of digital economy and digital society while developing a digital platform is a breakthrough solution to promote digital government, hasten digital transformation, reduce costs and increase efficiency. The information and communication sector aims to develop the digital platform ecosystem to meet the needs of Vietnamese people and then to the world. “Việt Nam needs more “Make in Viet Nam” digital platforms capable of going global to occupy new spaces,” he said. The orientation of the sector in the future is to focus on product development. More efforts would be made by the ministry to play a leading role in the process of digital transformation in all aspects of socio-economic development on the basis of promoting the strength of the whole society, Hùng said.

Administrative reform

Addressing the Congress, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Phạm Thị Thanh Trà, said in the socio-economic development strategy for 2011-2020, the Party has identified administrative reform was one of the three breakthroughs for national development, contributing to improving capacity, efficiency and accountability of State apparatus at all levels. In spite of gaining positive results in terms of administrative procedure reform thanks to the effort of the Government and the Prime Minister who have ordered drastic measures toward reducing the cost of administrative procedures as well as lessen the burden on people and businesses, there were still shortcomings, she said. “Administrative procedures in some fields are still cumbersome and complicated, especially administrative procedures in the field of land and construction,” Trà said. “The operation of the State administrative apparatus from the central to local levels has not yet been unified while the quality of the contingent of cadres and civil servants in some places was not equal.” To promote administrative reform, building a democratic, professional and modern State administration serving the people, it was necessary to continue building and perfecting the institutional system, particularly the socialist-oriented market economy institutions and the institutions of the State administration. Focus would be made on stepping up the reform of public service and civil servants, as well as building a contingent of

qualified civil servants and public employees who meet the requirements for the new situation. The Ministry of Home Affairs would vigorously carry out the development of e-Government and digital government which closely linked with administrative reform, aiming to improve the effectiveness in operations and service of administrative agencies at all levels in an open, transparent and modern manner.

Enhance value chains

After 35 years of adopting the renewal process, Việt Nam has obtained a number of achievements in modernisation and industrialisation, turning the country from one of the poorest in the world to a low-middle-income country and increasingly integrating deeply with the region and the world, said Trần Tuấn Anh, Minister of Industry and Trade in his presentation at the Congress. People's lives have been improved while the prestige of the country in the international arena has been enhanced. He emphasised that the industrial sector has, and would continue to play, an important role as a driving force for socio-economic development. The sector is the one with the highest growth rate in the national economy contributing 30 per cent of the country's GDP in 2011-2020 period. It has become the main export sector, helping the country climbing up from world's 50th largest exporting countries in 2010 to 22nd in 2019. However, he said that shortcomings still remained. Industrial production in Việt Nam focused mainly on the final stage of production, resulting in low added value. The driving force in the production and export of industrial products in the country is mainly aided by the FDI sector, accounting for approximately 70 per cent of the country's total export turnover.

The sustainability of Việt Nam's product development and export development still faced many potential risks while the country's trade costs were higher than the ASEAN average regarding logistics. The minister suggested a number of measures to enhance the country's role and position in the global production network and value chains. The measures include creating a favourable environment for digital innovation and transformation on the basis of restructuring each industry and fully exploiting the achievements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and exercise digitalisation. He underscored the need to effectively implement the allocation of resources for development, concentrating on creating growth poles, strong engines in all sectors and fields. It was also necessary to complete a mechanism towards creative government and offering a favourable and open environment for business investment. More efforts would be paid to effective implementation of free trade agreements and increase investment attraction to expand production for the country's economic development in the context of complicated developments from political tensions, trade conflicts and the trend of trade protectionism in the world, he said. Meanwhile, in the afternoon, participants discussed personnel matter of those people to be elected to the 13th tenure Party Central Committee. They approved through voting that the number of members of the Party Central Committee will be 200, including 180 official members and 20 alternate members.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/29/2021

Candidate Picks for Top Party Positions Qualified and Capable

Candidate picks for top Party posts are all qualified and capable to lead the country's development in the new era, delegates told the media on Friday on the sidelines of the ongoing 13th National Party Congress. The Congress, which convened this week to vote for 200 members on the Communist Party Central Committee, is expected to lay out the development courses for the country not only in the short-term, but also with an ambitious vision of a high-income developed socialist nation by 2045, when the country marks its 100th independence anniversary. Starting from Thursday afternoon, the nearly 1,600 delegates will dedicate almost three days to hearing reports on the candidates and consider their votes. Võ Hồng Hải, head of the organisation commission of Hà Tĩnh Province's Party Committee, said the candidates for the Party Central Committee positions have been considered carefully to reconcile the relationship between continuity and renewal, between composition of the organ and the required standards for the eligible candidates, between classes, regions as well as important sectors. "We will definitely not lower the qualification barriers to satisfy the demands for quota. The Party Central Committee stands for the wisdom, will, and aspirations of more than five million members of the Communist Party of Việt Nam along with the entire Vietnamese people," Hải said, adding that whether one meets the required criteria for the positions matters a great deal. This is not only true at the highest level of the Party, but also applicable also at the local level, Hải said.

Bùi Chí Thành, Chair of Việt Nam Fatherland Front Committee of Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Province, said the personnel preparations for the current congress commenced since early in the last term. The preparations have been "conscientious, meticulous and stringent", with many levels of government and Party contributing feedback, showcasing a high level of democratic openness. "The comrades who have been nominated for this tenure have been evaluated via an objective, democratic process throughout their entire working duration," Thành remarked. Thành also expects that this Congress would be able to elect a Party Central Committee that comprises 'outstanding comrades among the outstanding comrades' to lead the country's development and elevate the profile of Việt Nam in the international arena. Trần Quốc Nam, Chairman of Ninh Thuận Province People's Committee and vice secretary of Ninh Thuận Party Committee, said all delegates have a 'high sense of responsibility' and will vote for a Party Central Committee that is 'in line with the Party's intention and people's will.' He trusts the Party Central Committee will bring about the achievements that the people have entrusted them with. Sharing the opinion, Secretary of Lào Cai Province's Party Committee Đặng Xuân Phong told the media that "scrupulous personnel preparations" will "earn the confidence of the entire Vietnamese people." "Entrusted with the responsibility to pick out the members of the

Party Central Committee, we as delegates will be making decisions carefully and thoughtfully as to who we deem could meet the country's development demands," Phong stressed.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/30/2021

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Vietnamese Communist Party Congress Elects New Central Committee

The ongoing 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) on Saturday elected the party's 13th central committee. General Secretary of the CPV Central Committee (CPVCC) and Vietnamese President Nguyen Phu Trong, and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, are among the 180 members of the 13th CPVCC. Another 20 alternate members were also elected to the central committee. A total of 1,587 delegates representing over 5.1 million CPV members are attending the congress which kicked off on Jan. 25. A press release made public earlier on Saturday read that the congress had agreed on adjusting the agenda of the political event, which will now conclude on Feb. 1, one day earlier than in the original program.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 01/31/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: PayU India Appoints Prakash Padariya as CISO

Online payment solutions provider PayU on Monday said it has appointed Prakash Padariya as the company's Chief Information Security Officer, adding a key position to the India leadership team. In his new role, Padariya will lead and further strengthen PayU India security team, while ensuring alignment with PayU's Global Security strategic initiatives and standards. Padariya comes to PayU with more than 17 years of experience in core information, cybersecurity and technology. He was previously the CISO at GE India Technology Centre. He has also worked with leading Fortune 100 companies such as Royal Bank of Scotland, IBM, Target Corporation and Accenture in his career. "As a leading online payment player in the country, securing our customers' payment transaction data is a top priority for us and we constantly work to improve upon existing measures," Anirban Mukherjee, CEO, PayU India, said in a statement. Padariya professional expertise spans across banking & financial services and telecommunications & IT service industries. PayU's proprietary risk engine is built for global Internet businesses facing evolving fraud threats.

From <https://www.siliconindia.com> 01/05/2021

Haryana Govt Appoints Yash Garg IAS as Deputy Commissioner, Gurugram

Yash Garg IASThe Government of Haryana, on January 6, issued official orders for appointment of Yash Garg, an IAS officer of 2009-Batch from Haryana cadre, as Deputy Commissioner of Gurugram. Garg will replace the incumbent Deputy Commissioner Amit Khatri, who has taken study leave till October 2022 to pursue a course in the US. Garg, who was serving as the Municipal Commissioner of Faridabad, assumed the charge of Gurugram Municipal Corporation from January 7, Thursday.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/07/2021

Dr Jitendra Singh Announces e-PPO as Ease of Living of Senior Citizens

While delivering a promise of ease of living especially for the elderly, Dr Jitendra Singh, Union Minister of State (IC) Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER), MoS PMO, Personnel, Public Grievances, Pensions, Atomic Energy and Space, announced that the recently introduced Electronic "Pension Payment Order" (PPO) promises ease of living for senior citizens. Dr Singh, while referring to some path-breaking reforms introduced in the Ministry of Personnel, stated that the Department of Pensions in the Ministry of Personnel was often at the receiving end of complaints from senior citizens about the original copies of their Pension Payment Order getting misplaced. In such situations, the pensioners, particularly the older pensioners, had to face several hardships, he said. Dr Singh appreciated Prime Minister Narendra Modi's thrust on digitalization, and said, in the last six years there has been rapid progress in this direction and many of the Ministries and Departments in the Government of India were performing nearly 80 per cent of their work through e-office even before the onset of COVID pandemic. He congratulated the officials in the Department of Pensions who had successfully introduced the provision of Electronic "Pension Payment Order" during the height of COVID pandemic, which came as a boon to several of the retiring officials who were getting superannuated during the lockdown period and were finding it difficult to physically receive the hard copy of their PPO. Significantly, the entire process was accomplished much before the targeted timeline in view of the difficulties being faced by the pensioners due to the pandemic.

Accordingly, the Department of Pensions and Pensioners' Welfare decided to integrate the electronic PPO generated through PFMS application of Controller

General of Accounts (CGA) with Digi-locker. This enables the pensioner to obtain an instant print – out of the latest copy of his PPO from the Digi-locker account. Adding on to the further initiatives introduced for ease of living of senior citizens, Dr Singh said, these include pre-retirement workshops and counselling sessions as well as assistance in meaningful engagement in the post-retirement phase of life so that the energies, the expertise and the experience of senior citizens can be optimally utilised in the service of society and for the cause of nation-building.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/15//2021

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Farmers to Get Documents on Phone Through M-governance, New Startup Policy to Be Launched

Good news for Madhya Pradesh farmers, as they will be getting basic revenue records and documents like maps, B1 copies, khasra, on their mobile phones from January 25. This has been made possible with the launch of India's unique mobile governance initiative by the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Shivraj Singh Chouhan. The CM will open the innovative initiative to the people on January 25. Shivraj Singh Chouhan Farmers will be able to access the information with a simple phone call on the CM Helpline-181 by sharing basic info like their Aadhaar and mobile numbers. Following the call, a copy of the desired documents like B1, Khasra, and Maps will be sent on the registered mobile number. Moreover, under the rising entrepreneurial culture in Madhya Pradesh, the government is covering the social sector, agriculture, agritech, and food industry simultaneously for the first time in the country. The state government is promoting startups and incubation centres actively. As per a local daily, the CM informed that a new policy for startups is being finalized that will provide aid to at least 20,000 youth to get employment opportunities annually. The CM said that Madhya Pradesh is India's first state to have taken steps towards inculcating AI in governance and Virtual Governance.

Speaking on initiatives taken, the CM informed that out of 110 plots earmarked in IT Parks at Bhopal, Jabalpur and Indore at least 78 have been provided to the investing companies through online auction following all the rules that were processed. Besides this, it will also save a revenue of about Rs 30 crore while creating job opportunities. Laying down MP's initiatives in supporting startups, the CM was vocal of the fact that the state has moved towards becoming Startup Hub. There are around 1132 registered Startups in MP as of yet and over 3000 unregistered startups. Indore has been the city that saw most startups sprawling with 442 as of yet. Whereas, Bhopal is not much behind with 346 startups. The state also offers large incubation centres having a capacity of over 1200 seats, and more than 200 startups are incubated. Being supportive of the startup culture, the state government with the help of the Centre is involved in construction and machine installation works at the incubation centres coming up at Gwalior. Over 200 startups will be accommodated in

it. As per the CM, a new startup policy will be unrolled soon. Startups and incubation centres will be further strengthened under the new policy that will focus on agriculture, agri-tech and food industry and social sector.

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Election Commission of India to Launch Digital Voter ID Card (E-EPIC) Today

The Election Commission of India is to launch the e-EPIC (Electronic Electoral Photo Identity Card) programme today, on January 25, the National Voter's Day. The e-EPIC is a secure and non-editable PDF version of the regular voter ID card. The e-voterID will also feature a secure QR code with image and demographics like serial number, part number, and more. With the service going digital, the E-EPIC can be downloaded on a mobile or a computer and can be stored digitally. Election Commission of India to launch Digital Voter ID card (E-EPIC) todayThe E-EPIC service will be opened in two phases, the first phase will begin from today and will continue till January 31. In this phase, all new voters who have applied for the voter-ID card and registered their mobile numbers in Form-6 will be able to download the e-EPIC by simply authenticating their mobile number. However, a point to be noted is that the mobile numbers should be unique and not be ones previously registered in the ECI's electoral rolls. As per the Election Commission of India, the second phase will commence from February 1. This phase will be open for the general voters. All those who have given their mobile numbers (already linked ones) they can also download their E-EPIC. The move might play a specialised role in the upcoming polls in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Asian Development Bank Appoints New Country Director

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) appointed a new director to the Azerbaijani office, a source in the bank told Trend on Jan.7. The name of the new director who prior to her appointment to Azerbaijan headed the ADB office in Kyrgyzstan is Candice McDeigan. She took up her duties in January 2021, replacing on this position Nariman Mannapbekov who had been heading the Azerbaijani office from 2016. Since 1999, the ADB has allocated funds in the amount of \$ 4.4 billion to the country within the framework of cooperation with Azerbaijan.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/07/2021

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Azerbaijan Updates Search System Within Governmental Web Domain

The system of searching Azerbaijani state structures within gov.az domain has been updated, the Computer Incident Response Team (CERT) at the State Agency for Special Communications and Information Security of Azerbaijan's State Security Service noted, Trend reports on Jan.12. According to the agency, CERT has launched an updated version of the electronic information resource www.gov.az. "At present, the GOV.az zone has become a more interactive platform, on which the method of search by domain names and the provision of information has been additionally improved, a new interface developed, and the function to edit contact information and the location in the domain catalog by the owner of the domain name introduced. The registration of gov.az third-level domains is carried out by the Special Communication and Information Security State Agency of the Azerbaijani Special State Protection Service. More than 628 governmental domains have been registered in the Azerbaijani segment of the Internet, which are used by over 246 organizations to create unique site names for their divisions or services.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/12/2021

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Azerbaijan Appoints New Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev signed an order on the appointment of Rashad Nabiyev as minister of transport, communications and high technologies of Azerbaijan.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/26/2021

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KYRGYZSTAN: Central Election Commission Approves Election Results

The Central Election Commission (CEC) of Kyrgyzstan approved the results of an early presidential election 10 days ago at its meeting on Wednesday, Trend reports citing Xinhua. Some 79.20 percent voted for Sadyr Zhaparov, that is, over half of the votes of all voters who took part in the election. Thus, the CEC recognized Zhaparov as the president of Kyrgyzstan. In total, over 1.3 million citizens took part in voting in the early presidential election in Kyrgyzstan on Jan. 10, which makes 39.16 percent of the total number of voters included in the voter lists. In addition,

the meeting of the CEC approved the protocol on the results of the referendum on the form of government in Kyrgyzstan, which was also held on Jan. 10, 2021. Thus, 81.49 percent of voter cast votes for the presidential form of government, 10.91 percent for the parliamentary republic and 4.47 percent voted against all options. The early presidential election in Kyrgyzstan was held due to resignation of the previous president Sooronbai Jeenbekov amid protests against the results of the parliamentary elections, which took place on Oct. 4, 2020.

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TAJIKISTAN: WHO Appoints New Representative

U.N. health agency has appointed a new special representative to Tajikistan, replacing Ms. Bakhtygul Karryyeva, who reportedly contracted the novel coronavirus (COVID-15) in late November after visiting the Tajik northern Sughd province, Trend reports citing Kabar. According to sources, acting representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Tajikistan, Ms. Bakhtygul Karryyeva, contracted COVID -19 in November after a visit to Sughd province. After a short treatment at home and at the Dushanbe infectious diseases hospital, Ms. Karryyeva was reportedly evacuated from the country. The WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) has confirmed this information. "Unfortunately, this is true. Acting representative of WHO in Tajikistan, Ms. Bakhtygul Karryyeva, got sick with the novel coronavirus last month. Due to the existing chronic diseases, she was in a risk group," representative of WHO/Europe noted. In late December last year, Dr. Victor Olsavski, who had previously served as Head of the WHO Country Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was competitively selected to head the WHO Country Office in Tajikistan. He is expected to start work in Tajikistan soon.

Recall, WHO appointed Ms. Bakhtygul Karryyeva, who had previously worked at the Office of WHO Regional Director for Europe, acting head of the WHO permanent mission in Tajikistan in May last year. On October 20, 2020, a cooperation agreement for the next two years was signed in Dushanbe between the Government of Tajikistan, represented by Jamoliddin Abdullozoda, Minister of Health and Social Protection of the Population, and the World Health Organization, represented by Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe. The WHO Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) is one of WHO's six regional offices around the world. It serves the WHO European Region, which comprises 53 countries, covering a vast geographical region from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. The WHO Country Office in Tajikistan was established in Dushanbe in 1992 to provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Health in strengthening of the public health system in the country. The Office is the focal point for WHO activities in Tajikistan. The country team consists of 24 staff members, including 12 experts in the fields of health policy and financing, immunization and surveillance, epidemiology, communicable diseases,

disaster preparedness and response, family and community health, nutrition, food safety and food security, mental health and environment and health.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/25/2021

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TURKMENISTAN: Appoints New Ambassador to Kazakhstan

Turkmenistan has appointed a new ambassador to Kazakhstan, Trend reports with reference to Turkmenistan's State News Agency. The new Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Turkmenistan to the Republic of Kazakhstan was appointed Batyr Rejepov, the report says. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are strategic partners. Two neighboring countries indicated the availability of significant potential for enhancing cooperation in the trade and economic sphere, transport and communications sector, energy. Ashgabat and Nur-Sultan regularly discuss partnership issues in the gas sector and the development of cross-border mineral deposits. Kazakhstan is involved in a big project to supply Central Asian gas to China. Since 2009, China National Petroleum Corporation has been purchasing Turkmen fuel transported through the territories of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Within the cooperation in the transport sector, the project on the construction of the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran transnational railway was implemented in December 2014. The goods can be freely transported to the countries of the Persian Gulf, to the Indian Ocean, and transported to Europe via this trade route. As earlier the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan told Trend, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are implementing the new projects in the transport sector. The new project in the field of transport and logistics cooperation between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is the construction of the highway from the Turkmen side to the border with Kazakhstan and the bridge over the Garabogazgol Gulf. The ministry noted that the implementation of this project will allow increasing trade turnover, the volume of freight and passenger traffic. "This project will become another bright symbol of friendship between the two countries," the ministry added.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Box Office Plunges in 2020

Box office in Australia fell by 69 per cent in 2020 as the coronavirus outbreak forced cinema closures, capacity restrictions, the postponement of film releases and public health concerns about attending theatres. Data published on Thursday by the Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia showed nationwide annual revenues slumped from \$A1.23 billion in 2019 to just \$A401 million in 2020. Locally made films

grossed an aggregate \$A22.6 million, down from \$A40 million a year earlier. The MPDAA said that the outcome "was a testament to the Australian public's ongoing love of seeing movies on the big screen". It said the result was especially encouraging given the acceleration of audience fragmentation through growing digital content services coupled with stay-at-home trends during the pandemic. Sony's Jumanji: The Next Level with \$A28.9 million was the top grossing film in 2020, followed by Universal's 1917 with \$A23.3 million and Sony's Bad Boys for Life on \$A19.6 million.

The two major Hollywood titles released after Australian cinemas re-opened in June 2020 managed top ten chart positions. Warner Bros.' Tenet grossed \$A15.9 million while Wonder Woman 1984 managed \$A11.9 million. The MPDAA said Australian exhibitors implemented measures to ensure the safety of customers and staff, including a reduction in auditorium capacities, staggered seating to ensure physical distancing and stringent cleaning programs. As a result, going to the movies has proven to be one of the safest activities for small groups of people, with zero cases of community transmission of Coronavirus in cinemas anywhere in Australia," the MPDAA noted. "The death of cinema has been heralded each time a new technology shifted traditional business models. "However, the unquestionable enhancement of seeing a film on the big screen as well as the sentimental attachment to the communal experience of going to the movies with family and friends has proven to be robust and durable." "The outlook is bright with an abundance of great films releasing in 2021," said Brian Pritchett, Chairman of the MPDAA and MD, Paramount Pictures Australia, in an MPDAA statement.

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3、 Management, Capacity Building and Innovation

Asia-Pacific

Smart Cities to Be Engines of Emerging APAC Growth

Smart cities integrate information and communication technologies to address challenges faced by urban living. Arguably first pioneered by South Korea with the Songdo International Business District project, a masterplan city that began construction in 2002 with the reclamation of land along Incheon's waterfront, the need to be "smart" has become a must-have in many of the new masterplan cities in Asia. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the tremendous benefits of a smart city with high levels of digitisation in government and business. Some of the countries that have contained the virus most successfully across the globe include Japan, Taiwan and Singapore, all of which have some of the most advanced smart

cities in the world. Singapore, for example, was one of the fastest to utilise the capabilities it had invested into its “Smart Nation Initiative” to tackling the pandemic, rolling out a nationwide QR code check-in system and a contact-tracing app named “TraceTogether”, the source code of which was later shared with Australia for the country’s “COVIDSafe” application. The greenfield masterplan smart cities in Asia, however, will mostly be found in developing countries, where the aim is to create new economic and administrative centres to drive growth for the rest of the century and beyond.

“Nagara Rimba Nusa”, Indonesia

Budget: US\$33 billion

Timeline: 2021 – 2045

The current capital, Jakarta, located on the island of Java, is sinking. Facing the dual threat of rising sea levels and being built on swampy land, almost half of the city now sits below sea level. The new capital is to be located on in East Kalimantan, on the island of Borneo, straddling two relatively undeveloped regions of Kutai Kertanegara and Penajam Paser Utara. In Borneo, the new capital city may promote stronger economic ties with Malaysia and Brunei, who share the island. A design contest for the new capital city was launched and the submission by architecture firm URBAN+ beat out 755 other contestants with their entry titled “Nagara Rimba Nusa”, which translates to “forest and island hilltop”. The design will not be used as the sole basis for the new capital city, nor is the name of the submission the final name of the new capital city. To be built with eco-friendly and smart city features, construction of the new capital city is slated to commence in 2021, in spite of the Covid-19 pandemic.

New Clark City, Philippines

Budget: US\$14 million (Phase I only)

Timeline: 2016 – 2020 (Phase I), 2065 projected completion

Located in Central Luzon, north of Manila, New Clark City is envisioned as Philippines’ first smart, green and disaster-resilient metropolis. Managed by the Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) that is mandated to transform former US military bases for civilian use, New Clark City is sited on the former Camp O’Donnell. The city is envisioned as the alternative to Manila’s pollution and congestion, while boasting driverless cars, drones and eco-friendly buildings. New Clark City has been proposed, with the support of the BCDA, in the Senate as the Philippines’ new capital by 2030. The city is already formally declared by President Duterte as the “back up” seat of government in the event of emergencies and disasters.

Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), India

Budget: US\$72 billion

The DMIC is one of 5 industrial corridors under National Industrial Corridor Development Programme (NICDP). Under what is touted as India’s most ambitious infrastructure programme, the NICDP is an extension of the DMIC, which originally

began as joint project between Japan and India. The DMIC came about when supplies of iron ore to Japan were disrupted due to Chinese demand in from construction projects in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It was then that the idea of building an industrial corridor along the lines of the Tokyo – Osaka Freight corridor was proposed by the serving Japanese Ambassador to help meet the demand. Under the plan, eight smart cities will be built along the DMIC, of which two are Dholera SIR and Shendra-Bidkin. The project also buttresses with India's Smart Cities Mission, launched in 2015, that initially aimed for 100 smart cities in five years.

More smart cities to come

The cities listed are certainly not exhaustive. Especially in Southeast Asia, the indomitable drive towards digitisation has led to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to launch the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) to promote best practices and cross border exchanges for the development of smart cities. It is not just land developers that can benefit from participation, but also telecom and IT firms that can stand to profit by inventing innovative use cases for business and government applications.

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Food Systems Face a Daunting Triple Challenge Requiring Governments to Take a More Holistic Approach

Food systems face the triple challenge of providing food security and nutrition for a growing global population, and livelihoods to farmers and others working in food supply chains around the world, all while improving environmental sustainability. Given the deep connections between these objectives, governments can do much more to take into account the synergies and trade-offs that exist between the different areas, as well as the challenges for developing more coherent policy, according to a new OECD report. Making Better Policies for Food Systems brings together decades of OECD research and policy recommendations on food systems. The report underlines the long track record providing data, evidence and policy recommendations on topics ranging from agricultural productivity and trade to obesity, water use, rural development and global value chains. It notes that these and other topics were usually considered in isolation, rather than as components of wider food systems policies. The centrality of food systems for the Sustainable Development Goals has led the UN to convene a Food Systems Summit in September 2021. Development of a new “food systems approach,” capable of simultaneously making progress on the three dimensions of food security/nutrition, livelihoods and environmental sustainability, will require better coordination between policy makers in a range of sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, environment and public health, according to the OECD report.

This new approach will require policymakers to take a holistic view on food system objectives, as well as new efforts to avoid incoherent policies. In practice, this would mean that agricultural policymakers – who have traditionally focussed on agricultural production – would place a greater emphasis on the possible effects of farm policies on nutritional and environmental outcomes. Similarly, where environmental problems related to agriculture have in the past been addressed through agri-environmental policies, a food systems approach opens the possibility to use other instruments, such as those that promote changes in consumer or enterprise behaviour. A food systems-based approach recognises the complexity of potential synergies and trade-offs between food security and nutrition, livelihoods and environmental sustainability. Rising demand for some food products may benefit producers in poor countries while simultaneously bringing negative environmental consequences. Changes in food prices may benefit producers while harming poorer consumers. Conditions vary enormously between smallholder farmers in developing countries, those doing extensive grazing-based farming and high-tech farmers in advanced economies.

This complexity will require tailored and multi-dimensional policies, based on robust, evidence-based and inclusive policy processes. The OECD highlights the clear need to reform agricultural and fisheries support policies that are the most distorting and which create negative environmental effects. Beyond that, making better policies for food systems will require overcoming disagreements on facts, but also diverging interests and differing values among stakeholders, according to the report. Case studies on the seed sector, the ruminant livestock sector and the processed food sector provide in-depth discussion of how each can help address the triple challenge, the synergies and trade-offs that exist, as well as the differing policy processes that have been used in various countries.

The report focuses on three linked areas:

the actual performance of food systems, and the role of policy;

how policymakers can design food systems policies taking into account the three dimensions of food security/nutrition, livelihoods and environmental sustainability; and

the common factors complicating efforts to design better food system policies, and potential solutions.

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Risk Management Key to Strengthening Global Value Chains Resiliency: Study

APEC economies have developed a strong foundation to deal with the COVID-19

crisis, but more needs to be done to enhance their resiliency in global value chains, according to a recent policy brief by the APEC Policy Support Unit. “Building and strengthening resiliency is the top priority for firms involved in global value chains,” said Dr Akhmad Bayhaqi, a senior analyst with the APEC Policy Support Unit, who co-authored the study. “The economy-wide and global implications brought on by disruptions to supply chains resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that governments need to support firms in managing such risks.” The policy brief, titled *Managing Risks in Global Value Chains*, analyzes the ability of the APEC region and its peer international groupings to respond to disruptions and to quickly return to normal operations. Using a value chain strength index, the policy brief measures the strength of economies and groupings against the following risks: 1) logistics and infrastructure risk; 2) natural disaster risk; 3) market risk; 4) political risk; and 5) regulatory and policy risk. The policy brief finds that while APEC economies perform moderately well, the region falls slightly behind its peer international groupings in terms of value chain strength.

“We found that there is a significant disparity within the region with almost half of the economies registering a rather weak performance in terms of value chain strength,” Dr Bayhaqi explained. “The uneven level of development across economies in APEC affect the region’s ability to rebound quickly in times of systemic supply chain disruptions.” More could be done by the APEC region to ensure concerted development in the area of logistics and infrastructure, according to the policy brief. The region could also strengthen their resiliency against natural disasters and health-related calamities by, for example, improving the numbers of physicians and bolstering health expenditure. “Global value chains have increasingly become more prevalent, more integrated and more connected, increasing businesses’ exposure to certain risks,” said APEC Secretariat’s Executive Director, Dr Rebecca Sta Maria. “This is why incorporating risk management in supply chains is crucial, especially when dealing with disruption the scale of this pandemic.”

Dr Sta Maria said that a risk management framework should take a holistic approach, covering each part and every player in the supply chain network including firms, small businesses, governments and consumers. “We cannot afford to think of risk management as a ‘what if’ component in supply chains or in our trade deals,” she added. “Looking ahead, we have to put in place measures where we ensure the smooth flow of supply chains in times of crisis, especially for medical goods, essentials products and services.” Follow Dr Rebecca Sta Maria’s discussion at The Davos Agenda 2021 on Friday, 29 January, 10:00 CET or 17:00 Singapore time: *Transforming Supply Chains in Asia-Pacific*. The policy brief notes that firms often depend on the market to deal with potential disruptions, in particular for financial markets. As such, ensuring that markets remain resilient during periods of crisis is very important for efficient value chain operations.

Lowering business uncertainties through consistent and predictable regulatory

regimes also plays a vital role in building resiliency as it gives assurances to firms and investors that they would have access to an efficient legal framework should disputes arise. With a combined nominal GDP of USD 53 trillion, the APEC region is home to several key global business hubs and accounted for almost half of the global trade of goods and commercial services in 2019. Trade has been the driver of growth for the past three decades, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed firms and businesses around the region to unprecedented disruptions. Dr Bayhaqi highlighted that every international grouping, including APEC, “still has much room for improvement in terms of building and developing their supply chain resiliency.” “It is important to emphasize that a supply chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Cooperation is an essential strategy to improve the regional resiliency of supply chains,” Dr Sta Maria concluded.

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East Asia

CHINA: To Remove Barriers Hindering Implementation of Regulation on Improving Business Environment

Premier Li Keqiang heard a report on the third-party assessment of the implementation of the Regulation on Improving the Business Environment while chairing the State Council Executive Meeting on Monday, and urged greater efforts to remove barriers and provide stronger legal underpinning for the business environment. As entrusted by the State Council, third-party assessment of the implementation of the Regulation on Improving the Business Environment has been conducted in nine provinces. Overall results show that the Regulation has been well implemented, as evidenced by relatively high business satisfaction for tax and fee cuts and for government service convenience. The reform measures that facilitate the starting and operation of businesses, such as one permit for one sector, one license for one enterprise and joint application of permit and business license, have made a notable impact on business owners.

Despite last year's extremely challenging situation, over 20 million market entities were added and remained active, which shows the result of the constantly improving business environment. "The Regulation that took effect last year is aimed at strengthening market-oriented and law-based development. Business environment has considerably improved over the past year. The substantial increase in market entities last year and their ability to weather the difficulties are both attributable to a more just and equitable business environment," Li said. The assessment has also exposed entrepreneurs' complaints in such areas as tendering and bidding, intermediary services and financing. Progress in the implementation of the Regulation has been uneven between the eastern region and the central, western

and northeastern regions, and between provincial capitals and other cities. And the imbalance has been quite significant in some cases.

"According to the evaluation of the execution of the Regulation, people's sense of gain comes mostly from reforms of the government management model, including innovative measures like one permit for one sector and one license for one enterprise. Experience gained shall be further summarized and promoted," Li said. "There remain considerable gaps between the eastern region and the central, western and northeastern regions, as well as between provincial capitals and other cities, regarding fostering a more enabling business environment. That said, gaps also entail potential. Departments and localities concerned shall identify weak links and improve relevant work," he noted. The meeting urged greater efforts to reform government functions and further implement the Regulation, and ensure that these efforts truly stimulate market activities and bring about equity, justice and efficiency.

The eastern region and provincial capitals are encouraged to take pilot measures on par with international standards, while central, western and northeastern regions and non-capital cities will be supported in fostering notably better business environments through reform. Innovative measures such as one permit for one sector, one license for one enterprise and joint application of permit and business license will be applied extensively. Such measures will help nurture more new market entities and facilitate their operation based on market rules. "When formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan, gaps between different regions in terms of business environment shall be fully taken into consideration. Reform should be further advanced," Li said. Fair competition will be further promoted. Reform will be advanced for the market-oriented tendering and bidding of government projects. Intermediary services will be better regulated.

Efforts will be intensified to investigate and punish "hidden red tape" and possible irregularities in credit issuing that increase the financing cost of businesses. Making oversight more effective and efficient will be a priority task, to ensure authority is delegated where appropriate and regulation is fully enforced, the meeting noted. Oversight throughout the process will be made more targeted and effective. Integrated supervision and joint law enforcement will be conducted, and all the fields that concern the life and health of the people will be subject to oversight on a priority basis. "Greater efforts shall be made to address the prominent issues raised by market entities. Difficulties in getting administrative approvals and inadequate enforcement of oversight remain acute concerns, which have increased institutional transaction costs for market entities," Li said, "Proper solutions can effectively raise productivity."

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China to Ensure Safe and Stable Energy Supplies, Sufficient

Residential Heating for Winter

China will redouble efforts to ensure safe and stable energy supplies and sufficient residential heating for the winter, the State Council executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Friday. The meeting noted the recent surge in coal, electricity and natural gas demand across the country due to factors such as sharp temperature drop covering wide areas. Competent departments have made all-out efforts to shore up production and supply of coal, electricity and natural gas. With daily coal output maintained at high levels and electricity generation and gas supply hitting new highs, these efforts have been effective in meeting the needs of residents and key sectors. "Energy supply is a matter of warmth and health for the people, especially those in the northern region. It thus deserves our great attention," Li said. Recent days have seen historic daily lows of temperature in several regions. Meteorologic agencies are expecting further temperature drops in mid-January.

Those at the meeting decided that gas fields will be mobilized for safe, full-capacity production, and gas storage facilities will be fully employed to ensure supply under emergency situations. Coordinated efforts are needed to guarantee gas supply for heating purposes where possible. While ensuring safety, key regions and enterprises of coal production are urged to scale up production by tapping potentials, shore up delivery support, draw on reserves as conditions require, and take multi-pronged measures to maintain supply-demand balance. Different types of power generation should be readied to meet rush-hour electricity demand and boost electricity supply. Inter-provincial electricity transmission will be stepped up to channel power from surplus regions to those suffering shortages. Suppliers should be urged to fulfill their duties and ensure the supply of coal, electricity and natural gas in strict accordance with contracts. Regulators should strengthen production safety supervision and take swift measures against price manipulations.

"Keeping homes properly heated is of vital importance for the people, and greater efforts are needed to ensure natural gas, electricity and coal supply for the people. No deliberate outages will ever be allowed," Li said. "Governments at all levels shall intensify inspection and supervision, and any problem identified must be dealt with in a timely and effective way to ensure that the people stay safe and warm throughout the winter." Energy provision mechanisms will be strengthened to ensure energy supply over the long run. The systems of energy production, supply, storage and sales will be enhanced. Natural gas and coal storage facilities and emergency backup power systems will be developed at a faster pace, and the role of coal power in meeting peak demand will be harnessed in a science-based manner, with a view to ensuring energy security. "Stronger efforts shall be made to ensure safe and stable energy supply, with priority given to residential heating. It is important to power the heating facilities with the most efficient energy source based on local conditions and provide sufficient heating and power supply for residents, particularly for those in the colder northern region," Li said.

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China to Improve Business Environment in Next Five Years

China will continue to improve the business environment in the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025) while boosting quality management of products, projects, and services, said Zhang Gong, head of the State Administration for Market Regulation. China's business environment has upgraded remarkably in the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), as can be mirrored in the fact that the average time to start a business shrank from more than 30 days to less than four days, Zhang said. In the next five years, China would take a series of measures to boost business system reforms and provide market entities with a fair, transparent, procedure-based, convenient, and predictable business environment, he said. The list of business permits for enterprises successfully piloted in 18 pilot free trade zones will become a national standard and will apply nationwide, he said.

China would intensify reforms in pilot free trade zones to meet the needs of deepening reforms and build a high-standard market system, he said. In 2020, the administration stepped up law enforcement against monopolies and unfair competition, involving both online and offline activities, Zhang said. He pledged new efforts to fight these practices and prevent the disorderly expansion of capital. During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, China will continue to strengthen quality management on key products, industries, and projects, and daily consumer goods and services, he said. The quality of Chinese products and services has improved remarkably as 93.86 percent of manufactured products met quality standards. The figure was 100 percent for large and medium-sized construction projects, data from the market regulator showed.

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Political Advisors Discuss Measures to Further Improve China's Business Environment

Chinese political advisors on Thursday discussed measures to further improve China's business environment during a consultation session in Beijing. The biweekly session, held by the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's top political advisory body, was presided over by Wang Yang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the CPPCC National Committee. Wang stressed the importance of efforts to establish a

market-oriented, law-based and internationalized business environment in accordance with China's actual conditions to support the building of a modern socialist country. Noting China's progress in improving its business environment, which has seen its international ranking raised, political advisors underscored that there is still room for further promotion and said persistent efforts are needed to build a first-class business environment. They proposed including business environment assessment in the evaluation system for local governments, and introducing successful experience to more regions.

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JAPAN: To Launch New Subsidies to Help Employees, Business Operators Change Jobs or Industries

The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry will launch a new subsidy system in 2021 to support employees and business operators hit hard by the novel coronavirus — such as those in the tourism and restaurant sectors — helping them to find new jobs or change their field. Under the new system, the central government will back up relevant efforts by prefectural governments, aiming to help create new employment and preserve job security. The subsidies will be extended to programs implemented by Tokyo and other prefectural governments to help people who lose their jobs or shutter their business due to the impact of the coronavirus. In the case of the unemployed, the new system is aimed at such local government programs as those intended to foster through practical training employees who would be an immediate asset to new employers, and programs to help people obtain professional qualifications through relearning at colleges.

For business operators, the system envisages such programs as those aimed at supporting operators who go into a new field or diversify their line of business. As specific examples, the ministry cites programs aimed at helping business operators review their businesses via information and communication technology, and helping them provide their employees with training to acquire skills needed in their new line of business. Under the new system, if a prefectural government's application passes the screening by the central government, the state will extend financial support worth 90% of the program's expenses, with an upper limit of ¥225 million a year for a maximum of three years. This subsidy program has been included in the third supplementary budget for fiscal 2020. Once the budget passes the ordinary Diet session, to be convened in January 2021, the program is expected to start soon after. The central government has already underpinned the securing of jobs, through employment measures such as expanding of a system to subsidize a portion of leave allowance.

The new subsidy system is also aimed at responding flexibly to changes in industrial

structures, with the advent of the post-coronavirus era in mind, and promoting transfers into sectors where demand is expected to grow in the future. The labor ministry believes programs tailored to the actual circumstances of each region can be rolled out, because individual prefectural governments will take a central role in implementing the new subsidy system. According to the ministry, 79,522 employees had been fired or not had their job contracts renewed due to the impact of the virus in 2020 as of Dec. 25, including firings and non-renewals that had not yet taken place but were expected. A survey by credit research company Tokyo Shoko Research showed that 43,802 businesses suspended or ceased operations, or decided to dissolve themselves, from January through October. The number appears to be heading for a new annual record. These figures illustrate the heavy blow dealt to employees and businesses by the novel coronavirus.

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Gov't Eyes Declaring State of Emergency on Thursday for About a Month

Japan plans to declare a state of emergency in Tokyo and three neighboring prefectures this week, possibly on Thursday at the earliest, and lasting for about one month to curb its largest-yet surge of coronavirus cases, government officials said Monday. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said the government is considering the measure without specifying a start date or duration. It would be the second state of emergency in the country since the global pandemic broke out. Government sources said the government plans to decide on the declaration possibly on Thursday, and put it into effect on the same day or Friday. The initial start date was being planned for Saturday. Tokyo Gov Yuriko Koike and the leaders of Chiba, Kanagawa and Saitama prefectures agreed to jointly ask residents to refrain from nonessential trips outside the house and call on dining and drinking establishments to close by 8 p.m., further cutting their operating hours from the 10 p.m. currently requested. It was not immediately clear what another state of emergency would look like, with schools and some businesses closing during the previous one last spring. Suga indicated in a New Year's press conference that social and economic activities are unlikely to be halted across the board this time, saying the measure should be implemented "in a limited and focused manner."

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Nissan Licenses Technology Free of Charge to Support COVID-19 Fight

Nissan is supporting the fight against COVID-19 by providing licenses free of charge

for thermal imaging sensor technology developed by the company. Nissan is licensing the low-cost technology under the terms of the IP Open Access Declaration Against COVID-19, which the company joined in May. By signing the declaration, Nissan agreed not to seek compensation nor assert any patent, utility model, design or copyright claim against any activities aimed at combatting the pandemic. The licenses are for multiple products being developed by Chino Corp and Seiko NPC Corp. Chino is using Nissan's technology to develop, manufacture and sell non-contact body surface temperature measuring devices that can quickly detect high body surface temperatures. Seiko NPC has developed sensors under a sublicense of the technology from IHI Aerospace Co Ltd. These sensors are being used in non-contact body surface temperature measuring devices for multiple companies. The measuring devices are used in facilities such as schools, airports and medical facilities to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Nissan's contactless temperature-measuring sensor detects infrared rays from an object or area. It can display images, such as temperature distributions, with a resolution of about 2000 pixels and can be manufactured at significantly lower cost than sensors made using conventional technologies.

From <https://japantoday.com> 01/05/2021

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Japan's Innovation Community to Showcase Record Number of Startups at CES

The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) has announced that 53 technology startups will join global technology leaders in representing Japan at CES 2021, which will take place virtually from Jan 11-14. The number of Japanese startups exhibiting at this year's J-Startup Pavilion, which JETRO organizes, has nearly doubled from a year ago amidst the country's growing focus on the innovation economy. The J-Startup companies encompass a broad spectrum of product categories, including AI, health, wearables, robotics, IoT, smart home, transportation, blockchain, energy, and space tech, as well as anti-coronavirus technologies. Company names, product details, and website addresses can be found on the J-Startup Pavilion website.

On Jan 13, from 6-8 p.m., JETRO will also host " JAPAN Session: Transforming the Super Aging Society into a Super Smart Society," via YouTube live stream (viewable here). With one in four Japanese age 65 or older, the Japan Session aims to offer insights and solutions to the myriad problems that arise from an aging population. The panel will feature emerging leaders in the country's innovation community who will share their breakthrough technologies, visions, and strategies for creating a thriving "super-smart" world that is barrier-free for all. "We are proud to present an extensive lineup of novel technologies from Japan, all of which have the potential to transform the way people live around the world," JETRO Executive Vice President

Ichiro Sone said. "J-Startup companies' record turnout for CES 2021 reflects their enthusiasm for using CES as the launching pad to expand their businesses globally. It's also a testament to the governmental policies that are designed to boost innovation activities. We look forward to hearing how the J-Startup innovators, who work on the front line of the 'super-aging society,' envision our future at the Japan Session."

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Medical System in Tokyo Under Extreme Strain

Japanese experts are warning the current wave of coronavirus infections is putting increasing strain on the medical system in the capital. They say hospitals are being forced to turn away some COVID-19 patients and hotels where those with mild or no symptoms are asked to quarantine are full. The daily tally of new cases in Tokyo has been well over the 1,000-level for much of the past week. 135 people in the capital are now in serious condition. Public health experts report the average number of daily cases is up 65 percent this week, compared to a week earlier. Director Ohmagari Norio of Disease Control and Prevention Center said, "The current situation may reflect an explosive spread of infections." With hospital beds filling up, more than 8,000 people who tested positive are quarantining at home. Three have died, including two people who had pre-existing conditions. Hospital beds for COVID-19 patients are also running low in other parts of the greater Tokyo region.

One reason is that some patients need to stay at the hospital long after testing negative, as they recover. Even after testing negative, other hospitals are reluctant to accept these patients. Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide is urging medical associations to help secure more hospital beds for coronavirus patients... and to prepare for a vaccination drive. Suga said, "We need your continued cooperation to provide necessary medical assistance to those who need it." In an effort to curb the contagion, the central government added seven prefectures to its state of emergency on Thursday. The measure will remain in place until February 7. People are asked to refrain from non-essential outings and help reduce the number of commuters by 70 percent by working from home. But it appeared to be business as usual in the newly added prefectures on Thursday morning, compared to the state of emergency last spring. Some businesses are finding it hard to shift to remote work.

From <https://newsonjapan.com> 01/15/2021

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Japan to Use AI at Customs to Stop Drug Smuggling

Japan's Finance Ministry is promoting a program to introduce artificial intelligence and other cutting-edge technology to help customs agents crack down on increased smuggling of illegal drugs. The program aims to establish the world's most advanced inspection capabilities according to a plan announced by the ministry in June last year. As part of the program, AI-based analysis will be used to sort through huge amounts of data on past cases of unlawful import activity, looking for patterns of false descriptions on such matters as price, quantity and weight of goods on import declarations. The information will help pin down importers who should be watched more closely. To prevent the importing of illegal drugs, the ministry has already started testing a prototype nuclear quadrupole resonance (NQR) device that uses AI to check X-rayed items and identify possible drug smuggling. The NQR device sends a pulse via radio waves and can detect drugs hidden in body cavities. At present, drugs hidden in such a manner can only be confirmed using X-ray machines at hospitals. No country has yet adopted the technique to find illegal drugs.

From <https://newsonjapan.com> 01/21/2021

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Marketing, Sports Data Apps Join Fight Against Pandemic

Devices designed for improving customer marketing and sports performance are now being used in the fight against COVID-19 as companies deploy their technologies to meet new needs during the pandemic. Hitachi-LG Data Storage originally developed its 3D LiDAR People Counter sensor for retail stores to track shoppers' movements and analyze data in order to improve sales and customer satisfaction. The company, a joint venture between Japan's Hitachi and South Korea's LG Electronics, has now paired the application with a heat detection and camera app that takes customers' temperatures and checks if they are wearing a mask with a facial detection system. The technology monitors the number of people and their movements to reduce congestion and it estimates wait times at cash registers, to help reduce infection risks. It can also determine whether or not a customer has stopped by a specific area such as a required hand sanitizer station. It comes as retailers seek to create a safe environment and restore peace of mind to the in-store experience as fears of infection have driven customers away during the pandemic.

"It was often used for marketing before but recently it has been used in various places for unmanned stores. Since the coronavirus the number of unmanned stores has increased quite a lot," Norimoto Ichikawa, head of Hitachi-LG Data Storage's software development team, told Reuters at the annual Wearables Expo in Tokyo. Union Tool, exhibiting at the same trade show, said it was hoping to market its wearable heart sensor for applications including as a monitoring device for COVID-19 patients at quarantine hotels. The sensor, which can remotely monitor a person's heart rate and temperature, is now used for health management and

collection of biometric data for sports and exercise. Union Tool is teaming with Toyobo for the sensor to be used with the latter's stretchable conductive film for wearable devices and used in clothing. "If the number of patients increases in the future and more people will need to be quarantined at home or hotel, I think there's a possibility that such sensors can be used to remotely monitor people's condition in real time," said Naoki Jimbo, head of Union Tool's sales and marketing department.

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Japan Rushes to Deploy Unified Vaccination Record System

Japan is considering using its national ID system for its coronavirus vaccine rollout program, hoping to avoid the pitfalls and confusion that was created when the government dispersed economic aid earlier in the pandemic. Vaccinating the country's 125 million people has taken on a heightened sense of urgency as hospital officials have warned the medical system was near collapse and the nation prepares to host the Tokyo Summer Games this year. While Japan has kept its rates of COVID-19 relatively low compared with the Americas and Europe, it has seen a surge in the new year and is under its second state of emergency due to daily rises in cases. To ensure a smooth rollout of vaccines, the government wants a more unified approach to vaccination distribution and will likely use the "My Number" ID system. That system is a 12-digit number issued to all citizens and residents of Japan, including foreign residents, used for taxes, social security and disaster situations.

Currently, vaccines are distributed differently in each municipality. Such disparities could cause confusion in rolling out the vaccines, which need to be taken twice within a certain period. The government plans to start vaccinating medical workers from the end of February. From late March at the earliest, people 65 and older will receive the shots. People getting vaccines will take coupons from local municipal authorities to the vaccination sites, which are typically medical facilities near their homes. The new system would be linked to the national "My Number" IDs and the vaccination coupons. Information about who took the vaccine in which places would be shared by municipalities across Japan. The government aims to start operating the system by the spring, when they expect mass inoculations to begin.

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SOUTH KOREA: To Extend R&D Support for Bio Convergence Tech, Medical Devices

South Korea's science ministry said Friday it will extend research and development

(R&D) support for the bio-health sector, bolstering efforts to develop regenerative medicine and homegrown medical devices. Under the Ministry of Science and ICT's bio-health strategy, the country will also expand R&D investment to converge cutting-edge technology, such as artificial intelligence, with new medicine development to boost efficiency. The ministry will also expand support for the development of homegrown medical devices. It will also aim to acquire core technology in next-generation regenerative medicine, such as stem cell research, and strengthen long-term support for new treatment methods, such as gene editing technology. The move comes after the country outlined a bio-health investment strategy in 2019, which only clarified support for four sectors -- fundamental research, medicine, health care services and regulatory science. The updated strategy includes support for bio-convergence technology, medical devices, regenerative medicine, clinical health science, bio-resources and information infrastructure, as well as fostering more experts. The science ministry has set aside 520 billion won (\$466 million) to support biotechnology development this year.

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South-East Asia

PHILIPPINES: To Relax Ban on Foreign Travelers from Feb. 1

The Philippines will relax its ban on travelers, starting next month, from over 30 countries and regions that have confirmed cases of more transmissible COVID-19 variants, presidential spokesman Harry Roque said on Friday. The ban on foreign travelers from 36 countries and regions, including Britain, China and the United States, ends on Jan. 31. "The restriction remains until January 31, 2021, and would lapse after the aforesaid date," Roque said in a statement. The government clarified that foreign nationals who are not allowed entry to the Philippines as stated by previous orders, including those holding tourist visas, are still prohibited to enter the country. Roque reiterated that travelers allowed entry still need to complete the 14-day quarantine. On the same day, Roque announced that Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has retained the general community quarantine for the capital city of Manila until the end of February to curb the spread of the COVID-19. Aside from Manila, Roque said Duterte also placed a number of provinces across the country under the same restrictions. Many provinces in other parts of the country are put under more relaxed restrictions, he added. The Philippines has been put under varying degrees of lockdowns since mid-March last year. The Philippines has tallied 519,575 coronavirus infections, including 10,552 deaths.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 01/29/2021

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THAILAND: PM Sets Up Ad Hoc Panels to Probe Illegal Immigration, Gambling Dens

Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha on Thursday set up two ad hoc committees to investigate illegal entries of migrants and gambling dens in the face of the latest round of the coronavirus spread, allegedly triggered by such illicit acts. Prayut named Phakdee Phothisiri, a former member of the National Anti-Corruption Commission, as head of the committee in charge of investigating the illegal immigration and named Charnchao Chaiyanukij, a former permanent secretary for justice, as head of the panel in charge of investigating the illegal gambling businesses, especially in the provinces Rayong and Chonburi, according to an official attached to Government House. The installment of the ad hoc panels followed widespread allegations that some government personnel had failed to tackle illegal migrant trafficking and gambling dens, which allegedly led to the recent outbreak of coronavirus. So far, Thailand has reported over 7,000 cases since the second wave began.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 01/14/2021

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Thai FDA Approves Emergency Use of Astrazeneca COVID-19 Vaccine

Thailand's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the registration for emergency use of COVID-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca, with the first shipment of 50,000 doses scheduled to arrive next month, a senior official confirmed Thursday. The first 50,000 doses, produced by AstraZeneca in Italy, will be followed by another 150,000 doses in March and April, according to FDA Secretary General Paisal Dunkhum. The imported AstraZeneca vaccine is yet to be certified for quality and health safety by the Department of Medical Sciences before use, Paisal said. For the production of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Thailand by Siam Bioscience Co., the FDA chief said vaccines produced locally will not be available for use until May.

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THAILAND: PM Wants CCSA to Look into Vaccine Management Plan

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has ordered the Covid-19 pandemic vaccine management plan be submitted to the Centre for Covid-19 Situation Administration next week, said government deputy spokesperson Ratchada Thanadirek. The first groups to be inoculation will be medical staff, elders, chronically ill persons and medical staff working in high-risk areas. The CCSA reported 930 new cases on

Saturday and the death of a Myanmar labourer in Samut Sakhon province.

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VIETNAM: HÀ NỘI Promotes Science and Technology in Agricultural Production

Science and technology are key to agricultural production, allowing for increases in the capacity and quality of products and improving farmers' lives. For many years, Hà Nội has focused on solutions to promote the transfer of science and technology to farmers. However, to make science and technology the leverage for sustainable agricultural development, more supportive mechanisms and policies are needed, as well as the participation of the authorities.

Initial progress

Thanks to the application of science and technology in production, Kim Sơn Commune in Gia Lâm District has become the capital city's hub for growing high quality bananas. "My family grew more than 200 trees of the South African banana variety and earned over VNĐ250 million (US\$11,000) per year on average," Nguyễn Trọng Nghĩa, a banana farmer, told Hà Nội Mới (New Hà Nội) Newspaper. "We were planting bananas as per the VietGAP process, which raised consumption," said Nghĩa. Meanwhile, farmers in Vạn Thái Commune of Ứng Hoà District have invested in raising pigs to produce clean and safe pork. A farm belonging to Nguyễn Văn Thanh's family is one example. His farm is located on an area of 150,000 sq.m, raising 30,000 pigs in a closed and modern barn system. Every year, his family earns about VNĐ200 billion (US\$8.6 million). According to the president of Ứng Hoà District's Farmers' Association, Phạm Văn Hoạch, the association has guided, trained, and transferred technology and techniques to hundreds of local farmers. Ứng Hoà District has 51 agricultural production establishments applying high technology, bringing high economic efficiency. To help farmers access and grasp technological advances of the fourth industrial revolution and master some new technologies, in 2020, the Hà Nội Farmers' Association coordinated with agencies to organise more than 1,800 scientific and technical training seminars for 188,126 farmers, members of the cooperative and agricultural technicians. The results achieved were remarkable.

"The application of science and technology increased added value in agricultural production by 30 per cent," said Tạ Văn Tường, vice director of the Hà Nội Agriculture and Rural Development Department. "Hà Nội formed several high-tech agricultural models with revenue from VNĐ50 billion to hundreds of billions of đồng," he said. In particular, the application of biotechnology in seedling production has brought about a positive effect. Every year, the city supplies more than 100 million poultry to the market, excluding other breeds of livestock and seedling plants, he

added. According to Dương Thị Hằng, vice president of the Hà Nội Farmers' Association, in the 2015-2020 period, there were 3,200 farming households in Hà Nội achieving the title of good producers and businesspeople thanks to the application of science and technology. However, Hằng said that the number of farmers in the city who have the ability to access or master science and technology had not yet met expectations. This limitation was because the supporting mechanisms as well as the facilitation for farmers to access science and technology including training programmes had not yet met the real demand, Hằng said.

Hi-tech applications

In order to improve farmers' access to science and technology, Thường Tín District would select appropriate models and integrate them into agricultural vocational training programmes as well as support farmers to build hi-tech production establishments, according to Thường Tín District's vice chairman Bùi Công Tín. Meanwhile, vice chairman of Ứng Hoà District Tiến Hoàng said the local authority will link with businesses to build high-tech agricultural models which would be venues for directly guiding and supporting farmers in science and technology. The district would guide and support farmers to promote the application of information technology, proactively create production chains and marketing channels online, Hoàng said. Hoạch, president of Ứng Hoà District's Farmers' Association, suggested that the city should study and create a mechanism to build farmer support centres in each commune and township. In addition to the application of information technology in production, it was necessary to guide farmers to access and expand consumption markets, Hoạch said. However, in order for science and technology to reach farmers, first of all, farmers needed to promote autonomy and self-learning. In the future, the Hà Nội Agriculture and Rural Development Department will also coordinate with Farmers' Associations and localities to integrate vocational training and science and technology transfer programmes to farmers through many forms such as building agricultural extension models, organising production and branding conferences and seminars. "To have a modern agriculture sector, farmers must have mastery of science and technology. Bringing science and technology to farmers would help Hà Nội's agriculture production to thrive," said Tường.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/23/2021

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HCM City, Southern Provinces Step Up Efforts Against Fake Goods, Contraband as Tết Approaches

Officers tasked with preventing fake goods, trade fraud and smuggling in HCM City and southern border provinces have been forced to work hard ahead of Tết (Lunar New Year), which falls on February 12 this year. Last week the HCM City customs department discovered 14 steel containers that consignee V.V Steel Company described wrongly to evade tax. The company, in Long An Province's Đức Hòa

District, made a declaration that would have allowed it to enjoy 0 per cent tax instead of the 10-15 per cent it had to pay, equivalent to VNĐ1 billion (US\$43,000). Now, besides the tax it will also have to pay a penalty of 20 per cent of the amount. Smuggling and trade fraud are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Trương Văn Ba, director of the HCM City Market Surveillance Department, said last year 25,538 violations had been discovered involving loss of tax revenues of VNĐ5.8 trillion. Competent agencies filed charges in 113 cases.

According to Steering Committee 389 of HCM City, inspections had been reduced due to the Covid-19 pandemic but specifically target warehouses, yards and sites where large volumes of smuggled goods are likely to be concealed, improving the efficiency of prevention efforts. According to the city police, local militia have been urged to look out for dubious activities and crack down on the trade in prohibited, smuggled and counterfeit goods. Drugs, weapons, illegal firecrackers, unsafe and violent toys, and cigarettes are in the sights of officials. The city border guard force, the Southern Border Guard Soldiers' Department of Drug and Crime Prevention, naval squadron No 28 under the Việt Nam Border Defence Force, and border forces in Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu and Tiền Giang provinces will look out for possible violations at estuaries, sea ports and sea borders. The city is also calling on businesses and consumers to join hands in the fight against smuggling and trade fraud.

Cross-border smuggling

Border authorities in the Cửu Long (Mekong) Delta provinces of An Giang, Kiên Giang and Đồng Tháp are stepping up efforts to keep out smuggled goods, which usually increases during the year-end period. The contraband is mostly cigarettes and sugar brought in through the Châu Đốc City border in An Giang Province. Smugglers transport the goods from Cambodia in boats, motorbikes and trucks at night to evade officers, but if spotted are not averse to attacking them. Kiên Giang Province's Hà Tiên City also sees smuggling of goods from across the border, usually late at night. Smugglers travel in groups and transport large quantities of contraband, mainly foreign-made cigarettes. Authorities have discovered hundreds of cases of smuggling and confiscated tens of thousands of packs of cigarettes and other goods. Fishing boats are used to illegally transport and sell oil and petrol at sea. Hundreds of thousands of litres of oil of unknown origin have been seized by local agencies, who have also collected billions of đồng in fines. The An Giang Province steering committee for anti-smuggling, trade fraud and fake goods said troops were patrolling border gates, trails and crossings to prevent smuggling.

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Electricity Dispatch Centre Asks for Better Infrastructure

The National Load Dispatch Center (A0) has asked Vietnam Electricity (EVN) to

equip it with better infrastructure for the operation of a future wholesale and retail electricity market with more renewable energy resources. A representative of the centre said: "Wind and solar power plants have been put into operation on a large scale but data on their scale and generating capacity is not yet accurate." The representative added that rooftop solar power, with a capacity of up to 9,583 MWp, was affecting the load chart, making it tough to plan the power system operation as well as the market, especially due to the limitations of the transmission grid, particularly the 500kV / 220kV grid in the north. The centre also said the operation processes of the hydroelectric plants with a capacity of more than 30 MW had shortcomings to fit with electricity market regulations. As the future infrastructure will convert the transaction cycle from 60 minutes to 30 minutes, while the core software has reached its limit, the centre has asked EVN to soon install new tools.

Leaders of A0 also suggested the EVN consider offering supporting services for electricity loading and dispatch to develop the market. It also asked EVN to approve its plan for upgrading and expanding the existing infrastructure systems such as SCADA / EMS to better collect metering data due to the sudden development of renewable energy for the wholesale electricity market and the growing requirements for energy security. At the same time, it asked EVN to equip the Electricity Market Management System (MMS) system for after 2022 to ensure the infrastructure for the wholesale/retail electricity market with renewable energy. Speaking to the Vietnam News Agency, A0's representative said in 2021, it would set up better systems to improve the economic efficiency of the electricity system and minimise electricity costs for the country, adding it would develop the information technology infrastructure for the future for the wholesale electricity market. The centre also planned to complete the project of upgrading the IT infrastructure to serve the competitive wholesale electricity market of Việt Nam (VWEM) in 2020-2022 as well as apply open-ended technical innovations and scientific research.

The centre said it would improve the quality of short-term and long-term load forecasting for uncontrollable power sources including renewable energy, rooftop solar power and wind power sources. With an increasingly large-scale power system and the development of renewable energy sources to replace fossil fuels, the centre said it would propose solutions to strengthen the legal framework for renewable energy sources. A0 said it would research and install storage equipment to fit with the increase in renewable energy sources to meet local operational requirements and standards. Regarding human resources, A0 would recruit new engineers and improve the existing ones with more quality training to meet the requirements of a wholesale electricity market. According to the centre, there are 100 plants directly participating in the electricity market with a total installed capacity of 27,526 MW, accounting for 46.3 per cent of total installed capacity of power plants controlled by the national dispatching level. In 2020, four new factories joined the market with a total capacity of 1,837 MW. The total cost for those plants was VNĐ122 trillion (US\$5.3 billion).

Last year, the centre prepared to operate the wholesale electricity market including the calculation and announcement of market electricity price (CSMP), market capacity price (CCAN), total market price (CFMP), rate of electricity purchase and cost of purchasing electricity from some factories of power corporations. It also helped compile five processes regulating the operation of the competitive wholesale electricity market and reported to the EVN on the electricity market operation in 2021-2030 in the EVN's Power Plan VIII. The ENV is eyeing the operation of a competitive retail electricity market in 2021 after running a competitive wholesale market since 2019. The plans were specified in 2013, with the marketplace set to be developed in three distinct parts – the power generation market, the wholesale market and the retail market.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/27/2021

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P2P Lending Needs Better Management to Avoid Black Credit

The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) has warned about the increasing use of foreign peer-to-peer (P2P) lending in Việt Nam with potential risks of black credit. According to a draft report on the impact of the shared economy that MPI sent to ministries and ministerial-level agencies, P2P lending first appeared in Viet Nam in 2016 in the form of fintech companies, aiming towards unbanked customers. However, this has become a channel for so-called black credit. A representative from the ministry said: "The operation of the P2P lending model has brought positive effects, but if not managed and supervised closely, there may be a negative impact on society." The ministry's report said the current legal framework did not have specific provisions for peer-to-peer lending, while some companies had seen strong growth in customers. After registering with pawnshops, financial advisors and brokers, the companies were providing services to connect investors and borrowers with loans on online trading platforms. On social media, ads were offering online loan applications with very attractive rates and simple procedures. They give borrowers a lower amount of money at a high interest rate, but resort to threats when the debts are not repaid on time.

Recently, authorities in HCM City have found and dealt with illegal usury lines and black credit offered through online P2P lending applications on social networks. Major Trịnh Khánh Hùng, deputy head of the city's Public Security Criminal Police Division, said in 2020, the city police handled many cases involving Chinese lenders who cooperated with local people to run fintech companies. For example, police found illegal lending activities at Chinese-related Sora Technology Co., Ltd. and Di Thai Ky Financial Services Co., Ltd in May 2020 in District 2. Police also found similar activities at Cashwagon Co., Ltd. and Lendtech Co., Ltd which were headquartered at 17 Tôn Thất Tùng, District 1, in June. Also in 2020, the city police

investigated apps led by Chinese citizens which lent to more than 60,000 people in 60 provinces and cities for a total of about VNĐ100 billion (US\$4.3 million). These applications, namely "Vaytocdo", "Moreloan" or "VD online", provided loans with "exorbitant" interest rates of 2.5 per cent per day, equivalent to 17.5 per cent per week, 75 per cent per month and 912.5 per cent per year.

Legal framework needed

Facing developments of P2P lending, Phạm Tiến Dũng, director of the Payment Department from the State Bank of Viet Nam, spoke at a recent press conference on the implementation of banking sector tasks this year, saying: "SBV is continuing to monitor the market for appropriate management solutions." Dũng said the bank was assigned a pilot mechanism for P2P lending and has submitted a report to the Prime Minister, adding it was working on a decree relating to trial activity of P2P lending. The release of a legal framework by regulators would create conditions for genuine companies in P2P lending to develop, as the main point of the service was to help unbanked people access loans. As a leader of one a P2P lending firm, Đỗ Minh Hải, director of ATM Online Company, said: "Most people use black credit as they are afraid to spend time providing complicated documents and procedures to prove their finances, income and payment ability." Hải's company was using an electronic customer identification solution (eKYC) with big data to identify customers, which helped them to receive the money in about 15 minutes. Hải said legal fintech firms were trying to bring in technology to help borrowers complete administrative procedures: "At the same time, they help contributing to repelling black credit."

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/28/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: UP Govt Aims to Establish IT Parks in All Divisions in Collaboration with STPI

In the current era of information and communication technology (ICT) gaining immense importance in all walks of life including industries and business, Uttar Pradesh government is establishing IT and software technology parks across the state in collaboration with Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) to achieve the objective of setting up IT parks in all divisions under State's IT & Startup policy of 2017, informed Alok Kumar, Additional Chief Secretary (ACS), IT and Electronics, Government of Uttar Pradesh. The collaboration aims to set up an IT park on three acres of land in the Pilkhani Industrial Area, being developed on 200 acres in Saharanpur, with Plug-and-play and other facilities as per the parameters of STPI. UP Govt aims to establish IT parks in all divisions in collaboration with STPI. The ACS informed that the work of setting up IT parks in Meerut and Agra was almost

complete and Gorakhpur and Varanasi IT Parks were expected to be established by September 2021. The state government has provided land free of cost for all the above mentioned IT parks and the process of selecting local information technology and startup companies for these IT parks is also being done simultaneously. Further, he said that the transfer deed of Jawaharlal Nehru Commercial Complex of Varanasi Development Authority in favour of IT and Electronics Department is under process for the establishment of IT Park in Varanasi, while STPI would soon commence construction on available land in Kanpur (Panki) and the process was on for obtaining land of Indian Turpentine and Rosin Co. for the IT park project in Bareilly. It is estimated that IT parks under construction at present would attract an investment of about Rs 200 crores and create 15,000 employment opportunities.

Alok Kumar said that STPI centres with plug and play facility in Lucknow and Prayagraj were already functional and STPI centre of Lucknow had recorded exports of Rs 230 crore in the year 2019-20 as a result of the state government's investment-friendly policies and improvement in Ease of Doing Business. It may be noted that 20 IT/Startup companies are operating from Lucknow STPI centre, which has 50 plug-and-play seats with raw furnished workspace in about 2000 sqft, whereas, 10 IT or ITeS (information technology-enabled services) companies are functional in Prayagraj STPI centre with 50 plug-and-play seats and 5000 sqft. of raw furnished workspace. The IT Park in Gorakhpur has been developed on 3.58 acres of Gorakhpur Industrial Development Authority (GIDA) land, out of which 3432 sqft has been earmarked for the plug-and-play facility and 5568 sqft is a raw furnished workspace. It is expected to provide employment to 4000 people over a period of five years and export revenue is estimated at Rs 5-10 crore per year. Almost complete IT park in Meerut has been set up in an area of 2.5 acres with 25,074 sqft built-up area and 131 plug-and-play seats along with raw furnished workspace in 3640 sqft. An estimated annual export of Rs 6–10 crore and the creation of 5000 employment opportunities are expected in this IT park. Similarly, the IT park in Agra is being set up in the area of 2 acres, in which built-up area is 23,000 sqft with 122 plug-and-play seats and 2,330 sqft of raw furnished workspace. It is expected to generate 5,000 job opportunities during the five years and Rs 6-10 crores worth of exports annually. Moreover, efforts are being made to arrange sites in government buildings, in vacant buildings of engineering or polytechnic institutions, etc., as well as the land of the irrigation department to set up IT parks in the Aligarh, Azamgarh and Jhansi divisions. It is pertinent here to mention that Software Technology Parks of India is an autonomous organization established by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India Autonomous Society set up by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India with a mandate to promote software and electronic hardware exports from the country by implementing Software Technology Park (STP) & Electronic Hardware Technology Park (EHTP) Schemes.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/12//2021

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh Unveils India's First Indigenously Designed & Developed Driverless Metro Car

Defence Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, on January 15, unveiled state-of-the-art 'Driverless Metro Car' for Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) at a function held at BEML's Bangalore Complex in the presence of Raj Kumar, Secretary (Defence Production), Dr Deepak Kumar Hota, Chairman & Managing Director, BEML Ltd and host of senior officials. At the same function, the Minister, also virtually launched the Aerospace Assembly Hangar, situated within BEML's Bangalore Complex, and unveiled first indigenously manufactured Tatra Cabin by BEML. At BEML's Bangalore Complex, the Defence Minister inspected the Rail Hangars, the array of BEML equipment on display (from its Defence & Aerospace, Mining & Construction and Rail & Metro Divisions) and the newly launched Industrial Design Centre. Speaking on the occasion he said, "I am truly overwhelmed with what I have seen at BEML manufacturing facility today. I'm proud of the good work that the team of engineers and technicians are doing at BEML. I would also like to congratulate but bow before each and every member of BEML and wish that the wonderful work that is being done by the company should be made known to the nation. They are the real warriors of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', taking India ahead."

Welcoming the Minister, Dr Hota said, "The Defence Minister's visit to BEML is a true reflection of the unstinted support and encouragement that he is providing. BEML's foray into metro manufacturing has been a defining moment in the urban transportation scenario in India. With a major market share in the country in direct competition with well-established international players, BEML has made its mark as the only Indian company in this high technology field." Indigenously designed & developed state-of-the-art Driverless Metro trains are being manufactured at BEML's Bangalore Complex. The cars will operate on 25 kV AC traction power and equipped with CCTV surveillance and with the provision to carry passenger bi-cycles in the coaches. The cars are made up of stainless steel body with a capacity of carrying 2280 passengers in 6 cars Metro train-set. BEML bagged a total order of 576 cars for MMRDA's MRS1 project, the largest order ever, amidst stiff competition in the presence of international players and the supply is scheduled progressively up to January 2024. It may be recalled that BEML opened its Depot office recently at Charkop Metro Depot, MMRDA, Mumbai for commissioning, testing and round the clock services for Driverless Metro cars. Currently, BEML's order book position looks healthy at over Rs 12,000 crore and with the Government's push for 'Atmanirbhar' it may grow further.

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Karnataka Tops India Innovation Index 2020 Among Major States, Delhi First Among UTs

Karnataka topped the annual rankings of India Innovation Index 2020 released by NITI Aayog on Wednesday, January 20. Securing the rank one on the index, Karnataka became the most innovative state for the second year in a row. NITI-aayog In the second edition of the index released on Wednesday, Maharashtra hile securing the second spot, pushed Tamil Nadu to the third spot. Telangana followed the trail securing the fourth place. Kerala also jumped a spot up and secured the fifth slot piping down Haryana that rested with the sixth place among the list of 17 major states. Bihar was ranked last in the index with a score of 14.5. In the Hill and North-East states category, Himachal Pradesh topped the rankings followed by Uttarakhand, Manipur and Sikkim. Whereas, in the small or city-states and in Union Territory category, Delhi topped the charts being the most innovative one. It was followed by Chandigarh, Daman and Diu, and Puducherry. As reported by a national daily, Amit Kapoor, Chairman, Institute for Competitiveness, said, "There is a very strong correlation between innovation and development. As states become more innovative, their per-capita GDP (gross domestic product) rises." Institute for Competitiveness is a Gurugram-based organization that worked with NITI Aayog to develop the index. The India Innovation Index which is modelled along the lines of the global innovation index was launched last year. The index ranks states based on whether they provide a conducive environment for registering new businesses, applying for patents, human capital, and investments, among other measures.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/21/2021

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SRI LANKA: Spectrify AI to Launch Agri-tech Revolution

Spectrify AI, a part of VeracityAI Sri Lanka's fastest going AI company announced the launch of a new suite of solutions specifically designed to radically optimize production, agri-inputs, and quality control across the entire value chain for tea, spices and herbs for the first time in Sri Lanka. Leveraging the very latest advancements in spectral scanning, artificial intelligence and machine learning, Spectrify AI delivers end-to-end consistency on quality standards directly into the hands of producers and value chain partners. This is accomplished by deploying extremely low-cost patented spectral scanners paired with AI to conduct real-time spectral analysis of everything from soil composition to the chemical make-up of tea, spices and herbs at every point from field to factory to the final buyer. "Despite a rich history and unmatched legacy of quality, Sri Lanka's agri and plantation industries are yet to even approach their full potential. Ultimately this is due to a lack of good data. While most view this as a challenge, we see a massive opportunity in deploying new tech to dissolve traditional bottlenecks, drastically optimize on cost of production, and ultimately recapture our nation's reputation for the very highest quality tea,

spices and herbs in the world,” serial entrepreneur and Spectrify AI co-founder, Jeevan Gnanam said. Spectrify AI’s capabilities can also be merged with Veracity AI to analyse satellite imaging of land to track harvest development and study historical data to predict yields and risks. Additionally, Spectrify AI also offers integration with GoMicro, another groundbreaking AI detection tool that converts any smart device with a camera into a powerful handheld microscope for instant analysis and identification of plant pests and diseases.

“The future of agriculture is technology, and it is already here today. The reductions in cost and growth in capabilities of spectral imaging analysis has the potential to be more impactful to global economies and societies than the Agricultural and Electronic revolutions combined. Using AI and spectral imaging, we are gaining the ability to standardize, systematize and optimize agricultural production on an unprecedented scale. Our goal with Spectrify AI is to showcase this potential, and in the process, make Sri Lanka a hub for agri-tech innovation,” Deep Technology Entrepreneur and Spectrify co-founder Mike Richardson said. A subsidiary of SAKS, Veracity AI specializes in data and machine learning technologies to drive AI applications. Ever since its establishment in 2018, Veracity AI has been transforming companies by providing personalized, intelligent business models and product development strategy and prototyping in the areas of Data Science, Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence.

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Sri Lanka Ports Authority Implements Clearance of All Imported Goods through Electronic Methods

The Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) has taken steps towards the clearance of all imports at the Port of Colombo through electronic payments via the Internet. This allows port users to make payments from their homes or offices to clear goods from the Port of Colombo. This special facility will enable port users to make their port payments easily without hassle. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, all terminals of the Port of Colombo have been made readily available with necessary arrangements towards required services for all stakeholders. At present, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) and all other terminals of the Port of Colombo have also maintained all port operations with the implementation of a strategic crisis management plan. Accordingly, complying with the Government Health Regulations, steps have been secured to protect port employees and port users from the pandemic by, facilitating the payment of imported goods through the Internet, efficiently and expeditiously. With such extensions, facilities have been offered by Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) with the e-payment methods for the clearance of FCL and LCL cargo through respective clearance agencies via the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) web www.slpa.lk.

Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Baku Transport Agency Talks Updates Regarding Public Transport Services

Baku Transport Agency (BTA) is working to include option of filling up balance of 'BakiKart' travel cards by non-cash methods, Spokesman for BTA Mais Aghayev told Trend on Jan.12. According to Aghayev, work in this direction has been active since 2020. BakiKart is used in Baku to pay for public transport services. Meanwhile, Aghayev noted that all 320 buses to be imported by Azerbaijan from Turkey will function through contactless payments. "It's also planned to transfer to contactless payment a number of remaining buses, which still function through cash payments. In order to ensure the convenience of citizens, in order to provide them with high-quality and safe services in the field of passenger transportation, the BTA bus fleet is being updated, due to which another 320 new buses of Turkish production will be delivered to Azerbaijan.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/12/2021

Projects on Using Renewable Energy Sources Discussed in Azerbaijan

The fifth meeting of the commission established by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's Order No 1673 dated December 5, 2019 'On implementation of pilot projects in the field of use of renewable energy sources' was held, Trend reports referring to the Ministry of Energy. At the meeting in video conference format, chaired by the ministry's head Parviz Shahbazov, the work done in the implementation of pilot projects since the fourth meeting of the commission was reviewed. Besides, the execution status of the Order of the Azerbaijani Cabinet of Ministers dated December 29, 2020 'On ensuring implementation of the President's order on measures to fulfill pilot project related to construction of wind power plant with design capacity of 240 MW' was discussed. Making an opening speech, the meeting's chairman stressed the importance of the agreements signed between Saudi Arabian ACWA Power company and relevant agencies for the implementation of the first pilot project at the expense of private investment in the field of wind energy in our country in order to fulfill the tasks set by Azerbaijan's president to expand the use of renewable energy sources in our country.

Then, according to the agenda of the meeting, the members of the commission were informed about changes to the relevant legislative acts related to land use and signed agreements, investment promotion document, implementation of relevant measures on obligations under signed contracts, obtaining licenses and permits, as well as the work done together with relevant bodies in other directions and the next steps to be implemented. At the same time, information was given on the negotiation process with Masdar company from the UAE on the pilot project of solar power plant with an installed capacity of 230 MW. It was noted that the discussions on the relevant project documents were at the final stage and will be completed in the near future. The video conference participants included representatives of the Ministries of Energy, Economy, Finance, Justice, Ecology and Natural Resources, Emergency Situations, Committee of Urban Planning and Architecture, Central Bank, Azerenergy and Azerishig OJSCs.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/28/2021

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KAZAKHSTAN: East Kazakhstan Plans to Vaccinate 20% of Its Population

Kazakhstan as well as East Kazakhstan region will start vaccination against coronavirus February this year. Health workers and teachers are the first to get vaccinated, Trend reports citing Kazinform. Then students and people with chronic conditions will be inoculated. Vaccination is the only effective, cost-efficient and available measures to fight vaccine preventable diseases. According to preliminary calculations it is planned to vaccinate some 20% of the population of East Kazakhstan. As earlier reported, Kazakhstan plans to vaccinate up to 2 mln people in the first six months of the year, up to 3-4 mln in the second half of the year. Vaccination against coronavirus will be included into the national vaccination calendar of Kazakhstan. On December 21, 2020 Sputnik V vaccine production kicked off in Kazakhstan pursuant to realization of agreements between the Presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia. 2 mln doses will be manufactured there. It is planned to vaccinate some 10 mln of Kazakhstanis.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Labor Concerned over JobKeeper Rate Cut

Cuts to JobKeeper which start on Monday will remove critical support from the economy, Labor says. But the federal government insists now is the right time to

taper payments, as business and consumer confidence starts to recover. From Monday, people on the top rate of JobKeeper will see their payments cut by \$200 a fortnight, while workers on the lower part-time rate will face a cut of \$100. Labor finance spokeswoman Katy Gallagher said 1.6 million Australians relied on the payment. "These cuts will reduce critical support from the economy including from small businesses, regional communities and vulnerable Australians at a time of heightened uncertainty and new COVID-19 outbreaks," she said. The reduction comes as 2.2 million Australians are looking for work or more work, and government figures show unemployment is expected to hit 7.5 per cent in the March quarter.

Labor industrial relations spokesman Tony Burke said there was added stress on businesses particularly in parts of Sydney and surrounding tourist regions. "Many business owners are seeing holiday bookings cancelled or empty tables in their cafes and restaurants at what is usually their busiest time of the year," he said. Government support must be tailored to changing economic conditions and targeted to the hardest-hit parts of the economy, Labor said. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg told AAP the government had always said JobKeeper was to be a temporary program designed to taper off as economic confidence and momentum builds. "We're seeing that through the 734,000 jobs created over the last six months, with fewer businesses and their employees in need of JobKeeper and other temporary economic support," Mr Frydenberg said. He said the government's economic recovery plan also included a range of stimulus measures to keep Australians in jobs and business in business, including personal income tax cuts and the JobMaker hiring credit. "With our economic recovery well under way, Australians have cause for optimism and hope as we emerge from the COVID-19 recession."

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Savings to Be Made Through Energy Planning

The growth in renewable power generation has pushed down power bills, but a new report warns of higher prices if the coal plant switch-off is not properly managed. The Energy Security Board on Tuesday released a major report into the health of the national electricity market. It said without a smooth transition from Australia's reliance on coal-fired power to renewables, power prices could be pushed higher. "Properly considered investments in generation and networks should improve overall affordability, but inappropriate investment will not," the report said. The shift to wind and solar also needs careful management to ensure the electricity system can consistently meet required settings in terms of frequency and voltage. Wind and solar are non-synchronous and do not have the same technical characteristics as thermal and hydro power generation.

As well, Australia needed to consider how to balance cutting emissions and ensuring

reliable electricity. By the end of 2020, emissions in the national electricity market will be 25 per cent below 2005 levels and by 2030 this reduction is expected to be well over 50 per cent, the report said. There have been concerns about the closure of NSW's Liddell plant in 2023-24 putting reliability at risk, but the report notes the upgrade to the Queensland-NSW transmission interconnector is progressing well and local new renewable generation of around 900MW is under way. Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction Angus Taylor said the post-2025 work was important in keeping the lights on and costs down. "The national electricity market is at a turning point, with expanding choices, new technologies and large-scale replacement of thermal generation needed as older power stations leave the market," Mr Taylor said.

"Taking action now is critical and will minimise disruptions, and avoid unintended consequences." ESB chair Dr Kerry Schott said there were repercussions from rapid changes in the electricity system, such as the massive popularity of rooftop solar. "We're moving in the right direction, but major changes are needed to unlock value to customers and ensure capital investments are made in an efficient and timely manner to deliver the affordable, reliable and secure electricity consumers need," she said.

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Vaccine Timetable Vital to Manage Risk: PM

Scott Morrison says Australia will be sticking to its coronavirus vaccine timetable to avoid taking any unnecessary risks. However, his predecessor Malcolm Turnbull says there is a case to be made for not waiting until the government's target of March. The prime minister's comments came as Victoria recorded three locally acquired cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours and NSW revealed four new cases. Three NSW regional communities are on alert after an 18-year-old Berala man travelled through Orange, Nyngan and Broken Hill on a camping trip, then tested positive. The federal government is facing questions about why vaccines it has ordered have not yet been given regulatory approval and rolled out, despite some of them being used overseas. Mr Morrison said the vaccines were being used in emergency situations overseas and a number of countries were reporting "quite a few problems" with the rollout.

"We have our scheduled timetable," Mr Morrison told 3AW radio on Tuesday. "We are moving as swiftly and safely as can be done. "Australia is not in an emergency situation ... so we don't have to take unnecessary risks." The first vaccines are expected to be approved later this month, with Mr Morrison saying Australia would be "well into the vaccine" in the first quarter of the year. He said it was important all Australians had "total confidence" in the vaccines. However, Mr Turnbull tweeted on

Tuesday the rollout should be accelerated, basing his comments on the advice of Professor Raina Macintyre, one of the world's leading infectious diseases experts. Prof Macintyre has produced a 30-minute YouTube video in which she explains why health workers, aged care workers and border control staff should be vaccinated as soon as possible, and sets out the requirements for a best practice rollout in Australia.

She also argues for a greater range of vaccines to be purchased. "Prof Raina Macintyre makes powerful case for accelerating vaccination and NOT waiting until March," Mr Turnbull tweeted. Labor health spokesman Chris Bowen said the opposition would be keeping up pressure on the government to explain how Australia fell behind in the vaccine queue. He pointed to reports of a new government advertising campaign as evidence of putting spin ahead of delivery. More than 13 million vaccine doses have so far been administered across 33 countries. Australia has agreements with Pfizer-BioNTech, Oxford-AstraZeneca and Novavax. The AstraZeneca vaccine is being made in Melbourne by CSL. Meanwhile, Mr Morrison said he had spoken with the Victorian government to discuss ways to fast-track the movement of people across borders.

He hinted if a hotspot model was used - based on virus data from local wastewater research in NSW and Victoria - it would allow the smoother flow of people. "That is an opportunity for the Victorian government to work through those issues ... we'll see if we can get a better pathway home for Victorians." Mr Morrison rejected a Labor call for the national cabinet to meet sooner than the scheduled gathering in early February, saying he was in regular contact with premiers and health experts were meeting daily. He also dismissed a call for mandatory testing of all people seeking to return from overseas, saying the 14-day mandatory quarantining on return was appropriate. "We want everyone (who returns) to behave like they've got it."

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Government Delivers on Electricity Project

An ambitious project to connect northwest Queensland to the national electricity grid via a transmission line has received a boost from the Morrison government. Visiting Cloncurry on Wednesday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced support of up to \$11 million to help progress the CopperString project to final investment decision this year. "Our support for CopperString is an investment in the future of Queensland that will bring power prices down, create 750 direct construction jobs and unlock the significant economic potential of the North West Minerals Province," Mr Morrison said. The project, which has bipartisan support, has been the subject of state and federal election promises. Resources Minister Keith Pitt said the mining sector was a significant driver of jobs. "Affordable, reliable electricity is essential in driving

downstream manufacturing and creating more local jobs," he said. Proponents of the \$1.7 billion project - which would involve about 740km of high voltage electricity transmission line - have lodged a draft environmental impact statement with the Queensland coordinator-general.

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Climate Data to Aid Drought Resilience

Farmers will be given access to specialised climate data to help build their drought resilience under a new federal government initiative. The \$10 million Climate Services for Agriculture program will provide detailed regional information about future drought and climate risks, assisting farmers to prepare for potential impacts depending on their particular needs. It is being funded from the \$5 billion Future Drought Fund and is expected to be operating by June. Agriculture Minister David Littleproud says the program will complement seasonal forecasts and climate guides produced by the Bureau of Meteorology. "CSIRO and BOM will engage the agricultural sector to determine the type of climate information that is most useful to their businesses and test in four pilot regions to ensure the decision support tools meet their needs," he said in a statement.

"The pilot regions will be identified in early 2021 and will include a range of climatic regions and agricultural sectors. "The end result will deliver regional scale climate projections across Australia, along with actionable advice to help farm businesses to make decisions such as the commodities they produce and the information will be delivered through a user-friendly interactive digital platform." Drought continues to bite across parts of Queensland and NSW despite significant rain breaking the dry spell in the southern Murray-Darling Basin. Latest figures show water storages across the entire river system sit at 54 per cent. Dams in the northern basin are at 27 per cent, showing the rainfall gap for farmers and other water users to the south. All parts of Queensland in the basin remain officially in drought while northern and far-western NSW are awaiting significant rainfall to replenish river systems. "The Australian government continues to support farmers and regional businesses through the tough times and we are proud that we have committed more than \$10 billion in drought support measures," Mr Littleproud said.

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Funds Pledged to Reduce Disaster Risk

Australia will pledge \$1.5 billion over five years to help build a more climate-resilient world and set up a new agency to deal with disaster resilience and risk reduction.

Environment Minister Sussan Ley will make the pledge on Tuesday in an online address to an international climate adaptation summit hosted by The Netherlands. Australia will be among 118 nations involved in a call for action in raising ambition for climate adaptation and resilience. Ms Ley said work was needed, in collaboration with scientists, communities and traditional owners, to act and adapt to an already changing climate. "In July 2021, Australia will establish a National Resilience Relief and Recovery Agency as well as Climate and Resilience Services Australia to drive adaptation, enhance resilience and ensure effective relief and recovery from natural hazards," she will say. "As part of our commitment to build a more climate-resilient world, Australia has pledged new global finance of at least \$1.5 billion over the period 2021 to 2025, a 50 per cent increase on the previous period."

The agency was one of the recommendations of last year's bushfire royal commission, taking on the functions of not only the bushfire recovery agency but flood response and recovery responsibilities. Climate and Resilience Services Australia will make better use of national climate and natural disaster risk information to prepare for and build resilience to natural disasters. The summit is being held in the lead up to the UN climate summit in the UK in November. Australia's southeast was ravaged by bushfires over the 2019-20 summer. Scientists say such major disasters are expected to be more intense and frequent as the globe warms.

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Nationals Push for More Investment in Coal

Nationals MPs have picked a fresh climate change fight within the federal coalition, releasing a manufacturing plan underpinned by new coal-fired power stations. Australia is under increasing pressure to take stronger action on climate change following the election of Joe Biden in the United States. The new president has committed America to reaching net zero emissions by 2050. Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull has called on the Morrison government to use Mr Biden's election to commit to the same goal. But the Nationals are unwilling to walk away from coal to achieve the carbon target. Backbench members of the junior coalition partner have released a manufacturing plan that explicitly calls for investment in coal and gas-fired power. Nationals senator Matt Canavan claimed the nine-point plan would create up to 800,000 jobs within 15 years.

The former resources minister said power prices could be drastically reduced with the construction of coal-fired power stations. "It is the cheapest way to provide the reliable power needed to support manufacturing," Senator Canavan said. Labor frontbencher Tanya Plibersek is unconvinced. "We could create jobs, power manufacturing and cut power prices for families with cheaper, cleaner renewables," she said. The manufacturing blueprint poses a real problem for Scott Morrison, who

now faces duelling pressures at home and aboard. The prime minister is expected to speak to Mr Biden this week, with climate change almost guaranteed to be discussed. The two countries are setting up a joint working group to develop emission reduction technologies. It is unlikely Mr Morrison will attempt to override the Nationals agitators, leaving him exposed to criticism from the US and other major trading partners with strong climate change targets.

Mr Biden has pledged to replace US government vehicles with American-made electric cars, while Australia is still yet to set a policy on the issue. Energy Minister Angus Taylor on Monday spoke with his US counterpart John Kerry, who is the special presidential envoy for climate. In a read-out provided Mr Taylor's office, Mr Kerry welcomed Australia's target of achieving net zero "as soon as possible". The statement focused on Australia's approach of using technology in order to achieve net zero emissions. The pair agreed not only is more international collaboration needed, but the private sector needs more encouragement to invest in developing the technology required.

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Slipping Support for Australian Republic

Support for Australia becoming a republic appears to be waning, with just one in three Australians in favour of the idea. An online poll conducted for Nine Entertainment has found 40 per cent of people oppose replacing the British monarchy with an Australian head of state. One quarter of the 1222 surveyed said they didn't know, which is the highest number of undecided responses recorded by successive Ipsos and Nielsen polls. The polls indicate support has steadily declined from a peak of 57 per cent in December 1999, immediately after the failed republic referendum. In the latest poll, support levels were weakest among young people aged between 18 and 24, while Labor and Greens voters were more likely to want a republic than coalition voters. Australian Republican Movement chair Peter FitzSimons played down the results and suggested the poll was an outlier. He pointed to a YouGov survey from July last year that found 62 per cent of Australians would vote for a republic. Mr FitzSimons said the republican movement had been relatively quiet during the coronavirus pandemic but would ramp its campaign up again in coming months. Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull spearheaded the failed republic referendum movement. He believes the date Australia becomes a republic should be the new national day. But polling published by Nine Entertainment suggests support for changing the date of Australia Day is also not that strong.

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Broad Coalition Demands Net Zero Emissions

Climate change is back in the spotlight as a growing number of groups urge the Morrison government to commit to net zero emissions by 2050. Business leaders, scientists and government department officials have appeared before a parliamentary hearing looking at enshrining the target in legislation. The climate change bill is not supported by the federal government but a broad coalition of stakeholders believe it is a sensible path forward. Independent MP Zali Steggall, who put forward the private member's bill, said it was time for politicians of all persuasions to address climate change policies. "The government and especially the minister is, with respect, at the moment, playing politics with our future," she said. "They are not interested in listening to the business community, industry, science, our medical professionals, on what needs to be done with urgency.

"They are instead focusing on political games and delaying what needs to be done." Energy Minister Angus Taylor argues the bill would just create more bureaucracy. Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese said Labor was open to discussing the climate change bill. "But at the moment, of course, the truth is that the government has the numbers in the House of Representatives," he told reporters in Canberra. "And therefore with private member's bills, it's difficult for them to come to a vote." If legislated, the proposal would rubber-stamp into law a goal of net zero emissions by 2050, and set up a Climate Change Commission. The bill has wide support from environment, industry and business groups who have long been calling for certainty on climate policy from the federal government. Scientists have urged the federal government to replicate its expert-led approach to the coronavirus in tackling climate change.

Science and Technology Australia says the nation's successful approach to the pandemic provides a model for tackling climate risk and the transition to a net zero emissions economy. Australia's virus strategy is among the best in the world, the group's president Jeremy Brownlie says. "The last year has clearly demonstrated that to protect lives and livelihoods, we need to listen to the scientific evidence and use it to guide policy," he said. "The terrifying bushfire season last summer in Australia was a sign of things to come. "If we don't transition to a net zero emissions economy, we'll see further lives lost, lasting damage to our unique flora and fauna, and more local communities devastated by fire and drought."

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4、 Economic and Social Development and ICT

Asia-Pacific

Global Economy to Expand by 4% in 2021; Vaccine Deployment and Investment Key to Sustaining the Recovery

The global economy is expected to expand 4% in 2021, assuming an initial COVID-19 vaccine rollout becomes widespread throughout the year. A recovery, however, will likely be subdued, unless policy makers move decisively to tame the pandemic and implement investment-enhancing reforms, the World Bank says in its January 2021 Global Economic Prospects. Although the global economy is growing again after a 4.3% contraction in 2020, the pandemic has caused a heavy toll of deaths and illness, plunged millions into poverty, and may depress economic activity and incomes for a prolonged period. Top near-term policy priorities are controlling the spread of COVID-19 and ensuring rapid and widespread vaccine deployment. To support economic recovery, authorities also need to facilitate a re-investment cycle aimed at sustainable growth that is less dependent on government debt. “While the global economy appears to have entered a subdued recovery, policymakers face formidable challenges—in public health, debt management, budget policies, central banking and structural reforms—as they try to ensure that this still fragile global recovery gains traction and sets a foundation for robust growth,” said World Bank Group President David Malpass. “To overcome the impacts of the pandemic and counter the investment headwind, there needs to be a major push to improve business environments, increase labor and product market flexibility, and strengthen transparency and governance.”

The collapse in global economic activity in 2020 is estimated to have been slightly less severe than previously projected, mainly due to shallower contractions in advanced economies and a more robust recovery in China. In contrast, disruptions to activity in the majority of other emerging market and developing economies were more acute than expected. “Financial fragilities in many of these countries, as the growth shock impacts vulnerable household and business balance sheets, will also need to be addressed,” Vice President and World Bank Group Chief Economist Carmen Reinhart said. The near-term outlook remains highly uncertain, and different growth outcomes are still possible, as a section of the report details. A downside scenario in which infections continue to rise and the rollout of a vaccine is delayed could limit the global expansion to 1.6% in 2021. Meanwhile, in an upside scenario with successful pandemic control and a faster vaccination process, global growth could accelerate to nearly 5 percent. In advanced economies, a nascent rebound stalled in the third quarter following a resurgence of infections, pointing to a slow and challenging recovery. U.S. GDP is forecast to expand 3.5% in 2021, after an estimated 3.6% contraction in 2020. In the euro area, output is anticipated to grow 3.6% this year, following a 7.4% decline in 2020. Activity in Japan, which shrank by 5.3% in the year just ended, is forecast to grow by 2.5% in 2021.

Aggregate GDP in emerging market and developing economies, including China, is expected to grow 5% in 2021, after a contraction of 2.6% in 2020. China’s economy

is expected to expand by 7.9% this year following 2% growth last year. Excluding China, emerging market and developing economies are forecast to expand 3.4% in 2021 after a contraction of 5% in 2020. Among low-income economies, activity is projected to increase 3.3% in 2021, after a contraction of 0.9% in 2020. Analytical sections of the latest Global Economic Prospects report examine how the pandemic has amplified risks around debt accumulation; how it could hold back growth over the long term absent concerted reform efforts; and what risks are associated with the use of asset purchase programs as a monetary policy tool in emerging market and developing economies.

“The pandemic has greatly exacerbated debt risks in emerging market and developing economies; weak growth prospects will likely further increase debt burdens and erode borrowers’ ability to service debt,” World Bank Acting Vice President for Equitable Growth and Financial Institutions Ayhan Kose said. “The global community needs to act rapidly and forcefully to make sure the recent debt accumulation does not end with a string of debt crises. The developing world cannot afford another lost decade.” As severe crises did in the past, the pandemic is expected to leave long lasting adverse effects on global activity. It is likely to worsen the slowdown in global growth projected over the next decade due to underinvestment, underemployment, and labor force declines in many advanced economies. If history is any guide, the global economy is heading for a decade of growth disappointments unless policy makers put in place comprehensive reforms to improve the fundamental drivers of equitable and sustainable economic growth.

Policymakers need to continue to sustain the recovery, gradually shifting from income support to growth-enhancing policies. In the longer run, in emerging market and developing economies, policies to improve health and education services, digital infrastructure, climate resilience, and business and governance practices will help mitigate the economic damage caused by the pandemic, reduce poverty and advance shared prosperity. In the context of weak fiscal positions and elevated debt, institutional reforms to spur organic growth are particularly important. In the past, the growth dividends from reform efforts were recognized by investors in upgrades to their long-term growth expectations and increased investment flows. Central banks in some emerging market and developing economies have employed asset purchase programs in response to pandemic-induced financial market pressures, in many cases for the first time. When targeted to market failures, these programs appear to have helped stabilize financial markets during the initial stages of the crisis. However, in economies where asset purchases continue to expand and are perceived to finance fiscal deficits, these programs may erode central bank operational independence, risk currency weakness that de-anchors inflation expectations, and increase worries about debt sustainability.

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World Bank Prices NOK 5 Billion Sustainable Development Bond While Raising Awareness for Health and Gender Equality

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) priced its first Norwegian krone-denominated benchmark of 2021, a NOK 5 billion 5-year floating rate Sustainable Development Bond. The World Bank launched the Sustainable Development Bond while raising awareness for the World Bank's strategy, projects and programs that focus on gender equality and health and highlight how COVID-19 disproportionately impacts women. The 5-year floating rate bond is the largest NOK deal to date for a supranational issuer. The majority of the deal was placed with banks, bank treasuries, and corporates. Overall, Norwegian investors picked up the largest share at 65%, followed by Danish and Swedish investors at 19% and 16%, respectively. Participating investors included Oslo Pension Fund, Sparebank 1 SR-Bank, Sparebanken Helgeland, Sparebanken Øst, Sparebanken Østlandet, Sparebanken 1 SMN, and Storebrand Bank, among others. Nordea Bank Abp acted as lead manager for the transaction.

Jingdong Hua, Vice President and Treasurer, World Bank, said, "We are pleased to be back in the NOK market and thank investors for their ongoing support of the World Bank's mandate. Purpose and impact continue to drive our communication with investors – in our engagement with investors around this transaction, we are highlighting the critical importance of health and gender equality as the World Bank works with member countries towards a resilient recovery from COVID-19". Kristine Lien, Portfolio Manager, Kommunalbanken, said, "Local governments have an important position in Norwegian society, accounting for a large proportion of public sector services production. As the largest lender to the Norwegian local government, KBN has an important role in enabling the local and regional governments to improve quality of life across the country. KBN is proud to support the World Bank in sustainable development projects including those that focus on health and gender equality, reducing differences and creating opportunities for all".

John Hopp, Head of Treasury, Sparebanken Vest, said, "Sparebanken Vest was pleased to participate in yet another World Bank Sustainable Development Bond, in this case to raise awareness for health and gender equality. This bond represents both a safe and sustainable investment for Sparebanken Vest. The World Bank has been a pioneer and leader in the rapidly growing ESG investment space. At Sparebanken Vest we are also extremely focused on being a leader in terms of gender equality, and work hard to prevent unequal treatment and discrimination. Investments like this align well with the bank's own long-term ESG strategy". Philip Asp, Head of Investment Banking, Nordea, said, "Amidst the vast challenges that Covid-19 continues to present to the world, we applaud the efforts of the World Bank to support those most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. Nordea is proud to support the World Bank in raising awareness for this issue". The World Bank's goals

of ending extreme poverty by 2030 and promoting shared prosperity in a sustainable manner are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Increasingly, investors and other market participants are using the SDGs as a framework for investment and a way to communicate support for specific development priorities. With this Sustainable Development Bond, the World Bank is raising awareness for SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Investing in World Bank bonds offers investors an opportunity to align financial and social objectives.

Investor Breakdown by Type

Banks/Bank Treasuries/Corporates	60%
Asset Managers/Insurance/Pension Funds	30%
Central Banks/Official Institutions	10%

Transaction Summary

Issuer:	World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD)
Issuer rating:	Aaa /AAA (Moody's/S&P)
Currency:	NOK
Maturity	5-year
Amount:	NOK 5,000,000,000
Settlement date:	January 13, 2021
Maturity date:	January 13, 2026
Issue price:	107.566%
Issue yield:	3mN - 1 bp
Denomination:	NOK 10,000
Coupon:	3-month NIBOR + 150 bps p.a. paid quarterly
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	XS2283173222
Clearing system:	Euroclear/Clearstream
Lead manager:	Nordea Bank Abp

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 01/07/2021

World Bank Group and CES Announce Winners of Global Tech Challenge: Solutions for Women

Today at CES@2021 the World Bank Group and CES announced the winners of the Global Tech Challenge: Solutions for Women, launched at CES 2020. The World Bank Group, one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, partnered with CES—the world’s most influential technology event—to launch a Global Tech Challenge to bridge the digital gender divide. In low-and-middle-income countries, over 300 million fewer women are able to access the internet than men and are left out of the opportunities created by digital technologies. Addressing this widening gap is crucial, particularly during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when connectivity is key. “ From increasing access to connectivity and information for women in rural areas to mentoring isolated female entrepreneurs, the winners of this challenge are tackling the digital gender divide on multiple fronts. The World Bank Group is pleased to work with the selected innovators so that women and girls worldwide can fully embrace the opportunities offered by digital transformation,” said Boutheina Guermazi, the World Bank’s Director of Digital Development. Supported by the World Bank’s Digital Development Practice, whose mission is to achieve connectivity for all, the challenge rewards scalable and innovative technological solutions that seek to increase digital access, skills and opportunities for women. The winning solutions, listed below, were evaluated by a panel of leading experts from Microsoft 4Afrika Initiatives, GSMA, SoftBank, the International Telecommunication Union, IBM and The Female Quotient.

The three winners of the Global Tech Challenge: Solutions for Women are:

Bridge for Billions is a digital entrepreneurship ecosystem and mentoring platform for early-stage entrepreneurs, focused on inclusivity and affordability. Since its creation in 2015, it has supported 717 female entrepreneurs from 70+ countries.

“Being awarded as an innovative solution that seeks to empower women is an honor as we work to democratize access to quality entrepreneurship training, mentoring, and business opportunities globally. At a gender ratio of 46% female to 54% male, we are eliminating the bias against female entrepreneurs through our entrepreneurship programs,” said Pablo Santaefemia, CEO and co-founder of Bridge for Billions.

MicroMentor, a program of Mercy Corp, is a free mentoring platform which connects entrepreneurs and volunteer business mentors. Through MicroMentor, 12,481 women entrepreneurs have received business mentoring and opportunities. “With support and recognition from the World Bank and CES, we will be able to expand our reach to new partners and funders to provide critical business mentoring support to

more women-led SMEs. Women entrepreneurs have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and business mentoring is a critical resource for impacting their survival and resilience,” said Anita Ramachandran, MicroMentor Executive Director.

Soochnapreneur is an entrepreneurship program by the Digital Empowerment Foundation which connects India’s rural citizens to information, rights, government entitlements and other necessary digital services. Since its creation, it has trained 25,000 rural women to further empower more than 5 million rural women in India. “We are strongly committed to the idea that connecting women to communication and information technologies will end up benefiting the development of society at large. Therefore, the prospect of scaling our innovation and reaching more is thrilling for all of us working on the Soochnapreneur program and we look forward to engaging with World Bank Group teams to create a greater impact,” said Osama Manzar, founder of the Digital Empowerment Foundation. Winners will receive global visibility, the opportunity to engage with governments and World Bank Group teams, as well as the tools to potentially scale their technologies within development projects.

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CLIs Continue to Indicate a Mixed Picture Across the Major Economies

The OECD Composite leading indicators (CLIs) continue to recover from the COVID-19 crisis lows in most major economies, although the pace of growth varies. Among large OECD economies, the CLIs for the United States and Japan continue to point to stable growth, which is now also the assessment for the euro area as a whole including Germany, France and Italy. The CLI for Canada is improving steadily, while in the United Kingdom the CLI continues to point to a slowdown. Among major emerging economies, the CLIs for Brazil and the manufacturing sector of China continue to signal a steady increase while in India and Russia the CLIs continue to point to stable growth. Although vaccinations have begun, governments’ efforts to contain COVID-19 are ongoing and the rapidly changing nature of such measures mean that indicators used in the CLI compilation may fluctuate. As such, the CLIs should be interpreted with care.

OECD area: Stable growth



Visit the interactive OECD Data Portal to explore this data further. The above graph show country specific composite leading indicators (CLIs solid line, left axis and the relative month-on-month growth rate, right axis). Turning points of CLIs tend to precede turning points in economic activity relative to trend by six to nine months. The horizontal line at 100 represents the trend of economic activity. Shaded triangles mark confirmed turning-points of the CLI. Blank triangles mark provisional turning-points that may be reversed

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Reskilling and Labour Migration Vital to the Pacific's Economic Recovery

While the Pacific and Papua New Guinea (PNG) have avoided some of the worst health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of international travel and lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19 have had serious impacts on employment, international labour mobility, and livelihoods across the region. A new World Bank report, Pacific Island Countries in the era of COVID 19: Macroeconomic impacts and job prospects details the potential extent of job losses and labour market impacts in the region, while also suggesting how the Pacific may benefit from changing employment trends and other opportunities. Fewer local jobs and sluggishness in new international opportunities are all taking their toll on labour markets in the seven Pacific countries examined in the report (Fiji, Kiribati, PNG, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu). Of these, countries that are more reliant on international tourism such as Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa have borne the brunt of these effects, with tourism-related employment dropping by an estimated 64

percent in Vanuatu and unemployment claims in June 2020 nearly tripling the 2019 total in Fiji. Employment figures in countries where tourism plays a smaller role are also sobering, with job advertisements in PNG dropping by 76 percent between February and May 2020 as a result of lockdowns and travel restrictions. Flow-on effects to other industries, including retail and food services, together with reductions in commodity prices and remittance inflows, have added to this significant economic hardship across the region.

“The changes that we have seen in labour markets and employment across the Pacific are profound and are hitting the most vulnerable hardest - but importantly they are also leading families who would have been previously secure into vulnerable positions, especially workers in the tourism sector,” said Yasser El-Gammal, Practice Manager, Social Protection and Jobs, the World Bank. The report also highlights opportunities to mitigate the economic and employment shocks presented by the pandemic. These include prioritizing retraining and skill development of workers in affected industries, such as tourism, so they can move into sectors that require similar skill sets; promoting digital literacy skills to help Pacific islanders participate in remote working opportunities; and exploring new employment opportunities for low- and semi-skilled Pacific workers in Australia and New Zealand in the long term. “Ultimately, workers from the Pacific will remain in demand in Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere for a long time to come,” said report author Matthew Dornan, Senior Economist at the World Bank. “The various Pacific labour mobility schemes that are focused on employment in rural and regional areas are not only crucial to livelihoods and employment in the Pacific, but beneficial for employers and businesses in Australia and New Zealand.”

Of particular focus in the report is the need to support skills development and employment services in response to the crisis and as part of the economic recovery. This could include subsidizing the reskilling of workers, support for work-study and apprenticeship schemes, the provision of temporary wage subsidies for the unemployed, and an expansion of international labour mobility opportunities for Pacific Islanders. The latter can be facilitated by efforts to improve the employability of Pacific workers (e.g., through upskilling), reducing the costs associated with cross-border labour migration, and by improved marketing and relationship management with international employers. Recipient countries can also play a role through labour policies.

“Labour mobility requires close cooperation between countries,” said co-author Soonhwa Yi, Senior Economist at the World Bank. “While policy improvements from Pacific governments could help expand the overseas employment opportunities available to Pacific Islanders, receiving countries also need to ensure their migration and working visa policies support future demand for increased labour mobility.” The report stresses that moderating the employment and livelihoods impacts of COVID-19 across the region requires supportive policy responses from governments.

While support to affected populations is a priority, governments could also consider support to businesses, as has been provided in Tonga and PNG; safeguarding cash-flow through tax and import duty relief, as has been undertaken in PNG, Samoa and Solomon Islands; and exploring opportunities for direct cash transfers and social assistance to vulnerable populations.

“The COVID-19 pandemic also crisis highlights the urgency for Pacific countries to expand IT-related infrastructure and increase their engagement in the digital economy,” said Soonhwa Yi. “This would provide opportunities for workers in the digital economy and better position Pacific countries to export digital services across borders.” See the full Pacific Island Countries in the era of COVID 19: Macroeconomic impacts and job prospects report here. The World Bank Group, one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, is taking broad, fast action to help developing countries strengthen their pandemic response. We are supporting public health interventions, working to ensure the flow of critical supplies and equipment, and helping the private sector continue to operate and sustain jobs. We will be deploying up to \$160 billion in financial support over 15 months to help more than 100 countries protect the poor and vulnerable, support businesses, and bolster economic recovery. This includes \$50 billion of new IDA resources through grants and highly concessional loans.

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Digitalizing the Maritime Sector Set to Boost the Competitiveness and Resilience of Global Trade

A new report launched today by the World Bank and the International Association of Ports and Harbors (IAPH) shows that better digital collaboration between private and public entities across the maritime supply chain will result in significant efficiency gains, safer and more resilient supply chains, and lower emissions. Maritime transport carries over 90% of global merchandise trade, totaling some 11 billion tons of cargo per year. Digitalizing the sector would bring wide-ranging economic benefits and contribute to a stronger, more sustainable recovery. Accelerating Digitalization: Critical Actions to Strengthen the Resilience of the Maritime Supply Chain describes how collaborative use of digital technology can help streamline all aspects of maritime transport, from cross-border processes and documentation to communications between ship and shore, with a special focus on ports. The COVID-19 crisis has evidenced a key benefit of digitizing waterborne and landside operations: meeting the urgent needs to minimize human interaction and enhance the resilience of supply chains against future crises. “In many of our client countries, inefficiencies in the maritime sector result in delays and higher logistics costs, with an adverse impact on the entire economy. Digitization gives us a unique chance to address this issue,” noted Makhtar Diop, World Bank Vice President for

Infrastructure. “Beyond immediate benefits to the maritime sector, digitalization will help countries participate more fully in the global economy, and will lead to better development outcomes.”

IAPH Managing Director of Policy and Strategy, Dr Patrick Verhoeven, added: “the report’s short and medium term measures to accelerate digitalization have the proven potential to improve supply chain resilience and efficiency whilst addressing potential risks related to cybersecurity. However, necessary policy reform is also vital. Digitalization is not just a matter of technology but, more importantly, of change management, data collaboration, and political commitment.” Although the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has made it mandatory for all its member countries to exchange key data electronically (the FAL convention), a recent IAPH survey reveals that only a third of over 100 responding ports comply with that requirement. The main barriers to digitalize cited by the ports were the legal framework in their countries or regions and persuading the multiple private-public stakeholders to collaborate, not the technology. The report analyzes numerous technologies applied already by some from the world’s leading port and maritime communities, including big data, the internet of things (IoT), fifth-generation technology (5G), blockchain solutions, wearable devices, unmanned aircraft systems, and other smart technology-based methods to improve performance and economic competitiveness.

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Economic Inclusion Programs Now Benefit 92 Million People Worldwide

Economic inclusion programs, which help boost income and assets of the world’s poorest, are on the rise in 75 countries, reaching approximately 20 million poor and vulnerable households, and benefitting nearly 92 million individuals. This surge comes at a crucial time, as more than 700 million people around the world face extreme poverty, a number on the rise for the first time in two decades. According to the World Bank’s newly published “State of Economic Inclusion (SEI) Report 2020: The Potential to Scale,” economic inclusion programs —usually a combination of cash or in-kind transfers, skills training or coaching, access to finance, and links to market support— are fast becoming a critical instrument in many governments’ large-scale anti-poverty strategies. And they are likely to continue, especially in areas affected by conflict, climate change, and shocks, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “One of the most stubborn challenges we face in development is positively transforming the lives of the extreme poor and vulnerable— a problem exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Mari Pangestu, World Bank Group Managing Director. “This report presents—for the first time—a systematic review of economic inclusion programs around the world, and sheds light on how governments

can best invest in social protection, jobs, and financial inclusion, to help the poor build a better future for themselves.”

The SEI Report is a result of a unique collaboration under the Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI). PEI is a dedicated platform to support the adoption and adaptation of national economic inclusion programs working with a variety of stakeholders, including national governments and bilateral, multilateral, non-governmental, research, and private sector organizations. “Partnership is integral for program success given the multidimensional nature of program delivery. BRAC’s engagement with PEI reflects our collective commitment to ensuring program approaches and delivery are informed by community needs, ground realities and local partner expertise,” said Shameran Abed, Director BRAC, an international development organization based in Bangladesh.

The report examines over 200 programs, across 75 countries. It finds that governments around the world are increasingly scaling up economic inclusion initiatives through social safety nets. In-depth case studies covering the Sahel, Bangladesh, Peru and India highlight the evolution of economic inclusion programs, and how they are addressing challenges such as urbanization, gaps in human capital accumulation, adaptations to shock, and technological change. The implications of COVID-19 feature broadly in the report, which looks at the fallout of the pandemic at the household as well as institutional level. Economic inclusion programs for the poorest show strong potential to improve livelihoods as part of integrated policy responses focused on containing the pandemic, ensuring food security and supporting medium term recovery. Experiences in Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Zambia and other countries, show how economic inclusion programs can build on – rather than replace – social assistance programs.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the importance of linking social protection and economic inclusion when it comes to protecting people against shocks. We continue to provide significant funding for social protection and jobs. But there is a strong potential for economic inclusion programs to build on pre-existing government social protection systems, and this may prove critical in the long-term recovery from the COVID-19 fallout,” said Birgit Pickel, Director for Global Health; Pandemic Prevention; One Health, in the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, BMZ. The report reveals women’s economic empowerment is a key driver of interventions, with nearly 90 percent of programs surveyed having a gender focus. This is critical given findings from the report and other work from PEI which show that women make up the majority of workers in sectors such as education, retail travel, hospitality and domestic services, which have been most affected by COVID-19. Lessons from previous crises highlight the importance of this gender focus to avoid declining opportunities for women, de-prioritization of female health services, and increased gender-based violence.

“Economic inclusion packages are well positioned to support women to address the plurality of COVID-19 related impacts. In particular, the pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen national systems, and to make sure that they are inclusive and equitable by design, so that women and others who have been historically marginalized are not left out,” said Olivia Leland, Founder and CEO of Co-Impact, a global collaborative focused on improving the lives of millions of people across the world. The report also discusses key debates on program impact and costs, as these are critical factors affecting the sustainability of economic inclusion programs at scale. For example, the report sheds light on major lessons learnt from initiatives supported under the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program (SASPP), which was launched in 2014 to design and implement adaptive social protection programs aimed to help poor and vulnerable households become more resilient to the effects of climate change. One important lesson from that experience was the need to expand reach in a systematic and rapid manner.

“Leveraging digital technology will be critical to leapfrog capacity constraints and to strengthen program management. Many programs are already utilizing government social registries, beneficiary registries, and other government databases to identify potential participants,” said Michal Rutkowski, Global Director of the Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice at the World Bank. Alongside the SEI, the PEI is also launching an online and open-access PEI Data Portal. The data portal underscores a commitment to open access to support global learning and program implementation. The World Bank Group, one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, is taking broad, fast action to help developing countries strengthen their pandemic response. It is supporting public health interventions, working to ensure the flow of critical supplies and equipment, and helping the private sector continue to operate and sustain jobs. The WBG is making available up to \$160 billion over a 15-month period ending June 2021 to help more than 100 countries protect the poor and vulnerable, support businesses, and bolster economic recovery. This includes \$50 billion of new IDA resources through grants and highly concessional loans and \$12 billion for developing countries to finance the purchase and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

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ADB, EIB Join Forces to Protect Oceans, Support the Blue Economy

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) today formed a new Clean and Sustainable Ocean Partnership to support initiatives in Asia and the Pacific to help meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the climate goals of the Paris Agreement. The partnership will strengthen the capacity of ADB and EIB to support high-impact projects. Both institutions will finance activities

aimed at promoting cleaner oceans through the reduction of land-based plastics and other pollutants discharged into the ocean, as well as projects to improve the sustainability of socioeconomic activities that take place in oceans or use ocean-based resources. "Healthy oceans are critical to life across Asia and the Pacific, providing food security and climate resilience for hundreds of millions of people," said ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development Bambang Susantono. "This Memorandum of Understanding between ADB and EIB will launch a framework for cooperation on clean and sustainable oceans, helping us to expand our pipeline of ocean projects in the region and widen their impacts."

"Oceans play a vital role in the world economy and they are also the largest carbon sink on the planet, helping to regulate the global climate. But oceans are under enormous pressure, with implications for billions of people. The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 does not weaken our commitment to address global environmental and climate challenges," said EIB Vice-President Christian Kettel Thomsen. "As the European Union (EU) climate bank, we are very proud to partner with ADB through this new Clean and Sustainable Ocean Partnership to further protect the oceans and preserve and promote the sustainable use of this precious natural resource." The partnership provides a framework for ADB and EIB to expand inter-institutional cooperation and investments in ocean health and sustainable blue economy. The following principles will guide the ADB and EIB cooperation in jointly selected areas, including: (i) alignment with the country partnership strategies of both ADB and EIB; (ii) support for the achievement of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement by countries in Asia and the Pacific; (iii) encouragement of stakeholder participation and mobilization of third-party finance; (iv) environmental and social sustainability; and (v) country ownership of investment policies and programs. ADB and EIB will mutually benefit from organizational expertise in key investment areas as well as pool resources in emerging ocean issues and solutions and accelerate growth in the oceans project pipeline and development impact.

The partnership will support projects that reduce marine plastic pollution including integrated solid waste management projects, such as recycling; circular economy principles, such as designing out plastic waste; and promoting clean rivers and waterways, including through improved wastewater management and inclusive sanitation. The partnership will also focus on sustainable fisheries management and sustainable seafood supply chains; sustainable management, protection, and restoration of marine and coastal ecosystems and resources; integrated coastal protection activities; disaster risk preparedness; and green shipping, green ports, and maritime infrastructure, with a focus on increasing safety and environmental performance. In addition, ADB and EIB will develop joint technical assistance programs and advisory support to help partners get sustainable blue economy and clean oceans projects off the ground.

Healthy oceans are a key priority of ADB's Strategy 2030. In 2019, ADB launched a \$5 billion Action Plan for Healthy Oceans and Sustainable Blue Economies (the Action Plan) to boost investment and technical assistance to protect and restore oceans in Asia and the Pacific. The Action Plan focuses on promoting action on ecosystem management, pollution control, and sustainable coastal and marine development, while supporting ADB's developing members to catalyze blue finance for projects through the Oceans Financing Initiative. EIB is the long-term lending institution of the EU owned by its Member States. As the EU climate bank, the EIB is investing in the sustainable blue economy and supporting initiatives aiming at reducing pollution and preserving the oceans. Under its Blue Sustainable Ocean Strategy, the EIB committed to double its lending to sustainable ocean projects to €2.5 billion (around \$3 billion) over the period 2019–2023 and expects to mobilize at least €5 billion of investments that will contribute to improve the health of the oceans and their resources. ADB is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members—49 from the region.

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East Asia

CHINA: E-commerce Boosts Income of Chinese Farmers

E-commerce has helped bump up the income of Chinese farmers, contributing to the country's efforts on rural vitalization, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs said Wednesday. In 2019, rural online retail sales neared 400 billion yuan (about 61.9 billion U.S. dollars), said ministry official Zeng Yande at a press conference. "Quite a few farmers in China have turned to short videos or live streaming to sell their homegrown produce, and they managed to get high prices," Zeng said. Conditions for rural e-commerce development, including communication facilities and logistics, have witnessed continued improvements in recent years, with 4G network coverage for 98 percent of villages in the country, according to the ministry. More than 10 million people have engaged in entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas so far, serving as an important force supporting the development of the rural e-commerce sector.

Over the past three years, China has implemented its rural vitalization strategy. Farmers have seen continuous growth in their incomes and a narrowed income gap relative to urban residents. The country detailed plans to fully promote the strategy of rural vitalization in the Chinese leadership's proposals for formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035. Under this development blueprint,

China will push the development of industries with distinctive rural characteristics, cultivate new industries and modes of business, and encourage entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas.

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China to Further Boost Its Manufacturing Prowess in 2021

Having successfully navigated the extreme hardship brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, manufacturers across China are kicking production into high gear to make use of every minute of the new year. The latest data showed that China's producer price index (PPI), which measures costs for goods at the factory gate, rose 1.1 percent month on month in December, indicating a steady recovery in China's manufacturing sector. Yet, challenges remain ahead amid the capricious epidemic at home and the complicated external environment. "The opportunities outweigh the challenges," Xiao Yaqing, minister of industry and information technology, told Xinhua in an interview, adding that the fundamentals for the sustained and sound development of China's industrial sector will not change in 2021. Xiao urged efforts to modernize industrial chains and "crack hard nuts" such as bottlenecks in technological advancement to develop the country into a manufacturing powerhouse.

China has assumed the mantle of the workshop of the world for many years now, driven by its sheer size, complete industrial system and cheap labor force. As the country pushes forward the transformation of its economic growth model and heads for more efficient and high-quality growth, China aims to move up the value chain to make its manufacturing sector not only big but also smart and tech-savvy. The digitalization of China's manufacturing industry has seen continuous improvements in recent years, said Fang Xiaoxia, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. However, China's digital transformation of its manufacturing sector remains largely in its infancy, such as the use of industrial software, and data mining and utilization at production sites, Fang noted.

To further enhance its manufacturing prowess, China will build more independent and controllable industrial and supply chains, with efforts to achieve breakthroughs in key and core technologies, according to the tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference that took place in December. The automobile industry, for example, could emerge as a crucial sector for China's industrial upgrading. The country has outlined a roadmap for developing automated vehicles, aiming to achieve scale production of driverless cars of conditional automation by 2025. China will establish a basic ecosystem for driverless vehicles by 2025, said a document released last year, adding that the system should be continuously improved to build the country's strength in automated vehicles by 2050. Green industry is another area that China is hoping to build on its advantages.

To ensure green growth of the automobile sector, China unveiled a development plan for its new energy vehicle industry for the 2021-2035 period. By 2035, purely electric automobiles are likely to dominate new purchases, while vehicles used in public transportation will be exclusively electrified, according to the plan. Digital transformation of China's industrial sector has also accelerated during the epidemic. The boom of the online economy amid the epidemic-induced lockdowns has shifted many companies' traditional practices such as office meetings and marketing online. China's digital infrastructure also saw notable achievements, with a total of 580,000 5G base stations built last year and 600,000 more to be added to the network in 2021. The country vows more breakthroughs for the industrial application of 5G technology, with over 1,100 projects on the integration of 5G and industrial internet under construction, covering key fields such as raw materials, equipment manufacturing and consumer goods.

Apart from promoting technological advancement domestically, China also encourages foreign firms to engage in the country's industrial upgrading. In December 2020, China released a revised industrial catalog, opening up more sectors for foreign investors. Scheduled to take effect on Jan. 27, 2021, the new catalog encourages more foreign capital to pump into high-end manufacturing such as artificial intelligence, integrated circuits and new material. Opening up cutting-edge sectors not only creates more opportunities for foreign investors but also brings strategic factors such as talent, technology and capital to China, which will contribute to the establishment of the new development paradigm, said Zhao Ping, a researcher with the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade.

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China to Become World's Largest IoT Market in 2024: Report

China will surpass the United States to become the world's largest Internet of Things (IoT) market in 2024, according to an industrial report. China's spending on IoT is expected to reach around 300 billion U.S. dollars by 2024, with the compound annual growth rate to stand at 13 percent in the next five years, data from global market research firm International Data Corporation (IDC) showed. In 2024, the country's spending on IoT will account for 26.7 percent of global spending in the sector, followed by the United States at 23.8 percent and Western Europe at 23.4 percent, IDC data showed. Among the 20 industries covered in the IDC's report, manufacturing, government and consumer IoT spending will account for more than half of the total market spending by 2024. Jonathan Leung, a senior market analyst with IDC China, said the country saw disruptions in the IoT market due to COVID-19 and reduced IoT spending across all industries in early 2020. "As China continues along its road toward recovery, we expect the market to bounce back in the coming

years as enterprises begin to grasp the vital role of IoT in epidemic prevention and control, as well as their capabilities in mitigating market disruptions," he said.

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E-commerce Fattens Wallet in Central China's "Taobao Village"

Tapping the phone screen with her wrinkly finger to send voice messages to customers, Guo Mingfeng sells another homemade turquoise bracelet out of her hometown in Xiaying Village in central China's Hubei Province. "I can't read or write, but it does not affect my business," said Guo, 50. Guo mainly sells handicraft products via pictures and voice messages on the messaging service WeChat. The craftswoman lives in the mountainous area of Yunxi County, Shiyan City. She used to be a tofu maker working from dawn to dusk all year round in the city but could barely make enough money to support her kids' schooling and her sick parents. In 2014, she was put on the local poverty list. In the same year, her village, known for turquoise reserves and online turquoise businesses, was designated as a "Taobao Village." It is a title granted to villages with total annual e-commerce transactions of over 10 million yuan (1.54 million U.S. dollars).

They should also have more than 100 businesses, or at least 10 percent of households involved in e-commerce, as required by the title's creator Alibaba. "Since some of my relatives profited from the industry, I thought maybe I could also give it a try. So I went back to my village," she said. Guo then learned from her brother-in-law how to polish and shape the stones and how to use smartphones. "My attempt has been a success. Though my hands have become calloused due to stone processing, I can earn around 200,000 yuan in profit every year," she said. The poverty rate of Yunxi County once reached 32.7 percent, and Xiaying Village was listed as one of the most poverty-stricken villages in the county, according to Liu Tingzhou, Party chief of Xiaying Village. "Our turquoise industry was good, but poor transportation and poor Internet access restricted the business in the mountains.

Only a small number of villagers worked in the field," said Liu, adding that turquoise plus e-commerce could be the solution to leading villagers out of poverty. Liu then organized free training courses for locals to learn how to do business online. They rebuilt roads and upgraded the village's Internet network. In 2019, a 5G network extended there to help villagers sell goods via livestreaming. "Step by step, our village changed, and it shook off poverty in 2017," Liu said. In 2019, nearly 700 villagers engaged in e-commerce, running more than 500 online stores, and the annual sales exceeded 200 million yuan. As the turquoise resource is exhaustible, the village has mapped out a new plan for the future. "Our county is also a typical agricultural county with rich planting and animal-raising industries. E-commerce plus agriculture could be another solution," said Liu. With the help of the local government,

local e-commerce entrepreneurs provided more jobs to poor people and signed agreements to help farmers sell their products.

It included chicken, pork, tea, mushrooms, and honey for sale across the whole country. In 2019, agricultural product sales accounted for more than 30 percent of the village's e-commerce revenue. Zhou Hua, a previously impoverished villager, saw her income increase three times since working in a local tea factory. Zhou, 33, once worked as a waitress in a hotpot restaurant in downtown Shiyuan, and her husband was a worker at construction sites. "We didn't earn much and had to leave our son alone in the village," Zhou said. Both Zhou and her husband now work in the tea factory close to their home. Their family income can reach around 100,000 yuan a year. "I am satisfied with my life. My wallet gets fatter, and the best thing is that I can accompany my son every day," Zhou said. "I hope our days will be better in the new year," she added.

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Hong Kong Markets Come Out of 2020 Stronger Than Ever

Hong Kong's capital markets remained resilient despite challenges last year and in many ways came out of 2020 stronger than ever, Laura Cha Shih May-lung, chairperson of Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited (HKEX), said Monday. "Hong Kong's role as an international financial center connecting mainland ... and the rest of the world will be more relevant than ever despite significant market volatility around the globe," the chairperson said when speaking at an online financial forum. She attributed Hong Kong's development over the past decades largely to opportunities from the reform and opening-up of the mainland. "I will see that continue to be the case as renminbi internationalization continues and as the mainland market opens more." Despite fluctuations in global financial markets, HKEX remained steady growth in 2020, ranking the second largest globally in terms of IPO fund-raising. Especially, mega secondary listings of U.S.-traded mainland companies including JD.com and NetEase brought fresh vitality.

The chairperson believes the trend of homecoming listings will continue this year, citing Hong Kong's increasing attractiveness to businesses and investors due to bold market reforms in recent years. An increasing number of money-starved new economy companies have turned to Hong Kong as the exchange adopted new listing rules to attract tech firms. In 2020, new economy companies made up about 60 percent of Hong Kong's IPO fund-raising. Hong Kong has become the world's second largest biotech fund-raising center. "I have heard people in Silicon Valley said that Hong Kong now is a credible alternative to Nasdaq," she said. The 14th Asian Financial Forum running from Monday to Tuesday was organized by the government of China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Hong Kong

Trade Development Council. Under the theme "Reshaping the World Economic Landscape", the forum assembled online more than 160 policymakers, financial experts, investors, business leaders and economists from across the world.

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Creating Economic Milestone with People-first Approach

In the face of a pandemic unseen in the last 100 years, China's gross domestic product (GDP) exceeded the 100-trillion-yuan (about 15.41 trillion U.S. dollars) threshold in 2020 and is expected to be the only major economy to post positive growth, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The hard-earned achievement was made by the people and for the people, embodying the fundamental objective of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the world's largest ruling political party, which is to serve the people wholeheartedly. Following is a review of the practice and experience of the country and the Party encapsulated in the acronym "PEOPLE" -- People's lives first, employment as a priority, opinions from the public heard, poverty alleviation victory, livelihoods guaranteed, and ecological progress.

PEOPLE'S LIVES FIRST

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the country has put people's lives and health first, fully demonstrating its people-centered philosophy. The Chinese government has provided free medical treatment for COVID-19 patients without leaving even a single individual unattended, dispatched quick medical supplies and medical teams to cities hit hard by the epidemic, and ensured the supply of people's daily necessities. Such crucial steps to stem the spread of the virus have laid the foundation for the resumption of work and production and created conditions for the "V-shaped" economic rebound. To help other countries plagued by the pandemic, China has pledged to make its vaccines a global public good and called for joint efforts to build a community of health for all.

EMPLOYMENT AS A PRIORITY

Ensuring employment was a priority of the macro-economic policy last year, said Ning Jizhe, head of the NBS. China has set no specific target for economic growth but made practical plans to ensure new urban jobs, give full play to the market entities and improve people's livelihoods. China's job market remained stable in 2020. A total of 11.86 million new urban jobs were created during the whole year, achieving 131.8 percent of the target set for the entire year, the NBS data showed. In the next stage, China will promote employment, optimize income distribution structure and expand the middle-income group as part of efforts to boost domestic consumption, according to a tone-setting economic conference held in December last year.

OPINIONS FROM PUBLIC HEARD

The people's right to oversight is guaranteed as the government has launched an online platform to collect people's complaints on problems they find in local epidemic control efforts. Starting in late January last year, press conferences were regularly held by the State Council's joint prevention and control mechanism against COVID-19 to keep the people informed on issues such as treatment of patients, the allocation of supplies, the resumption of work and production as well as the reopening of schools. In compiling the 14th Five-Year Plan, several symposiums were held to solicit opinions and suggestions from entrepreneurs, non-CPC personages, scientists, experts in economic, education, culture, health and sports fields, as well as grassroots representatives from a broad spectrum of professions. Comments were also solicited online, and in just two weeks, over 1 million pieces of comments were collected.

POVERTY ALLEVIATION VICTORY

The remarkable achievements made on the front of poverty alleviation also epitomize the people-centered philosophy. In 2020, all of China's nearly 100 million impoverished rural residents living below the current poverty line had shaken off poverty after eight years of efforts. All 832 poor counties have now been lifted out of poverty. The country has made concerted efforts including implementing preferential tax policies, improving the use of anti-poverty funds, establishing online platforms for selling agricultural products from poverty-stricken areas, launching workshops and recruitment campaigns, and sending millions of cadres from the government to poverty-stricken areas to join the poverty eradication battle. Because of these efforts, China is expected to achieve the poverty eradication goals set in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years ahead of schedule.

LIVELIHOODS GUARANTEED

Though the epidemic has affected employment, income and people's lives, the livelihoods of residents have been safeguarded as the country stepped up efforts to secure people's basic livelihoods. In 2020, China's per capita disposable income rose 2.1 percent to 32,189 yuan, basically keeping pace with the GDP increase, according to NBS data. China's consumer price index remained stable and rose 2.5 percent year on year in 2020, staying within the government's annual target of around 3.5 percent. Official data also showed the country continued to see a generally stable housing market in December, with home prices in 70 major cities showing mild month-on-month increases. Subsidies and supportive policies have been also offered to people with financial difficulties. Speaking to Xinhua recently, Finance Minister Liu Kun said the government will normalize its implementation of the specified transfer payment mechanism to raise fiscal spending efficiency while "tightening the belt" to save money and enrich the people.

ECOLOGICAL PROGRESS

A good ecological environment is the fairest public product and the most accessible welfare for the people. In recent years, the country has accelerated efforts to develop a system for building an ecological civilization, including improvements of laws and regulations on environmental protection and the launch of action plans on the prevention of air, water and soil pollutions. Meanwhile, more than 20 million people living under China's poverty line freed themselves from the clutches of destitution through ecological poverty-relief programs, according to the National Forestry and Grassland Administration. Witnessing China's hard-won achievements in the "extraordinary" year of 2020, Tesla CEO Elon Musk has recently praised the Chinese government for being very responsive to its people's needs and happiness. The fundamental aim of the CPC is to serve the people heart and soul, said Kingphet Mongkhonvilay, a senior official from the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, adding that the CPC has clearly demonstrated its dedication to the interests of the people amid the pandemic.

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China Remains World's Largest Online Retail Market: Ministry

China's online retail sales of goods rose 14.8 percent year on year to 9.8 trillion yuan (about 1.5 trillion U.S. dollars) in 2020, data from the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) showed Tuesday. China has ranked the largest online retail market in the world for eight years in a row, the MOC said, noting that online retail sales accounted for 24.9 percent of the country's total retail sales volume last year. Surging online sales boosted the courier sector, with a total of 83.36 billion parcels being delivered through the year. In 2020, e-commerce sales via livestreaming also gained popularity, with more than 20 million livestreaming marketing activities taking place. The MOC data also showed that the country's imports of consumer goods increased by 8.2 percent year on year to 1.57 trillion yuan.

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China Ratchets Up Crackdown on Cross-border E-commerce Smuggling

China has intensified its crackdown on smuggling via cross-border e-commerce, the country's customs authority said Thursday. Customs across the nation handled 79 such cases last year, involving 10.49 billion yuan (about 1.62 billion U.S. dollars), said Sun Zhijie, an official with the General Administration of Customs, at a press conference. In these cases, smugglers usually used forged transaction certificates

and stole consumer identities to enjoy preferential tariff and tax rates. Ten typical cases of smuggling in 2020 were presented at the conference, with one of them relating to cross-border e-commerce. Remaining on high alert over smuggling, Chinese customs handled a total of 4,061 smuggling cases last year, Sun said.

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E-commerce Heralds Thriving Careers for Independent Fashion Designers

When Liu Min launched her brand "Ms MIN" on the e-commerce platform Taobao, many people asked her the logic behind choosing to open a store on the internet despite being an independent designer in London. After striving for years to establish her brand, the fashion designer from the city of Xiamen, east China's Fujian Province, is determined to stick with her choice. Like many other designers, she interacts with customers online garnering more ideas for her original design. Prior to starting her business on Taobao, Liu however did have her concerns. "I kept thinking if online retailers are supposed to cater to the public? Is online business against independent designing?" Liu recalled. Initially, Liu had a small team and she had to be a fitting model herself. But thanks to customer feedbacks, Liu managed to improve her design. "I read the comments regularly and integrate their ideas into my designs.

It is important to learn from them," Liu said. "For example, in terms of modifying waist styles of the attires, customers provide a lot of suggestions on the platform. They are willing to share their experience with you and offer valuable advice." Liu is amongst a bunch of fashion designers looking for new development prospects on the internet. Statistics show there are more than 2,000 fashion brands on Tmall, the online marketplace under Alibaba Group. Online stores provide a free space for fashion designers allowing them to control, sell and experiment with their designs, Liu noted. "When the works of designers withstand the test of the market, they can grow into fashion brands faster," Liu said. "The internet brought my work to the public eye. I would have never been able to do it without the help of the internet." Liu has recently opened a brick-and-mortar store in Shanghai while maintaining her online store.

"I suppose it is a great strategy to run both stores," Liu said. "The two stores are complementary to each other. Online customers can visit the offline store for a real experience, while the offline customers can also become potential online buyers." Liu Xiaolu, another fashion designer in Xiamen, worked the other way around. She first launched a retail outlet of her fashion brand "Deepmoss," before taking the business online. Liu Xiaolu said she believes the online store was one of the fastest ways to establish her distribution channels. "Nowadays, customers walk into a buyer's shop and when they fancy something, they subconsciously look for it online," she said. "My designs have literally reached all potential customers across the country thanks

to the internet," she said, adding that her brand is very popular in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. It takes a long time for designers to grow mature and the road is full of uncertainties, but the online space makes it possible for them to reach success, said Guo Xiaohua, with the School of Film, Television and Communication, Xiamen University of Technology.

"Young designers live in the internet era, and they are used to communicating with customers online before, during and post designing," Guo said, noting that the internet is the main arena for the young designers to test their products, and for customers to buy their products. Fashion critic Tang Shuang said that in recent years, the public has attached more importance to distinctive fashion products of independent designers, rather than luxury brands and fast fashion. "To some extent, the internet has freed local designers from their localities and allowed their works to reach the national market. Through online communication, their brands are getting closer to customers," Tang said.

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China's Strong Economic Performance Good Sign for Global Recovery, Says Scholar

China managed to control the COVID-19 early on, and register a positive economic growth in 2020, which are good signs for global economy, a scholar said here in a recent interview with Xinhua. "It is quite a performance in such a difficult year," said Cai Daolu, a visiting senior fellow of the National University of Singapore Business School, when commenting on the data that China registered a 2.3 percent GDP growth in 2020 and became the only major economy that recorded a positive growth in the year amid the pandemic. China's strong economic performance in 2020 has been translated into two important features, namely "a stable labor market" and "a rising disposable income" in China, Cai said. With a strong central government coordinating the efforts with the local governments, China has been very committed and efficient in containing the spread of the virus, which creates a safe environment for household spending and the labor force's return to work, he said.

"The key crucial element (for the economic performance) is the containment of the virus that grants confidence to the population," Cai said. Other elements also apply. As some countries tended to turn inward and closed their doors amid the pandemic last year, China reaffirmed its commitment to trade of goods and services, and to investment, signing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement with 14 other countries, and concluding the negotiations of the China-EU investment treaty. These multilateral agreements will not only help mitigate the economic damage of COVID-19, but also boost the confidence of

investors, thus facilitate global economic recovery, he said. "We need an economically healthy and strong China." A lot of travel restrictions have been imposed almost worldwide to control the coronavirus right now, but Cai noted that there's an urgency for the world to be more connected to combat the pandemic, because the global supply chains are so complex and interconnected, and people need access to goods and services.

"Only in this way can we maximize the provision of goods, such as medical equipment, and take full advantage of our comparative advantages of each country," he noted. Touching upon the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, Cai believed that it aims to connect China with the rest of the world through connectivity and can help build a more integrated globe. "When countries are more connected, when the transaction costs are reduced, it gives market access to everyone that is part of this network," he said, adding that the initiative can play an important and transformative role in lifting people out of poverty. Thus, the initiative can have a substantial economic benefit for the global economy, he said.

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China Realizes 5G Coverage in Pearl River Delta Region

China's Guangdong Province has built more than 120,000 5G base stations and basically realized 5G network coverage in urban areas in the Pearl River Delta region, known as a major economic powerhouse. According to data released at the ongoing fourth session of the 13th Guangdong Provincial People's Congress, Guangdong will have 220,000 5G base stations built by the end of 2022, when the number of 5G users in the province is expected to reach 60 million. China's leading telecom companies of Huawei and ZTE are both based in the province, giving Guangdong an edge in developing the 5G industry.

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Consumer Products Expo a Boost to Hainan's Free Trade Port Plan

Preparations are in full swing for the first China International Consumer Products Expo set to be held in May in Haikou, capital of south China's Hainan Province. It will be the first international expo in the tropical province since China released a master plan last June to build the whole of Hainan Island into a globally influential, high-level free trade port by the middle of the century. According to the provincial bureau of

international economic development, many overseas companies have already secured their spots in the 80,000-square-meter exhibition venue. Kentaro Fujiwara, Shiseido China CEO, said the expo will create a global platform for international investors to display and trade consumer products. Amid a global economic downturn due to COVID-19, the Hainan free trade port has become a unique magnet for foreign investment as it ushers in a golden opportunity of further opening-up.

According to the government work report delivered Sunday by Feng Fei, acting governor of Hainan, the number of new market entities in the province increased by 30.9 percent year on year in 2020. The number of new enterprises, says the report, grew by 113.7 percent. Official statistics showed that in 2020, a total of 1,005 overseas-funded enterprises were established in Hainan, surging 197.3 percent over the previous year, and its actual use of foreign capital stood at 3.03 billion U.S. dollars, up 100 percent. Eighty countries and regions had investment in Hainan last year, double the number in 2019, and the investors covered all G20 member countries, said Peng Wei, deputy director of the provincial commerce department. On Feb. 1, the 2020 negative list for foreign investment access in Hainan free trade port will take effect. The list introduces measures to promote opening-up in crucial areas, such as value-added telecommunications and education.

Overseas high-level universities and vocational colleges specializing in science and engineering, agriculture, and medicine will be allowed to run on the island independently. Hainan is making every effort to build itself into a place for educational innovation. Germany's Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences signed an agreement to open a campus in the Yangpu Economic Development Zone last year. The campus plans to enroll students this year. Meanwhile, public opinion is being solicited for a draft Hainan free trade port law, which is expected to grant the province greater autonomy in reform and provide a legal guarantee for the construction of the free trade port, according to Shen Xiaoming, Party chief of Hainan.

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Road, Trade and Exchange, China and ASEAN Countries Forge Closer Community

A handful of seashells are on display in a museum in southwest China's border province of Yunnan, recording the country's past history of international communication. Archaeologists believe that the seashells, imported from South and Southeast Asia over 2,000 years ago, were used as both currency and an important commodity in Yunnan. Today, they embody the long-standing economic ties between China and the region. Bordering Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, Yunnan has been a frontline of interconnection and exchanges between China and the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, said Chen Lijun, vice president of the China (Kunming) Academy of South and Southeast Asian Studies. In 2020, China and the ASEAN for the first time became each other's largest partners.

INTERNATIONAL CHANNELS

The Kunming Dounan Flower Market is the largest fresh cut flower trading market in Asia, from where flowers are loaded and arrive in Bangkok of Thailand in about 40 hours via the highway between the provincial capital of Kunming and Bangkok, Thailand. It is estimated that some 8 million or 10 million flowers are sold from the market overseas, among which 20 percent to 30 percent are purchased by buyers from South and Southeast Asian countries. According to the provincial transport department, Yunnan has been pushing forward infrastructure construction to boost interconnectivity with its neighboring countries. The Yunnan sections of international expressways leading to Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar have been opened to traffic. In late 2020, the Dali-Lincang high-speed railway was put into use.

"We used to say we were in outlying border regions, but now we are at the forefront," said Lu Shaoyun, deputy director of the Lincang development and reform commission. Now more than 10 enterprises, including China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited, have settled in Lincang. "After the transportation cost drops sharply, Lincang's foreign trade advantages will be brought into full play," said Lu. The Kunming-Vientiane railway linking Yunnan with Laos, another key project, is expected to be opened this year, allowing trains to travel between the two cities in one day. The improved infrastructure has paved the way for Yunnan to build a global logistics center, with flower being the main commodity, according to the provincial authorities.

CLOSE EXCHANGES

Siddhant Subedi was learning how to select and make tea in a Kunming-based training class. Curious about many aspects of Chinese culture, the 22-year-old Nepali student chose to study business administration after learning Chinese for one year. "Since I was a kid, I have been fascinated by China," said Subedi. "China has a big market, and I want to be a part of it." In recent years, Yunnan has accelerated international exchanges and cooperation in education. Many overseas students like Subedi chose Yunnan to further their studies. In 2019, universities and higher education institutions in Yunnan enrolled 16,600 overseas students from 115 countries.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, Yunnan has sent medical experts to Laos and Myanmar to aid the countries in fighting the disease and donated medical supplies and equipment worth over 46 million yuan (about 7.05 million U.S. dollars) to more than 20 countries, said Zhu Wenzhong, with the provincial foreign affairs office. The province has also sent 27 batches of medical teams to neighboring countries to perform free cataract surgeries on 5,287 patients. Moreover, over

40,000 children in Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and other countries were screened for congenital heart diseases with the province's help.

OPEN ECONOMY

It is winter, but the atmosphere is fiery in a fruit transaction market in Wanding, a city sitting at the China-Myanmar border. Following epidemic-control procedures, workers were loading watermelons from Myanmar onto trucks bound for the Chinese inland and coastal cities. "Every winter, the watermelon yield is low in China, and we import more than 30 tonnes of watermelons daily from Myanmar and sell them to the northern regions," said Hou Xianhua, a businessman from the central province of Henan. Meanwhile, at a workshop 40 km away, motorcycle production lines are running as normal. Despite the impact of the epidemic, more than 300,000 motorcycles were exported to Myanmar in 2020. "After years of market development, our products are becoming more popular in neighboring countries," said Fang Wei, a manager of the motorcycle plant.

Hao Yishan, deputy head of the provincial commerce department, said that Yunnan's trade partners have expanded to 206 countries and regions, with ASEAN long remaining the largest one. Data shows that the foreign trade volume in Yunnan increased from 24.5 billion dollars in 2015 to 33.6 billion dollars in 2019. Its trade with South Asian and Southeast Asian countries soared to 17.4 billion dollars, an annual average growth of 5.4 percent. The Yunnan pilot free trade zone (FTZ), established in August 2019, has become a new carrier for open economic development. In 2020, the foreign trade of the Yunnan pilot FTZ reached 71.79 billion yuan, surging 91.4 percent year on year, driving the overall growth of Yunnan's foreign trade by 14.8 percentage points.

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Rural Xinjiang Residents Enjoy Steady Income Growth in 2020

Rural residents of northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region enjoyed steady income growth in 2020 as the region's anti-poverty campaign bore fruit, official data showed on Wednesday. Their per capita disposable income last year reached 14,056 yuan (about 2,169 U.S. dollars), up 5 percent year on year excluding the inflation factor, according to a press conference. Xinjiang's consumer price index, a main gauge of inflation, edged up 1.5 percent year on year in 2020, 1 percentage point lower than the national figure. The region's annual average urban surveyed unemployment rate stood at 5.2 percent in 2020, with the number dropping to 4.6 percent in the last quarter. Xinjiang bid farewell to absolute poverty in 2020, with its last 10 counties removed from the national poverty list in November.

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China to Widen Market Access for Foreign Investment: MOC

China's Ministry of Commerce (MOC) on Friday pledged to continue widening market access for foreign investment as the sector continues to face a complex and severe situation this year. China will fully implement the new negative list for foreign investment and further lift restrictive measures, Zong Changqing, a MOC official, told a press briefing. Pilots to open up the service sector will be further expanded, while stronger policy support will be provided to stabilize foreign investment, Zong said, adding that the ministry will also improve the layout of the pilot free trade zones and implement the construction plan for Hainan free trade port. More efforts will be made to step up the protection of legitimate interests of foreign investors and foster a business environment that is market-oriented, law-based and internationalized. Rising above the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic recession, China became the world's top destination for new foreign direct investment last year. The country bucked the global downward trend and recorded a 4-percent growth in inflows, overtaking the United States as the largest recipient in 2020, according to a recent report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

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China's Outbound Investment Balance Doubles in Past Five Years

China's balance of outbound direct investment (ODI) had exceeded 2.3 trillion U.S. dollars by the end of 2020, double the figure from the end of 2015, data from the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) showed. In 2020, China's ODI remained relatively stable at 132.9 billion dollars with an optimized structure, the ministry said during a press conference Friday. China's non-financial direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road reached 17.79 billion dollars last year, up 18.3 percent, the data showed. Key industries including equipment manufacturing and information technology saw rapid increases in investment from China, MOC data showed.

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China's Renewable Energy Generation Maintains Growth in 2020

China's renewable energy generation rose 8.4 percent year on year to 2.21 trillion kWh in 2020, the National Energy Administration (NEA) said Saturday. By the end of last year, the total national installed capacity of renewable energy generation had hit 934 million kilowatts, up 17.5 percent year on year. Meanwhile, the country wasted less renewable energy in 2020 amid a rising utilization rate, according to the NEA. The utilization rate of hydropower came in at 96.61 percent last year, up 0.73 percentage points year on year, while the average utilization rate of wind power reached 97 percent, up 1 percentage point year on year.

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JAPAN: Will Pandemic Telework Boost Women's Careers in Japan, S Korea?

COVID-19 could be a tipping point in the push to retain more women in the workforce in Japan and South Korea and for them to have families with new flexible work arrangements expected to stay, according to researchers and recruiters. The pandemic has disproportionately hit women's careers across the globe, with studies finding they are more likely to work in sectors badly impacted by COVID-19 and are picking up a heavier load of unpaid childcare and chores than men. But in Japan and South Korea, where employees are often under pressure to work long hours in the office with reports of death by overwork, more flexible working could make women rethink leaving jobs to start a family. "If women are given such choice (of flexible working), they will likely utilize the opportunity," said Kyoko Nagano, a Japanese mother-of-two who has worked in local firms and now runs her own businesses in education and tourism.

"There will be positive impacts. Women will feel safer to have families," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Tokyo. Japan and South Korea have been pushing for more women to stay in the workforce in recent years as the two Asian nations struggle with a fast-aging population and low birth rates. But the gender gap in the workplace remains a challenge in both countries which lag other advanced economies. Japan is ranked 121 and South Korea 108 out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, with both scoring poorly on women's economic participation and political empowerment. Japan in December adopted a new five-year gender equality plan after failing to reach half of a 30% target of women leaders in politics and business by the end of 2020. Meanwhile, South Korea has the highest gender wage gap among advanced countries at 32.5% in 2019 - more than double the average for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development nations.

"Women workers are often held back because of the lack of flexibility in corporate jobs, and the 'time poverty' they face as unpaid care work falls disproportionately on

their shoulders," said Anu Madgavkar of the McKinsey Global Institute. Women would likely benefit from a hybrid work model of splitting workdays between office and home that is set to persist even after the pandemic, added Madgavkar, a partner at the MGI, the research arm of global consultancy firm McKinsey. "This means women can spend less time commuting and gain more flexibility about how to manage work-related activities alongside care responsibilities," she said. Telework has been slow to catch on in parts of Asia which put a strong emphasis on being present at the office, until the coronavirus has forced companies to rethink traditional offices. Many Japanese firms had resisted home working in the past, and its intense work culture led to the phenomenon of *karoshi*, or death by overwork, when employees kill themselves or suffer strokes because of excessive hours.

But about 80% of firms surveyed in Japan said they would continue flexible work after COVID-19, according to a poll of more than 3,000 companies across Asia by recruiting firm RGF Professional Recruitment which showed an "unprecedented shift" in the region. The move could stop firms from promoting the "traditionally glorified culture of overtime" and put higher emphasis on output than time spent at work that disadvantages women, according to RGF's Japan Managing Director Benjamin Cordier. "The adjustment has also disrupted how companies evaluate work performance, which may level the playing field for both men and women in the workplace," Cordier added. In South Korea, COVID-19 saw work culture "changing gradually", with a preference for presenteeism among workers slowly diminishing, said Yuichiro Tsuchiyama, head of JAC Recruitment Korea, a Seoul-based recruiting firm. More than half of 100 top Korean companies surveyed by the Korea Employers Federation, a major business group, in September said they would expand work-from-home schemes after the pandemic.

In Japan, tech giant Fujitsu, electronics maker Hitachi, and video game firm Square Enix are among firms that have announced they were offering teleworking as a permanent option. "In Japan, where men have been slow to play a more active role in child rearing and housework, the introduction of flexible working styles has created an environment in which men can do more to contribute," a Fujitsu spokesman said by email. Remote work, however, can be a mixed blessing. Heejung Chung, a South Korean expert on work-life balance at Britain's University of Kent, has published studies showing it helped to boost female participation in the workforce. "Flexible working and the blurring of boundaries can also lead to more work, working all the time and the boundary blurring of work and other spheres of life," Chung said. Chung called for an overhaul of the long hours work culture, while MGI's Madgavkar said teleworking could only benefit women if it was accompanied by other key organizational shifts. "Our surveys across Asian employers found that the 'anytime, anywhere' culture is one of the top reasons why women advance more slowly than men – and work from home could exacerbate this," she warned.

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Japan's Telework Rate Low amid Virus State of Emergency

Companies in Japan have not promoted teleworking much, despite a call by the government to reduce the number of workers in offices by 70% during the second coronavirus state of emergency, a survey by the Japan Productivity Center has shown. The proportion of teleworkers fell to 22.0% in mid-January, from 31.5 % in May last year, when the country was under the first state of emergency. The share dropped to 32.7%, from 41.3%, in Tokyo and three neighboring prefectures that have been under the emergency since Jan. 8. The emergency was later expanded to include seven other prefectures. The proportion of teleworkers who went to the office not more than two days per week dropped to 55.0%, from 69.4 %.

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Japan's 2020 Job Availability Logs Sharpest Drop in 45 Years

Japan's job availability ratio in 2020 logged the sharpest drop since 1975, while the average unemployment rate marked the first rise in 11 years, highlighting the magnitude of the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic on workers, government data showed Friday. The job availability ratio fell 0.42 point to 1.18, the fastest pace since a 0.59 point drop in 1975 recorded in the wake of the 1973 global oil crisis, according to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. It means there were 118 job openings for every 100 job seekers. The pace of decline surpassed the 0.41 point slip logged in 2009 following the global financial crisis, with the figure hitting the lowest level since 1.09 in 2014, the labor ministry said. The annual jobless rate stood at 2.8 percent in 2020, up 0.4 percentage point from the previous year to log the first increase since 2009, when it climbed 1.1 points to 5.1 percent, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications said.

The number of unemployed rose 290,000 to 1.91 million, also the first increase in 11 years. The number of people in work fell 480,000 to 66.76 million, down for the first time in eight years. "The data showed a continued significant impact from the coronavirus pandemic (on the labor market). We will closely monitor developments," said Ryota Takeda, minister of internal affairs and communications. Of those with jobs, 20.90 million were nonregular employees, falling 750,000 from the previous year and down for the first time since comparable data became available in 2014, amid an increase in layoffs and non-renewal of work contracts by companies hit by the pandemic. Until the pandemic, the number of nonregular workers had been on the rise in Japan with more women and elderly people entering the labor market, with the country facing severe manpower shortages in recent years amid the rapid aging

of the population.

Of the people in work, 35.39 million were regular workers, rising 360,000 from a year earlier and up for the sixth year in a row. As another indication of the virus impact, the number of furloughed employees surged by 800,000 to 2.56 million, a record high since comparable data became available in 1968. The annual growth was also the steepest ever. By sector, the number of workers in the services industry including hotels and restaurants declined by 290,000 to 3.91 million, by far the sharpest drop among all industries, as fears of virus infections made consumers hesitant to dine out and take trips. The pandemic took a heavy toll on the world's third-largest economy throughout last year.

The government's first state of emergency, declared nationwide over the virus from April to May with requests for people to stay home and nonessential businesses to suspend operations, triggered the country's worst recession on record. In the April-June period, the Japanese economy contracted an annualized real 29.2 percent from the previous quarter. Although the jobless rate in Japan is still low compared with other major economies, the outlook for employment remains uncertain after Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declared a second virus emergency earlier this month for Tokyo and 10 other prefectures following a resurgence in infections since mid-November. On the back of the labor shortages in recent years, the 2019 average jobless rate stood at 2.4 percent, the lowest level since 1992. But with the virus spread last year, the monthly jobless rate began to worsen gradually, reaching the 3 percent level in August for the first time in over three years.

"The results showed that the employment environment worsened remarkably last year in the worst economic slump in the postwar period amid the coronavirus infections," said Munehisa Tamura, an analyst at the Daiwa Institute of Research. But Tamura said the deterioration of the jobless rate was not as serious as it might have been, "possibly because business operators tried to maintain their workforces as much as possible to prepare for the lifting of the (first) virus emergency, with the support of government subsidies." For 2021, Tamura predicted the labor market figures would basically improve due to the structural manpower shortages but would still depend to a large degree on the virus situation. In December alone, the unemployment rate stood at 2.9 percent, with the job availability ratio hitting 1.06, both unchanged from November.

From <https://japantoday.com> 01/30/2021

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Japan Should Keep Paper Textbooks, Use Digital Materials as Supplements

Throughout their long history, human beings have shaped their character by writing on paper and reading printed matter. It must be thoroughly examined whether it is truly all right to entrust learning to the newly emerging digital formats. The Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry has presented an outline of proposals for an interim report on the full-fledged introduction of digital textbooks to an expert panel. The outline argues that digital formats have such advantages as the fact that terminals are easy to carry and displayed images can be enlarged, and it contains five proposals to utilize them, including that all textbooks used at elementary and junior high schools “will shift to a digital format” and that “they should be used in tandem with paper materials” from the 2024 academic year. Japan has maintained high academic standards by using printed textbooks. What kind of education will be aimed for by switching to digital? A complete conversion to digital formats while leaving principles behind should not be allowed.

Some of the countries that pioneered the introduction of digital textbooks ultimately adopted a more cautious attitude because doubts arose about children’s ability to concentrate and the effect on their learning. There are also many countries that do not regard digital materials as textbooks. In Japan, textbooks should be paper-based, and digital materials should be used in a supplementary capacity to enhance learning effectiveness. It is important to adopt flexible approaches that are not bound by the five proposals, such as using digital technology effectively in subjects and lessons where it is easier to learn through video and audio. It will be irreparable if students’ academic ability declines as a result of a rush to digitization in an effort to make up for the delay in shifting to information technology. Meiji University Prof. Takashi Saito said, “Memories become fixed more readily from paper,” and insists that knowledge that must be acquired should be learned from printed textbooks, while secondary information should be presented digitally. This is a sensible opinion.

Among more than 100 college students who want to become teachers, an overwhelming majority said printed textbooks should continue to exist. Until recently, the ministry prohibited junior high school students from bringing smartphones into schools. Elementary school students are still prohibited from doing so, in principle. And now the government suddenly plans to distribute digital terminals to all students and digitize textbooks. Many teachers and parents may be confused. The education ministry was once criticized by financial authorities for the fact that electronic blackboards distributed to schools were not being used. If the ministry thinks that using digital terminals as textbooks will demonstrate that it is not making the same mistake again, it has its priorities confused. The Cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga advocates the promotion of digitization. It is urgent to streamline administrative procedures, but textbooks should not be discussed in the same way. The distribution of digital terminals is said to be part of economic stimulus measures following the consumption tax hike. The education of children, who will carry the nation’s future, should not be handled from the perspective of economic benefits.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 01/31/2021

SOUTH KOREA: To Spend Nearly 13 Trn Won on Digital New Deal in 2021

South Korea said Wednesday it will spend 12.7 trillion won (US\$11.7 billion) this year as part of its digital New Deal program, which aims to foster new tech industries for job creation. The government last year unveiled ambitious stimulus projects, under its Korean New Deal initiative, amounting to 160 trillion won until 2025. The digital New Deal targets pouring 58.2 trillion won into key tech investments to create around 900,000 jobs by the same year. Last year, South Korea spent 3.5 trillion won on digital New Deal projects, such as supporting the development of smart factories. The central government will invest 7.6 trillion won in digital New Deal projects this year, with the rest of the amount covered by regional governments and the private sector, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT.

The ministry said 9.9 trillion won will be spent on developing technologies based on data, networks and artificial intelligence (AI), which includes developing AI-based technologies, such as self-driving cars and smart factories. Around 700 billion won will be set aside for virtual services, such as remote education and smart medical systems. The ministry added that 2.1 trillion won will be spent on the digitization of social overhead capital, which includes projects such as installing road infrastructure with self-driving technology and updating the country's disaster-response system.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/06/2021

Online Platform Operators to Face Stern Measures Over Unfair Biz Practices Regulator

South Korea's antitrust regulator said Friday it will seek to take punitive actions against unfair business activity by online platform operators in a bid to protect contractors and consumers. The Korea Fair Trade Commission (KFTC) plans to submit a bill designed to prevent unfair business activity by online platform operators to the National Assembly next week, the regulator said in its 2021 policy plan. Under the bill, online platform operators will be levied with a hefty fine if they conduct abusive or illegal business activity against contractors registered as sellers. In a contactless consumption trend caused by the pandemic, online platforms such as Google, Naver and delivery apps have come to have a powerful presence.

But smaller merchants and shop owners registered as sellers on the platforms have

not been properly protected, raising the need to enhance transparency in transactions on online platforms. The KFTC said it will also seek a revision to the Electronic Commerce Consumer Protection Act to better make online platform businesses take responsibility for consumer damages occurring from e-commerce transactions. The regulator also plans to regulate inter-affiliate trading by conglomerates. Internal trading has been blamed for allowing owner families to easily net large profits by having subsidiaries award lucrative contracts to each other, undermining the principle of fair competition.

From <http://www.koreaherald.com> 01/22/2021

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S. Korea to Further Expand 5G Infrastructure

South Korea will increase the coverage of the next-generation mobile networks, dubbed as 5G, to 85 cities across the country this year, from the current seven major cities, the Ministry of Science and ICT said. The ministry's plan, unveiled Tuesday, also include an expanded support for local firms to transition to the ultra-fast networks, investments in research and development of mobile edge computing, a key component in driving the commercial use of 5G in areas such as virtual reality. It also plans to allow non-telecommunications firms to operate private networks for their businesses as well. A budget of 165.5 billion won has been set aside this year to help a wide range of sectors to utilize the benefits of the new network technology, including some 88 billion won on future mobility, 40 billion won on augmented and virtual reality-based entertainment content and 16 billion won for smart city projects.

The government will start providing network bandwidth to non-telecommunications firms in the first half of this year, allowing them to operate their own private networks. It will provide 600 megahertz of 5G bandwidth this year, it said. According to the government's survey, around 20 software developers and IT firms have expressed hopes to build their own 5G networks. A private network is an enterprise-dedicated closed network that provides communication connections to people belonging to the specific enterprise. Previously, only mobile carriers were able to customize and operate networks in South Korea. To encourage uses of private 5G networks, the government will invest 127.9 billion won this year. Public sectors, such as harbor facilities and the defense sector, will be the first to use private 5G networks and customized solutions.

At the same time, the government will take the lead in development of mobile edge computing, also called the multi-access edge computing, which is a cloud-based technology that could reduce latency by bringing the computation and storage capabilities to the edge of the network. Between 2020-22, the government is to invest 120 billion won in more than 15 projects dedicated to introduce MEC solutions to local firms and public sectors, including smart manufacturing, self-driving,

telemedicine and disease control. "The demand for MEC solutions will increase as 5G network-related technologies improve in the future," the government said. The global MEC market is expected to post an annual growth rate of 157.4 percent to reach at \$72.4 billion, officials said, quoting market researcher Frost and Sullivan's data. Meanwhile, the ICT Ministry will also inject 52.5 billion won in supporting 5G equipment manufacturers to help them strengthen their technological prowess.

From <http://www.koreaherald.com> 01/26/2021

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Mobile Carriers Push for Online Platforms, Unmanned Stores amid Pandemic

South Korean mobile carriers are launching unmanned stores and expanding their online retail platforms as the COVID-19 pandemic limits in-person contact and accelerates the use of virtual services. KT Corp. said Thursday it launched its first unmanned store equipped with digital kiosks for customers to buy phones and switch data plans all on their own. The store, located in the southeastern city of Daegu, is run by employees during the day and operates unmanned at night, allowing virus-wary customers to shop for phones by themselves. The telecom operator said it plans to open another unmanned store in southern Seoul in March. KT joins the recent digital retail rush by mobile carriers to capture young consumers used to online services and to cut costs in physical stores. SK Telecom Co., the country's largest mobile carrier, also operates an unmanned zone at its flagship store in western Seoul, where users can purchase or sell phones through digital kiosks and receive data plan recommendations via artificial intelligence.

As part of its virtual retail drive, the telecom operator earlier this month unveiled more affordable mobile data plans for customers who purchase phones through its online store. The company said it was able to cut costs by solely using its online retail channels. "The retail structure of telecom operators is changing through the COVID-19 pandemic," Hana Financial Investment analyst Kim Hong-sik said in a report. "Instead of handing out rebates to retail stores, carriers can slash prices through online data plans." "Acquiring users online is seen as a plus in terms of profitability," Kim added. Smaller rival LG Uplus Corp. has followed suit, releasing competitively priced mobile plans through its online store earlier this week. The carrier has also expanded unmanned services by installing digital kiosks at 30 locations, including its retail stores and discount store Homeplus. The kiosks, which look similar to ATM machines, allow users to buy sim cards and pay their mobile subscription fees on their own, according to LG Uplus. The carrier first unveiled the kiosks in July last year, vowing to shift to more virtual services.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/28/2021

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S. Korea's 5G Users Near 12 Million in 2020 Data

The number of 5G subscribers in South Korea approached nearly 12 million last year since the launch of the latest mobile network in April 2019, data showed Friday. South Korea's 5G users stood at 11.85 million as of end-December last year, up over 900,000 from the previous month, according to the data from the Ministry of Science and ICT. The figure accounted for 16.8 percent of the total 70.5 million mobile network subscriptions in the country. The number of 5G users picked up in the second half of last year, thanks to launches of new 5G phones, including Apple Inc.'s iPhone 12 series and Samsung Electronics Co.'s Galaxy Note 20 models. The country's migration to the high-speed network is expected to accelerate further with the launches of Samsung's new flagship Galaxy S21 models and cheaper data plans from mobile carriers sold through online retail channels. With the growing number of 5G users, local mobile carriers are focusing on adopting new technology, such as standalone 5G, to improve network quality. South Korean telecom operators currently support non-standalone 5G, which requires support from the previous 4G LTE network. Users on the 4G network accounted for the majority of mobile subscriptions last year at 52.5 million, or 74.5 percent of the total.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Population Reaches Nearly 271.35 Million People till Dec. 2020

The Indonesian population reached 271,349,889 people till December 2020, according to the Home Affairs Ministry. The number is the latest population data based on synchronization of the results of the 2020 population census and data on population administration from the ministry's Directorate General of Population and Civil Registration, the ministry's Secretary General Muhammad Hudori said in a statement here Thursday. Of the number, the total female population reached 134,229,988 and the male population was 137,119,901. In addition, there were 86,437,053 families. Based on the distribution of population, Java Island occupies the top position with the largest population of 55.94 percent, followed by Sumatra Island 21.73 percent, Sulawesi Island 7.43 percent, Kalimantan Island 6.13 percent, Bali Island and Nusa Tenggara Island 5.57 percent, Papua Island 2.02 percent, and Maluku Island 1.17 percent. In detail, West Java is the province with the largest population of 47.1 million people, followed by East Java with 41.04 million people, Central Java 37.10 million people, North Sumatra 15.14 million people, and Banten 11.64 million people. There are five provinces with the lowest population, namely

North Kalimantan (0.68 million people), West Papua (1.15 million people), Gorontalo (1.19 million people), North Maluku (1.30 million people), and Bangka Belitung Islands (1.43 million people). Meanwhile, Head of the Central Agency of Statistics Suhariyanto said that the increase in the recorded population was due to the rise in the population growth rate of 0.14 percent from September to December 2020. The results of the 2020 population census compared to that in 2010 showed an increase in the population of 32.56 million people or an average of 3.26 million every year, he said.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com/> 01/21/2021

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PHILIPPINES: Economy Shrinks 9.5 Pct in 2020, Lowest Growth Since 1946

The Philippine economy shrank 9.5 percent in 2020 after contracting 8.3 percent in the fourth quarter due to the prolonged impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said on Thursday. "The Philippine gross domestic product posted a growth rate of -8.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, resulting in the -9.5 percent full-year growth rate for 2020," PSA head Dennis Mapa said in a virtual press conference. Mapa said the 2020 GDP growth is the lowest since 1946. According to the PSA, the full-year growth of agriculture in the Philippines is at -0.2 percent; services, -9.1 percent; and industry, -13.1 percent. "COVID-19 disrupted our growth momentum and development trajectory," Acting Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick Chua said in the same briefing, adding 2020 was "the most difficult year in our lives." Chua said the quarantine restrictions reduced household spending by 801 billion pesos (roughly 16.6 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020 or an average of around 2.2 billion pesos (roughly 45.7 million U.S. dollars) per day.

"The fall in consumption translates into a total income loss of around 1.04 trillion pesos (roughly 21.6 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020 or an average of around 2.8 billion pesos (roughly 58 million U.S. dollars) per day," Chua added. The Development Budget Coordination Committee estimates that the economy will grow by 6.5 to 7.5 percent in 2021 and by 8 to 10 percent in 2022. "Further opening the economy in 2021 will require a careful and calibrated approach given risks from new virus strains," Chua said. However, he added that "prolonging the status quo of community quarantine and risk aversion is not an option." "In 2020, we saw significant hardships among the people deprived of jobs and income that led to more hunger, more poor people, higher prevalence of other sicknesses, far more deaths from non-COVID-19 reasons, and lost opportunities," Chua added. The Philippines now has 518,407 confirmed COVID-19 cases, including 10,481 deaths.

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SINGAPORE: Unemployment Rates Grow in 2020

Singapore's Ministry of Manpower announced on Thursday that the country's annual average unemployment rate for overall in 2020 rose to 3 percent from 2.3 percent in 2019. The unemployment rate for residents grew from 3.1 percent to 4.1 percent, and that for citizens grew from 3.3 percent to 4.2 percent, according to the Labour Market Advance Release 2020. However, these figures remained below the annual rates observed during SARS in 2003 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2009. Singapore's total employment, excluding foreign domestic workers, decreased 172,200 in the whole year of 2020.

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VIETNAM: Ministry Aims to Secure Stable Electricity Supply for 870,000 Households in Rural, Mountainous, Island Areas

The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) has announced ambitious plans to ensure 870,000 households in rural, mountainous and island areas have a stable electricity connection by 2025. Some 153,000 households are set to get electricity for the first time, while a further 717,000 households will have their unstable supplies improved as part of the target programme for rural, mountainous and island electricity supply in the period 2021-25. The target was revealed at a conference of the Department of Electricity and Renewable Energy under the MoIT held yesterday in Hà Nội. The programme will also supply electricity to more than 2,600 small and medium-sized pump stations in 13 provinces in the Mekong Delta. The move will supplement the national grid or provide renewable energy sources for islands like Cồn Cỏ Island in Quảng Trị Province, Thổ Chu, An Sơn and Nam Du in Kiên Giang Province, and Ninh Tân, Ninh Đảo and Diệp Sơn island villages in Khánh Hòa Province. Speaking at the conference, Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Đặng Hoàng An said providing electricity to rural areas was an important and outstanding achievement of Việt Nam, with electricity supplied to more than 17 million households in rural, remote, border and island areas.

In rural areas, the percentage of households using electricity as of December 31, 2019, reached 99.26 per cent, meaning only about 0.74 per cent of rural households lacked access to electricity. The target programme for electricity supply for rural, mountainous and island areas in 2016-20 set a goal of supplying electricity from the national grid to the 17 communes without electricity, which are home to about 1,055,000 households in 9,890 villages and hamlets. The programme achieved encouraging results and supplied power to all 17 communes, with a total of 204,737 households getting power, as did five islands including Lý Sơn, Bạch Long Vỹ, Nhơn Châu, Cù Lao Chàm and Cái Chiên. An said that due to the limitations of financial

resources, capital from the central budget for the programme only reached VNĐ4.7 trillion (US\$204.7 million), including the reciprocal capital of investors, just 18.5 per cent of the total capital needs. This meant the target of most rural households accessing electricity was missed.

Bùi Quốc Hùng, deputy director of the Department of Electricity and Renewable Energy, said that the goal for 2021-25 was to supply electricity to most rural households, but an additional VNĐ26 trillion (\$1.1 billion) of investment capital was needed. The total capital was very large, finding funding was a problem, he said, adding that Việt Nam has become a more developed economy so it no longer has access to concessional official development assistance (ODA) sources. Therefore, the MoIT recommended that the Government report to the National Assembly to balance public debt, giving priority to seeking ODA loans and foreign concessional capital to supplement the central budget to implement the programme. Võ Quang Lâm, deputy general director of Vietnam Electricity (EVN), said that by last year, EVN had provided and managed electricity sales to 11 out of 12 island districts and 82 out of 85 island communes with a total capital of more than VNĐ7.9 trillion (\$342.2 million). The supply of electricity to mountainous and island regions faced many difficulties in terms of geographical distance, the longevity of equipment and maintenance, he said. Đặng Ngọc Hậu, deputy chairman of Sơn La Province People's Committee, said that up to now, 97.5 per cent of households in the province had electricity, greatly contributing to economic development, social security and poverty reduction. On average, the number of poor households reduced by 3 per cent per year. However, Sơn La was still a poor province, so it would strive to bring the rate of households using electricity to 99.5 per cent, he said.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/15/2021

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First Industrial Park in Việt Nam Gains Access to 5G Network

The Yên Phong 1 Industrial Park in northern Bắc Ninh province has become the first park in Việt Nam to gain access to a 5G telecom network, with the new technology launched onsite by Viettel on Thursday. At the launch, Deputy Minister of Information and Communications Phan Tâm said the trial of the 5G network in Yên Phong 1 is part of efforts to implement Politburo Resolution No 52-NQ/TW, issued in September 2019, on certain policies for proactive engagement in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, thereby helping to develop modern digital infrastructure meeting businesses' digital transformation needs. The application of 5G is also useful for attracting new-generation FDI and projects that use high and green technology, he emphasised. Tâm asked Viettel, in addition to building 5G infrastructure, to coordinate with local enterprises to carry out digital transformation solutions and begin applying 5G technology in their operations. He also told Bắc Ninh authorities to create the conditions necessary for Viettel to develop 5G infrastructure at local

industrial parks and promote digital transformation, helping turn the province into the capital of innovation in the northern region. Vice Chairman of the provincial People's Committee Vương Quốc Tuấn said Yên Phong 1 is the first industrial park in Việt Nam where the 5G network has become available, adding that the application of 5G will help accelerate the production process and attract more investment to the park and Bắc Ninh as a whole.

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Health Insurance Expected to Cover 91.58 Percent of Population

Up to 91.58 per cent of the national population is expected to join health insurance plans this year, according to the Vietnam Social Security (VSS). The sector also aims to raise the rates of labourers participating in social insurance from 32.7 per cent to 35.2 per cent, and unemployment insurance from 27 per cent to 28.5 per cent. To reach those goals, administrative reform and information-technology application will continue, as well as artificial intelligence to better serve people and businesses. It will also revamp the communications work to raise public awareness of social insurance, while intensifying inspections over social and health insurance payment of enterprises. At a meeting of the Việt Nam National Committee on Ageing (VNCA) on January 15, VSS Deputy General Director Trần Đình Liệu said Việt Nam aimed to provide social insurance coverage for all elderly people nationwide by 2021. According to a report of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Việt Nam had nearly 13 million elderly people (aged 60 and above) in 2020, accounting for 12 per cent of the population, with about 1.98 million aged over 80, and approximately 7.7 million elderly people living in rural areas.

The State budget spent about VNĐ18 trillion (US\$779.69 million) implementing social assistance policies for the elderly in the community. More than 1.8 million elderly people received monthly allowances, over 1.4 million enjoyed allowances as national contributors, and 3.1 million are enjoying pensions and social insurance benefits. In addition, 12.1 million senior citizens currently have health insurance cards. The VNCA said it appreciated efforts made by the Vietnam Association of the Elderly (VAE) and its local chapters in creating conditions for the elderly to participate in cultural, musical and sports activities, while urging for more active support from all-level Party committees and authorities in the work. At the meeting, VNCA members agreed that in the future ministries, sectors and localities should focus on implementing policies related to the elderly in close association with multidimensional poverty elimination policies.

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City Strengthens HIV Prevention Efforts, Hopes to End Transmission by 2030

HCM City will continue to strengthen HIV preventive efforts with tests for early detection and treatment among high-risk groups to help achieve the national goal of eradicating the spread of the disease by 2030. It is also providing comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention services, especially to vulnerable and high-risk groups. One other goal of the city's programme on HIV/AIDS prevention is to prevent discrimination against people with HIV. The city identified its first HIV patient in 1990, and monitored her health regularly since and treated her with antiretroviral (ARV) drugs. Now 60, the unidentified woman remains relatively healthy and is being treated at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases. Citing her example, doctors point out that if people with HIV are diagnosed and treated early, and they comply with the treatment regime, they could lead a long life. Nguyễn Hữu Hưng, deputy head of the city Department of Health, said since the first case was detected, the city had spent 30 years fighting the epidemic.

In 1990-2000 the city strengthened communication to educate and improve public awareness of protection against HIV/AIDS and creating prevention models. As a result, the rate of transmission among injecting drug users fell from 42.3 per cent in 1995 to 18.6 per cent in 1998. In 2000-10 HIV transmission prevention models were expanded throughout the city with ARV therapy. The city also has programmes for prevention of mother-to-child transmission to help significantly reduce transmission. In 2010-20 the city controlled the epidemic through a number of strategies such as immediate treatment after testing positive, breakthrough in policies and technologies for HIV tests and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). A 24-year-old gay man in Thủ Đức District is availing PrEP to prevent the risk of HIV transmission, and said he felt assured. The city has more than 30 public and private facilities under the programme. It has achieved the 90-90-90 goal, meaning 90 per cent of those living with HIV know their status, 90 per cent are receiving treatment and 90 per cent on treatment have viral suppression which stops further transmission. It has 145 facilities for HIV counselling and testing, with 24 of them providing methadone treatment to nearly 5,400 patients.

Challenges

However, speaking at a conference held last week to review 30 years of HIV/AIDS prevention, Hưng said the city unexpectedly had nearly 5,500 people living undetected with HIV in the community, leading to a high risk of transmission. Besides, an increase in the number of men who have sex with men raises the risk of outbreaks, and risk groups are changing, becoming difficult to access and demand high confidentiality, and this is also a big challenge, according to Hưng. Doctors also warn about the high risk of HIV transmission among male adolescents who have sex with men. Phạm Thị Lua, a social worker at Children's Hospital 1, cited the case of a 15-year-old boy who was found to have HIV while being treated for genital warts. He

had sex with an older man who rents a room near his house. Dr Dư Tuấn Quy, acting head of the hospital's infectious and neurological diseases department, said four or five 14- and 15-year-olds last year came to the department for HIV treatment after having sex with men. "It is alarming," he said. Moreover, many boys were sexually abused and did not even know their infection status, he lamented.

When they did know their status, they did not dare tell their parents, and this was further cause for worry, he said. His department is treating 57 HIV patient who are more than 15 and 226 others aged just 10-15, and they could easily spread it if they have unsafe sex, according to the doctor. At these ages psychological and biological changes occur to people, and, compared to people of other ages, are more sensitive and rebellious. So, when they know they are infected with HIV, they often fall into a negative mood and live irresponsibly. Many say their parents died of HIV and so they themselves have no hope of living, become depressed, act indiscriminately like having unprotected sex, and transmit it to their partners. He said the family should play an important role in helping detect HIV infection in adolescents by paying attention to symptoms of health problems and taking them for examination. In the unfortunate case that their child is infected with HIV, parents need to be calm, accompany their children for treatment as prescribed by the doctor and avoid creating stress thus resulting in the patient stopping treatment, he said. According to Ministry of Health statistics, the number of people with HIV in the ages of 15-16 tripled in 2019 from 2011.

Quy said the Children's Hospital 1 had collaborated with the Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention and others to organise training courses in counselling for HIV prevention and in psychological and biological issues for adolescents with HIV. It also worked with vocational training schools to train adolescents with HIV. Assoc Prof Dr Phạm Đức Mạnh, deputy head of the Việt Nam Administration of HIV/AIDS Control, said the city was a "bright spot" in the country in mobilising the political system and society in HIV/ AIDS prevention and control. It had carried out prevention and fighting efforts well and pioneered initiatives in treatment and prevention, he said. It had also obtained and used donations effectively, he said. But with its high population density, the city still faced many challenges like the increase in HIV/AIDS infections in the MSM community and the high rate of new incidence each year compared to other localities in the country, he warned. Therefore, it should have the right strategies for each risk group and continue to solicit social resources, especially people with HIV, to persuade infected people to go for treatment and high-risk groups to avail of preventive services.

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Public Investment to Focus on Key Projects to Create Impetus for Economic Growth

Public investment will focus on key national projects with important roles in enhancing regional links and creating new drivers and room for economic growth, Minister of Planning and Investment Nguyễn Chí Dũng has said. Last year saw the highest public investment disbursement rate in 2016-20 as the Government identified public investment as a major driver for growth in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Planning and Investment estimated the public investment disbursement rate would reach more than 90 per cent of the plan as of the end January 31 (the deadline for disbursement of 2020 public investment), compared to 73.3 per cent of 2017, 66.8 per cent of 2018 and 67.46 per cent of 2019. There were 17 ministries, central-level agencies and 17 localities with disbursement rates of more than 80 per cent as of December 31, 2020. However, 13 ministries and central-level agencies and five localities had disbursement rates below 60 per cent. According to Nguyễn Mạnh Quyền, Deputy Chairman of Hà Nội People's Committee, the capital city disbursed about VNĐ40.7 trillion worth of public investment or 93 per cent of the plan.

HCM City disbursed VNĐ31.5 trillion of public investment in 2020, 1.7 times higher than 2019, Lê Thị Huỳnh Mai, Director of the municipal Department of Planning and Investment, said. These figures showed that never before was public investment disbursement as quick and strong as in 2020, said Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment Trần Quốc Phương. "It is public investment that drove GDP growth in 2020," he said. Phương pointed out that total social investment accounted for 34 per cent of GDP and public investment 25 per cent of the total social investment, meaning public investment made up about 6-7 per cent of GDP. "Taking into account the impacts of public investment, public investment plays a really important role in growth," Phương said. Despite this progress, speeding up the disbursement of public investment remains a priority in 2021. Phương said that the Law on Public Investment No 39/2019/QH14 which took effect from the beginning of this year would help tighten management of the entire process of public investment. In addition, the decentralisation of management would also be enhanced together with increasing accountabilities for higher efficiency of public investment. With the new regulations, plans for public investment would also be more accurate and practical, Phương said. Sums which were failed to be disbursed would be deducted from the medium-term public investment plan, Phương said. There were always differences between plans and real implementation but "don't let the gap be too big," Phương said. In 2021, the ministry will regularly update about the progress of public investment disbursement to give a timely push to the progress, he added.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/21/2021

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Universities Offer Free Online Courses for Everyone

Many universities in Việt Nam are developing free massive open online courses (MOOCs) in an aim to contribute to a learning society available to everyone in the community. HCM City Open University, for instance, last weekend launched Việt Nam's massive open online courses platform, called VMOOC, with more than 40 free courses in fields such as business administration, finance-banking, law, foreign languages and others. The university is co-operating with Hà Nội Open University to develop further VMOOCs. Dr Phan Thị Ngọc Thanh, director of the ELearning Center at HCMC Open University, said that courses last for four to six weeks and are open to anyone. Course participants only need a computer with an internet connection, or a smartphone or other mobile devices, to take part in these courses anywhere and at any time. Integrated lessons between theory and practice are offered. The courses are based on standards from the US Quality Matters, a leading global organisation promoting quality assurance in online and innovative digital teaching and learning environments.

Prof Nguyễn Minh Hà, rector of HCM City Open University, said: "E-learning is being strongly developed in the country. This development is the inevitable trend of the 4.0 technology revolution era." "Online training is gradually asserting the importance of meeting people's learning needs anywhere and at any time," Hà added. "VMOOCs will provide free online courses to spread knowledge to the community," he said. VMOOC is a digital platform that meets goals of the country's project "Developing Digitalized Vietnamese Knowledge Systems" which has been carried out since 2018. The aim is to build a data foundation and disseminate knowledge in socio-economic fields and science and technology to create conditions for the community to contribute, share and exploit, he added. Deputy Minister of Education and Training Nguyễn Văn Phúc said: "The development of MOOCs around the world is the premise and the driving force for Vietnam to move towards. Việt Nam's educational development now and in future cannot be separated from the application of technology in the implementation process."

Besides traditionally training programs, the ministry welcomes massive open online training models like VMOOCs because they contribute to realising the Party and State's policy to reform the open education system, creating learning conditions for everyone in the country," Phúc added. He asked other universities in the country to develop VMOOCs to diversify content and programmes so that all people have an opportunity to access higher education. Vũ Thị Tú Anh, deputy director-general of the Continuing Education Department under the Ministry of Education and Training, said: "We have to improve people's knowledge and ensure educational opportunities for everyone." Universities should have the responsibility to develop open materials to help everyone have access to higher education as other countries do, Anh said. "Studying is not only done to obtain a degree, but improve knowledge and skills for working. It is a daily living need. Each Vietnamese person should take advantage of this open material source," she added. VMOOCs help ensure that no one is left

behind in the country, she added. Anh said the ministry was setting up a legal framework to recognise lifelong learning. Trương Tiến Tùng, rector of Hà Nội Open University, said: "We will continue to co-operate with other universities toward the goal of developing an open educational ecosystem contributing to Việt Nam's learning society." In Southeast Asia, Singapore and Malaysia developed an open education system very early. As a result, Malaysia increased the number of people with access to higher education from 10 per cent in 2010 to 33 per cent in 2018. Malaysia's goal is to increase the rate to 50 per cent by 2030.

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E-Commerce to Continue Growing This Year

The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) plans to accelerate the implementation of the national e-commerce development master plan of 2021-25 to keep up with the growth of digital trading activities. Head of the MoIT's E-Commerce and Digital Economy Department Đặng Hoàng Hải said: "By 2020, 53 per cent of the population participated in online shopping." "Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, local e-commerce revenue grew 18 per cent, reaching US\$11.8 billion, accounting for 5.5 per cent of total retail sales, consumer goods and services nationwide," he added. The MoIT representative said with the support of electronic payments it would focus on developing e-commerce infrastructure, building and perfecting institutions and legal framework for e-commerce, creating a transparent and favourable legal environment for businesses and consumers in Việt Nam. He said Việt Nam was considered one of the fastest-growing e-commerce markets in Southeast Asia, adding that with a population of more than 97 million people and a big proportion of young people with high internet access, Việt Nam's e-commerce market will continue to grow.

According to industry insiders, e-commerce will continue to grow strongly in 2021 and create new impetus for economic growth, creating an opportunity for Vietnamese businesses to build new business strategies and approach modern distribution channels to expand markets and recover from the pandemic. Hà Nội, as one of the two leading cities in e-commerce development, plans to have online retail sales increase by 20 per cent by 2025 when 55 per cent of people are hoped to participate in online shopping and 50 per cent of small and medium-sized enterprises would do business on e-commerce floors. Deputy director of the city's Department of Industry and Trade Trần Thị Phương Lan said: "The department continues to open seminars, training courses on e-commerce, including many activities in co-ordination with big digital platforms such as Google, Alibaba and Amazon for local businesses to increase their business results in the online environment." Director of Co.opmart Hà Nội supermarket Nguyễn Thị Kim Dung said her supermarket would develop an e-commerce website combining multi-channel sales this year.

At the same time, the MoIT's E-Commerce and Digital Economy Department would implement the GoOnline programme in 2021 to accompany local businesses. He said the programme would include telecommunications, technology, and e-commerce systems, manufacturers, traders and individuals nationwide. According to the ministry, it will strengthen co-ordination, inspection, examination and violation handling in e-commerce, as well as step-up training for State management officials and owners of e-commerce exchanges on protected trademarks to solve disputes and complaints. This will also help detect counterfeit products, goods of unknown origin and goods infringing intellectual property rights. Last year, the MoIT applied blockchain technology to trace the origin of goods for some agricultural products to improve the brand and promote exports of agricultural products to developed countries as the EU-Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) was ratified. The ministry also built a total solution for logistics service exchanges between logistics businesses and shippers to facilitate e-commerce delivery services and supported businesses to apply technology in digital transformation. Together with the national master plan, the MoIT will submit to the Government an amended decree on e-commerce to enhance the integration, connection and sharing of data between it and cities and provinces through the National Public Service Portal. The MoIT will develop more systems to serve the ministry's e-government and training programmes for managers and specialised programmes for staff in e-commerce as well as short-term training courses on e-commerce for businesses. The ministry announced Việt Nam was of the three nations with the highest growth rate of the retail market in Southeast together with Indonesia and the Philippines.

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Infectious Diseases Under Control Thanks to Expanded Immunisation Programme

The expanded immunisation programme has helped Việt Nam control many infectious diseases such as wild polio, measles, rubella and diphtheria. No cases of wild polio were reported in 2020. This is the 20th year Việt Nam has successfully eradicated polio and also the 15th year of neonatal tetanus elimination, according to Associate Professor Dương Thị Hồng, deputy director of National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology. The number of measles cases in 11 months of 2020 was 1,136, down sharply compared to 14,156 cases in 2019, while there were only 46 rubella cases. Notably, in the first months of 2020, the country recorded 212 cases of diphtheria and five deaths. Diphtheria outbreaks mostly occurred in four provinces in the Central Highlands and Quảng Trị Province. Ninety-four per cent of diphtheria cases were in children over five years old and adults.

To deal with such situation, the Ministry of Health launched a vaccination programme against diphtheria and a five-in-one combination vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, hepatitis B and Haemophilus influenza type B for all people in four provinces of the Central Highlands. This helped control the diphtheria epidemic and no new cases had been recorded for more than a month, Hồng said at a recent workshop on expanded immunisation. From 2018 to 2020, cities and provinces had been equipped with specialised freezers with financial support from the Government and GAVI-The Vaccine Alliance to preserve vaccines, said Đặng Thị Thanh Huyền, deputy head of the National Expanded Immunisation Office. In 2021, the National Expanded Immunisation Programme would promote activities to maintain the full vaccination rate for children under one-year-old to more than 95 per cent nationwide, she said. It was expected that about 1 million children aged 1-5 years old in high-risk areas would be vaccinated against measles-rubella in 2021. More than 90 per cent of districts nationwide would be equipped with new specialised freezers to ensure the quality of vaccine preservation in expanded vaccination programme.

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HCM City Renews Agreement on Environmental Education Activities at Schools

The Department of Natural Resources and Environment and the Department of Education and Training in HCM City on Thursday signed a cooperation agreement on environmental education and communications for the 2021-2025 period. It is a continuation of the implementation of the five-year cooperation since 2016. Environmental awareness has been significantly enhanced among students, with many initiatives launched at schools in the past few years, said Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mỹ, deputy director of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. The two departments have also developed communication materials and videos on the 'green schools' model that has been implemented since 2018, Mỹ said. The model outlines activities on environmental awareness and protection at schools, such as tree planting, collection of recyclable materials separated at the source, and water and electricity savings. A wide range of initiatives has been implemented at all schools to encourage young people to engage in environmental protection. Dương Trí Dũng, deputy director of the city's Department of Education and Training, said that environmental education and communications should be carried out frequently at schools to increase awareness among teachers, students and staff. Individual schools should also identify creative and sustainable solutions to enhance environmental education and communications, he added. The two departments will co-organise contests and activities to introduce more initiatives to all schools in the city, he said. Environmental education is part of the curriculum as well as extracurricular programmes in all public schools, from nursery to high school levels, in the city.

South Asia

INDIA: Vi Business & Fortinet Collaborate to Launch Managed Security Services

Vi Business, the enterprise arm of Vodafone Idea Ltd. (VIL) announces the launch of Managed Security Service and has collaborated with Fortinet, a global leader in broad, integrated and automated cybersecurity solutions, as the technology cornerstone for the offering. Vodafone Idea's Managed Security Service (MSS) delivers Next-Generation Firewalls with advanced security features offering the first line of defence for any cyberattack, thus ensuring that enterprise network is protected. MSS will provide the power that today's networks require, built on Fortinet's innovative security processing units (SPUs) and FortiOS operating system. The MSS includes both network-based firewalling with intrusion protection detection features and secure remote user access to enable remote workers to connect to their corporate network safely and securely through a VPN. This security-driven networking approach powered by Fortinet enables organisations to scale their network infrastructures without compromising security, which provides effective protection for today's environments. By delivering the industry's highest performance, best of breed security, the service will enable the most demanding digital innovation as well as meet the vast capacity and performance demands of critical business operations, both now as well as a future-proof investment. In addition, the deployment is simplified as customers can leverage the security features of the Fortinet FortiGate next-generation firewalls and is offered on an "as-a-service" model. This is vital to enterprises since they can focus on their business while trusting Vi business to deliver and manage their network security.

Commenting on the launch, Anil Philip, EVP- Products, Solutions and Partnerships, Vodafone Idea said, "Vi Business is a trusted connectivity partner for the enterprise. Acknowledging this confidence, we are proud to extend support with infrastructure security services that are closely associated with connectivity requirements. Our partnership with Fortinet will enable us to provide secure connectivity to our enterprise customers to address their need for managed and safe security solutions." Rajesh Maurya, Regional Vice President, India & SAARC, Fortinet added "The sophistication of today's threat landscape, coupled with the speed at which user traffic is increasing, requires organizations adopt advanced protection. With our integrated security platform, MSSPs and telecom service providers, such as Vodafone Idea, benefit from high-performance technology and an easy to manage security solution that provides comprehensive protection for the extended enterprise." MSS is offered 'as a service' and provides OPEX based pricing, thereby eliminating

the need for upfront investment by the customer. It provides the flexibility to choose products and services as per the needs. Enterprise customers also get access to an online experience portal showcasing an analytical and detailed view on the security posture and threat analytics in their network.

From <http://egov.eletsonline.com> 01/03/2021

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India-Sri Lanka Educational Institutions Now Connected Through High Speed Internet

To boost the academic collaborations between India and Sri Lanka, a gigabit connectivity between the National Knowledge Network of India and LEARN network of Sri Lanka has been set up in Colombo. On his official visit to Sri Lanka, Union Minister for Law and Justice and Electronics and IT Ravi Shankar Prasad inaugurated the connectivity. Sri Lankan Minister for Telecommunications and Digital Infrastructure Harin Fernando was also present on this occasion. After the launch from the headquarters of the Ministry of Telecommunications and Digital Infrastructure, Colombo, the Minister also held a video conference with officers of Ministry of Electronics and IT, Government of India present in Delhi and other connected educational institutions of India and Sri Lanka. Both the countries have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for enhancing cooperation between India and Sri Lanka in the IT sector, cyber security and e-governance. Prasad also inaugurated the use of eOffice software developed by National Informatics Center (NIC) by the Government of Sri Lanka.

From <http://www.egovonline.net> 01/08/2021

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Aurangabad Smart City Flags Off Bus Service to Shendra & Karmad

Aurangabad Smart City flags off bus service to Shendra & Karmad In an effort to improve public transport connectivity, Aurangabad Smart City Development Corporation Ltd extended the smart city bus services to Shendra and Karmad and flagged off the bus service on January 11. The decision will aid in improving connectivity with AURIC city that is India's first planned greenfield smart industrial city. The AURIC city project is a part of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor project that is being planned to sprawl over 10,000 acres of land. According to the city corporation, the project involves a total of 50 smart city buses that are likely to run on 20 routes. Of the 20 routes nine are within the city. However, places like railway station, Harsul T-point via Government Engineering College, Sutgirmi Chowk, Pundaliknagar and Cidco are included in the newer routes.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/12/2021

HERE Releases 3D City Models for Industries to Build Reality-based Applications and Simulations

HERE Technologies, the leading location data and technology platform, today unveiled high-fidelity, 3D models of 75 city centres around the world to give software developers the geospatial data needed to build real-world visualizations of cities. With HERE Premier 3D Cities, last-mile delivery drivers can navigate dense cities with maps that highlight precise building dimensions and entry points along their delivery routes. The entertainment industry gets the building blocks for virtual site visits and seamless computer-generated imagery integration. Telecommunications companies can optimize their buildouts of 5G networks in 3D and urban planners and emergency responders can build digital twins for better land use analysis and disaster readiness simulations. HERE Premier 3D Cities contain rich data layers and attributes that are aligned to physical geometry and terrain. Each structure is indexed, addressable, and accurate in terms of physical location, volume size, elevation and façade color. Currently, the Audi A8 luxury sedan's modular infotainment platform (MIB2+) integrates HERE 3D city models, providing drivers with the latest navigation user interface and lane-level guidance experiences.

“With the enterprise developer in mind, HERE has captured, indexed and mapped the world’s major road networks and urban centres in 3D,” said Jørgen Behrens, Senior Vice President and Chief Product Officer at HERE Technologies. “We’re excited to see how these unique 3D city models open up a world of possibilities and value for businesses. They are the building blocks to create accurate, sub-meter augmented reality applications that are transforming supply chains, transportation and mobility networks, and overall consumer experiences.” The indexed and addressable structures within HERE Premier 3D Cities allow developers to search and highlight individual buildings, attach additional metadata to the structures, and apply advanced rendering techniques including CGI applications. HERE Premier 3D Cities are available in Cesium/OGC 3D Tiles to support seamless integration. Each kilometre of data is stored in small-sized tiles for efficient streaming and rendering. Sample datasets of London, Berlin and Munich are currently available on AWS Data Exchange. HERE has mapped 196 countries and collects more than 28 terabytes of terrestrial LiDAR data every day. HERE Premier 3D Cities are created with multiple sources – including LiDAR, optical and satellite imagery – and decades of cartographic expertise and AI/Machine Learning applications the company has developed to deliver industry-leading location-based services to enterprises globally. To find out more about HERE Premier 3D Cities.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/12/2021

New Delhi Railway Station to See Transit-oriented Development

Redevelopment of the New Delhi Railway Station will be done in accordance with transit-oriented development (TOD) policy, said Lieutenant Governor (LG) of Delhi, Anil Baijal, on January 18, while chairing the second meeting of the apex committee to “oversee and facilitate” the project. Delhi LG Anil BaijalAs per the officials, TOD is a type of urban development that maximizes the amount of residential, business and leisure space within walking distance of public transport. During the meeting, the LG also encouraged the use of recycled water for non-potable purposes. Further, he advised the formation of coordination committees to ensure better implementation. For redeveloping the New Delhi Railway Station, Rail Land Development Authority (RLDA) which has taken up the charge has invited bids from private players. The New Delhi Railway Station is the largest and the second busiest station in the country that caters to approximately 4,50,000 passengers in a day or about 160-170 million passengers in a year. As per the officials, the redevelopment work is being carried out on public-private partnership (PPP) mode by RLDA while following the TOD policy. With the redevelopment work, the New Delhi Railway Station will get a facelift that will enhance the overall passenger experience and improve infrastructure and modern amenities. As per the redevelopment plan, the station will get dome-shaped terminal buildings with two arrival and two departure areas at the concourse. The plan also includes provisions for two multimodal transport hubs (MMTH) on either side of the station along with a pedestrian walkway with high street shopping, spaces for offices and other commercial activities.

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Importance of Press Release in Digital Marketing

Press release has been rapidly changing with time. Amazingly, its importance in digital marketing is increasing. Press releases are mainly used by firms to spread awareness about their brand or new product. If you are wondering whether press releases have an importance in digital marketing then you are thinking right! You must have heard about digital PR while learning some tips about digital marketing. Surprisingly, this is what press release is all about! Digital PR is highly essential for your business as it spreads awareness globally about your brand, products or services. We are sure that you are well aware how digital marketing strategies help you generate leads and efficiently increase conversions. But it is also vital of the business to focus on other marketing strategies that boost conversions and generate leads. Therefore, to achieve digital marketing goals, effective strategies of Public Relations should be implemented. The best part about press releases is that it even allows you to interact with your target audience by spreading awareness about new launches. So are you ready to know some incredible benefits of press release in

digital marketing? Well, let's begin! As discussed earlier, press release offer incredible benefits for digital marketing strategies. This ensures that firms market their products and their brand more efficiently and interact with their target audience. Therefore, some important elements that we will highlight are as follows:

Press releases help digital marketers to find out new opportunities by exposing their product and brand to the target audience. It helps them to get new ideas for marketing campaigns to spread more awareness about their business. Creating landing pages is not the only solution to generate more leads towards your business. As the competition is fierce in the digital world, it is vital for you to build a strong connection and deeply engage your target audience about your brand and product. You definitely would want to increase the reach of your site. Well, this is also ensure by press releases. They help to increase more traffic to your side and to generate more leads. This is because people are more influenced by the print media and all the new stories. So pulling a highly engaging press release will encourage people to search about your web and know about your business; hence increasing traffic and generating leads. The increase your brand visibility a highly engaging press release will attract the journalists towards your brand. They will be encourages to take more media converge of your business. This will even spread more awareness about your existence to the masses and the prospects that you would want to cater to. Most importantly, press release even helps you to build your business and brand as high authority. This increases the credibility of your brand that is always beneficial to boost the conversion rate. These major benefits can be ensured by press release distribution service. So if you want to boost the image of your brand then make sure you hire the best press release distribution service for your business.

From <https://www.siliconindia.com> 01/24/2021

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SRI LANKA: Telecom & Mobitel Join Forces Making History in National Connectivity

Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) and SLT Mobitel unveiled their unified brand identity on January 1, 2021 at SLT Headquarters forming a formidable force creating a lasting legacy as the national Information and Communications Technology (ICT) solutions leader. The historic unification of products and services were symbolically launched at the event that took place with the participation of Rohan Fernando, Chairman, Sri Lanka Telecom Group; Lalith Seneviratne, Group Chief Executive Officer, Sri Lanka Telecom; Kiththi Perera, Chief Executive Officer, Sri Lanka Telecom; Chandika Vitharana, Acting CEO, SLT Mobitel and other key officials of the Sri Lanka Telecom Group. This historic unification will be an impetus to the Government's effort to create a technology driven economy and a technology-based society, with SLT-MOBITEL contributing immensely towards the digitalization of Sri Lanka. For over 163 years Sri Lanka Telecom PLC has solved the country's need for connectivity, operating on

Fixed, Mobile and Other operational segments, with SLT recognized as the fixed line powerhouse brand and Mobitel the benchmark for mobile services. Together, SLT and Mobitel strengthen the country's ICT infrastructure, empowering people and transforming businesses with digitalisation. "Today's brand unification brings Sri Lanka Telecom and Mobitel products and services under a single brand. The new brand identity will strengthen the brand equity of SLT-MOBITEL, synergizing the goodwill gained by both to one strong brand with digitalization at its core. A brand that consumers readily recognize, trust and accept." Rohan Fernando, Chairman, Sri Lanka Telecom Group stated. The new brand identity brings the brands together in a setting that is instantly recognizable to the consumer and portrays the unified relationship. The change in the logo is underpinned by a companywide realignment and unification of service, truly representative of SLT. SLT-MOBITEL enables the fulfilment of customer aspirations, be it in life or in work, making for greater efficiency, ease and limitless opportunities.

Lalith Seneviratne, Group Chief Executive Officer, Sri Lanka Telecom spoke on the impact of the brand unification on consumers. "At SLT Group we no longer think of ourselves as a connectivity partner but as a lifestyle company impacting people's lifestyles greatly. The two anchor companies in the group, SLT and Mobitel hold an important position to support the foundation of the Group. Together with other subsidiaries they provide Fixed-Line Services, Mobile Communications, Broadband Service, Internet TV, and Health Services Access among others. The companies will now further enhance collaboration under one brand and provide customer-first innovative services as the industry leader in providing a great customer experience." Through Sri Lanka Telecom, SLT-MOBITEL provides telecom networks and ICT services to organisations of all proportions across all economic sectors, other telecommunications operators and internet service providers (ISPs), public sector institutions, and domestic customers. These efforts are supplemented by an array of technologies including optical fibre, ADSL2+, VDSL2, carrier-grade Wi-Fi, and both fixed and mobile 4G LTE technologies. The Company also uses its multiple international submarine cable networks to offer state-of-the-art global services, securing its position as a key global player in the telecom industry. "From today, all of our customers will know us as one SLT-MOBITEL family and will enjoy all of our services together. All of us at SLT will be bound together under our common brand identity as we take helm as the primary telecommunication services provider to the nation. We look forward to the synergized brand value this gives us, as we work with Mobitel to expand our 4G, 5G and wireless broadband offering under a unified brand umbrella, creating value for the customers and the company." Kiththi Perera, Chief Executive Officer, Sri Lanka Telecom said, speaking on the launch of the new digital-centric identity.

Via Mobitel, SLT-MOBITEL offers mobile ICT services including mobile telephony, high-speed broadband, enterprise solutions, international services, and a range of value-added services with national coverage. As the fastest 4.5G/4G+ mobile

network in Sri Lanka, Mobitel offers an unparalleled broadband network recognised by Ookla Speedtest Awards as the fastest mobile network in Sri Lanka. Mobitel has innovated market breakthrough products such as Master and Sri Flix for the local market, having carried out the biggest broadband expansion carried out in 2019 with over US\$ 100 million investments. The first operator in South Asia to trial 5G over a mobile network, Mobitel is in the forefront of digital technology in Sri Lanka gearing up the country for the deployment of 5G. Chandika Vitharana, Acting Chief Executive Officer, SLT Mobitel commented on the synergy from the brand unification. “SLT Mobitel is the only truly Sri Lankan mobile services provider and is the frontrunner in digital mobile technology. SLT and Mobitel joining forces signals to the consumers the strength of our offering and our undisputed leadership in telecommunication services in Sri Lanka.

The future for our customers looks bright, as our connection brings us all together.” Sri Lanka Telecom PLC is the national Information and Communications Technology (ICT) solutions provider and the leading broadband and backbone infrastructure services provider in Sri Lanka for over 163 years. SLT enables opportunities that empower Sri Lankans and elevates the country’s standing in the global arena. SLT’s transformation into a digital service provider has seen the Company move beyond telecommunications services to provide a variety of services and solutions that cater to a digital lifestyle. Mobitel, the mobile arm of SLT launched the First Commercial 4.5G/4G+ Mobile Network in South Asia in 2018 and was the first network in South Asia to successfully showcase the deployment of 5G over a Mobile Network by connecting a commercial Mobile smartphone to its 5G network exceeding speeds of 1.55Gbps. Mobitel has made great strides in recent years to expand its influence in NB-IoT, Automation, Artificial Intelligence and Critical Communication technologies and solutions and has been adjudged as the Fastest 4G-LTE network in Sri Lanka for two consecutive years by Ookla, the global leader in internet speed and testing applications.

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The Differences Between Big Data, Data Science and Data Analytics – and Why It Matters to Your Business

As today’s software development practices form their foundations on the cloud through cloud support services, digital applications are more interconnected than ever before. If your IT agency is a dedicated AWS partner (or partnered with any other leading provider, for that matter) this implies a relationship with an entity apart from your development team. This is all well and good, but have you thought about how these facets need to come together for leveraging business outcomes? A sustainable software development lifecycle is one such component, but understanding your customers, employees and various other stakeholders is a whole

other area of untapped potential. Once again, the mix between software and the cloud comes into play. While your applications reach the masses, data is fed from every interaction, and into your databases that are located in the back-end. This is where the potential lies; by understanding this data better, your business will be on its way to enhancing everything from customer journeys to better products. However, extracting insights from your data is a fairly complex undertaking – even for the simplest of data repositories. But this hasn't deterred today's businesses from venturing into data territory, for the potential that lies within is one that is bound to bring true value and competitiveness.

The many fields of studying data have long since been increasing in popularity, but many fundamental aspects are still misconceived by the typical business owner. Big data, data science and data analytics are three terms that are commonly used, but since their use cases overlap, this leaves many confused. Here, we outline the definitions of each, with the aim of individually understanding each component – and how it falls into the bigger picture pertaining to business data. If you own a digital application/product which collects data with every interaction a user makes, you've got big data on your hands already. What really distinguishes big data from its otherwise 'data' counterpart is the fact that big data is too overwhelming to be processed by basic analytics tools. On top of that, increasing data entries may also render databases saturated – another clear sign of classic big data. As data is gathered with even the smallest interactions, big data can gradually pile up, thereby creating vast amounts of raw and unstructured data repositories. Extracting insights from raw data of this calibre via rudimentary tools and expertise can only do so much; advanced competencies are required so that numbers can be crunched to precisely address the challenges your business may be facing. Ultimately, big data is always a requisite for any form of data-related study; it all boils down to how effective your strategy is for extracting insights from such repositories. When you have pools of big data that are already replete with figures, entries and everything else in between, you have two major ways to bring the value that all this data holds, to the forefront. Data science is one of them. By incorporating mathematical equations, programming expertise or a combination of the two, existing data can be processed to reveal trends and insights otherwise not observed by current business strategies.

One of the biggest advantages that data science offers to businesses is the ability to measure, change and repeat. An iterative process of this nature is an effective solution in the wake of aggressive business competition, especially since technology and consumer trends are always changing. On a more mainstream and general level, data science is the base for anything that is involved with machine learning, as identifying patterns from existing data sets is crucial for algorithms to learn and understand, for enhancing product outputs. If your business has burning questions that have been left unanswered, digging deeper into your data to address the same can give you a sense of direction of what to do next, depending on what the numbers tell you. This is a prime example of data analytics, and is also one of the solutions

you can adopt for making better sense of your big data. Modern Business Intelligence solutions focus on offering advanced data analytics capabilities, from intricate visualizations to customizations at a granular level. On the whole, data analytics can also focus on obtaining data based on a question that businesses need a response to, with processing and reporting also following suit in the same way. This can be a highly targeted strategy to resolve chronic or persisting business problems – something which the industry of software development in Sri Lanka is also striving to do, through its data-centric digital services. With cloud-based Business Intelligence involving easy setup with little to no IT intervention, data analytics has become more accessible. No matter what you specialize in and which department you hail from, access hosted Business Intelligence by filtering preferences to make your data work for you – and not the other way around.

As companies get busy in understanding loopholes and problems that can be fixed through data-backed decisions, identifying and securing the very source(s) of data commonly falls by the wayside. This can be detrimental for businesses, as poor data can reveal invalid insights, thereby leading to equally faulty business decisions. Before you delve into data science or data analytics, ensure that your data is arriving from valid sources, and is well secured – with only authorized individuals being allowed to access it. Routine validation is also necessary, as even the smallest data items can lead to erroneous reporting. With millions reliant on the modern digital landscape, vast amounts of data are being generated during any given moment. Within these data masses lies immense value, as records can reveal trends and outcomes that would've otherwise never caught the attention of anyone who is involved with your brand or business. This is where big data, data science and data analytics come in. Understanding these three terms will give you the leverage you need to intelligently unveil insights that lie underneath otherwise raw data, for powerful decision making.

From <https://www.lankabusinessonline.com> 01/19/2021

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Health Ministry Joins Hands to Launch Facebook's Blood Donations Feature in Sri Lanka

In an effort to make it easier for people to donate blood, Facebook has launched the Blood Donations feature in Sri Lanka in partnership with the Ministry of Health's National Blood Transfusion Service (NBTS) supported by the Health Promotion Bureau (HPB). Till date, 24 blood cluster centers have been onboarded as part of the joint initiative. Globally, millions of lives depend on access to safe and sustainable blood supply. The COVID-19 pandemic has also changed how and where people donate blood. Whether it be for regular blood transfusions or emergencies like road accidents, complex surgeries or COVID-related complications, access to blood is

crucial to save lives. With this in mind, Facebook's Blood Donations feature has been created to connect interested donors to blood banks and help build a community of support. "The world is becoming increasingly connected due to social media," said Hon. Pavithra Wanniarachchi, the Minister of Health in Sri Lanka. "We look forward to working with Facebook and partners, to digitize and strengthen our healthcare system and make it easier for people to stay informed and connected while facilitating blood donations. We encourage anyone who is able and willing, to sign up and contribute to the wellbeing of all citizens in the country. We can save many lives with your concern and participation." By the power of connection and community, Facebook's Blood Donations feature has helped increase voluntary blood donations around the world. It gives people aged 18-55 the option to use Facebook to sign up to receive notifications from nearby blood banks, giving them the opportunity to reach out and donate.

A press briefing was organized to discuss the launch of Facebook's Blood Donations feature. Panelists included Oshada Senanayake, Director General of Telecommunication Regulatory Commission; Dr. G S K Dharmarathna, Deputy Director General of Health Services (Laboratory Services); and Dr. Palitha Karunapema, Director, HPB. "The National Blood Transfusion Service of Sri Lanka is driven by voluntary non-remunerated blood donors," said Dr. Lakshman Edirisinghe, Director of NBTs, who also attended the press briefing. "The Facebook Blood Donations feature enables direct communication with blood donors islandwide and this will be a valuable asset to our service, especially during this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic." In Sri Lanka, Facebook has partnered with the Health Promotion Bureau and other local organizations to ensure that people have access to credible health information online. This will also help debunk misinformation, such as wrong cures. With the support of HPB, Facebook has trained health professionals on the use of social media for health communications. Facebook also works closely with the National Institute of Mental Health to raise awareness on mental health and wellbeing using digital platforms. "Facebook hopes to build communities that support each other in times of need," said Yasas Vishuddhi Abeywickrama, Policy Programs Manager for Sri Lanka at Facebook. "Because of the global pandemic, more people are using digital platforms to create health awareness and form support systems. We are happy to work with the government and partners to make it easier to donate and ensure that more people have access to safe and sustainable blood supply." Over 85 million Facebook users globally have signed up through the Blood Donations feature to receive notifications from nearby blood banks. This feature is now available in 28 countries, including Sri Lanka.

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Sri Lanka Can Achieve a Greener and More Prosperous Future

Farmers, hoteliers and homestay owners, fishers, producers of the famous Kanthale milk curd, Ayurveda healers, fruit growers, developers, safari jeep drivers, local dwellers—all derive their livelihoods from shared natural resources offered by the Hurulu-Kaudualla-Kanthale (HKK) Landscape. Located in the North East of Sri Lanka and home to 650,000 people, the bountiful area stretches over the lower catchment of the Mahaweli River in Anuradapura, Pollonnaruwa, and Trincomallee Districts, and embodies over 2,500 years of cultural and natural heritage. As one of Sri Lanka's highest paddy, vegetable, and fruit-producing regions, the area contributes to the national economy and food security. The landscape is rich and diverse biologically, with 270 thousand hectares of famous protected areas and national parks. But the region has been under threat in the past few decades. Human population growth and degraded and fragmented habitats have pushed elephants and other animals into conflict with local dwellers; rain patterns are more erratic because of climate change; agrochemicals, plastic, and waste pollute the land, rivers, and the ocean. At the same time, traditional knowledge and land-use practices are lost and replaced with more commercial applications. In that context, Sri Lanka's Forest Department and Department of Wildlife Conservation, with support from the World Bank's Ecosystem Conservation and Management Project (ESCAMP) is seeking new approaches to manage its land and natural resources better.

Over the last two years, a group of scientists and practitioners led by ESCAMP has collaborated with local communities and businesses to restore forests and habitats, increase the productivity of rangelands, alleviate human-elephant conflict, mitigate pollution, and generate new livelihood opportunities for residents. This is no trivial task considering the multiple and often conflicting economic and political interests over land and its resources. But work is underway. A landscape management plan prepared by the group has identified key natural resources and ecosystem services provided by the landscape to the economy, outlined main threats to longer-term prospects, and identified main economic sectors and stakeholders that can work together. It advocates to imbed a more integrated decision making into Sri Lanka's government and institutions managing HKK landscape. A coordinating body, robust sectoral information, resolution of conflicting interests, and Government incentives to collaborate are being proposed for that. International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) and the Forest Department initiated a practical training on forest landscape restoration. Sri Lanka pledged to restore about 200,000 hectares of forest landscapes under the framework of the Bonn Convention and aims to increase the forest area to 31% of the island.

IUFRO contributed to the restoration goals by funding this training that equipped over 40 practitioners with knowledge and practices of restoration techniques last month. Just like pieces of a puzzle become a full picture, integrating economic activities – grazing and farming, hydropower generation, or nature-based tourism – within the ecological bounds of a watershed will help restore natural resources and generate additional socio-economic benefits. Countries like China, Ethiopia, Costa Rica,

Sweden, Peru, Thailand, Zambia, and others have demonstrated that such an integrated approach to land use works better for the environment and people. Rebuilding resilient and green economies in the wake of Covid-19 is challenging, especially at the initial stages. But Sri Lanka is well-positioned to put the pieces of the puzzle together and secure a more prosperous and safer future. This blog is part of a series of discussions and activities organized by the World Bank South Asia Environment, Natural Resources and Blue Economy team to inform a Green recovery in the region.

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Stax Says Sri Lanka Slow to Accept Remote-working, Advocates Wider Adoption

Stax Inc., a leading global management consulting firm, observes that delaying digitization during this pandemic era would present substantial drawbacks for Sri Lankan companies as they would lack the capacity to compete globally. By adopting digitization, Stax Inc. articulates that businesses would soon learn that customers are no longer confined to the geography of Sri Lanka and could thus improve their scope of clientele and operations. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, many prominent Sri Lankan companies are yet to enable systems and processes to empower digitalization in their operations. In order to do so, this paradigm shift would have to encompass internal and customer-facing processes, while instigating paperless concepts as a part of Sri Lanka's operating culture. This way, businesses will be able to increase efficiency while boosting their performance, productivity and profits. Observations by Stax Inc. also found that some organizations are wary to mandate remote working and digital processes due to the generation mix and bias at management level. To overcome this, education and effective training must become a key element with demonstratable results, as change also requires time. Digital signatures and documentation are still seldom used in Sri Lanka, whereas they are commonplace in developed markets such as the UK, by contributing to substantial savings in time, energy, emissions and efficiency. Elaborating Stax's learnings, Dr. Rasitha Wickramasinghe commented, "Many companies have inculcated a 'we have to get into the office' mindset. Stax has gone the other way and we are saying 'we can work from home'. Our default mode is to work from home, and whenever we need, we will come into office. Even according to pre-covid studies in developed markets, it is proven that people express satisfaction when remote working. Performance and productivity have been higher than when physically commuting daily to work. We should see this as an opportunity to enable remote working as our default mode." He further stated, "Globally, 80% of the work force are working remotely. It's ironic for Sri Lanka, where people spend anywhere between two to four hours commuting; that a huge loss of productivity along with the harm done to the

environment.”

The management consulting firm has initiated an effective remote working system for its Sri Lankan operation delivering tangible savings and efficiencies across all aspects of the business. The Company has consulted, developed and delivered a number of remote working solutions to its clientele and is encouraging Sri Lankan businesses and offering advice to adopt remote working as part of an empowering work culture. However, it is noted that this would not be a valid concept for every industry and some models would entail only a percentage of its staff to work remotely. Only few solutions can be made to work 100% remote and organisations would need to look at hybrid models. Remote working entails the creation of high-trust networks within organizations, and it will enable corporate Sri Lanka to ramp up efficiency and take on new global and local markets with motivated employees.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Launching Project to Develop ICT Skills of Population

An online learning portal to improve the digital skills of the population and develop their knowledge on the use of information and communication technologies has been created in Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan told Trend. According to the ministry, the ‘iktlab.edu.az’ online learning portal offers free online trainings (video lessons) on acquiring knowledge in the field of ICT and digital technologies, in which users can participate in an interactive form. “The portal will post lessons in various areas of ICT and digital technologies, prepared in the Azerbaijani language. The portal currently provides video information on the basics of digital skills, the use of Internet technologies and other similar topics,” said the ministry. Content related to digital marketing and programming courses will also be available soon. “The purpose of this project is to help the population, especially women, in obtaining knowledge and skills in all parts of the country on a free basis. Those who successfully complete the training course will be able to obtain certificates through this portal,” the ministry noted. The online project is being implemented by the ICT Application and Training Center (IKT LAB) with the support of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies and the International Telecommunications Union. The platform was developed within the ‘Development of multimedia online courses and a web portal for women’ project. This project is being implemented on the basis of the decision of the World Conference on the Development of Telecommunications on the implementation of regional projects as part of regional initiatives.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/06/2021

Number of Compulsory Real Estate Insurance Contracts in Azerbaijan Almost Triples

The Azerbaijan Insurers Association (AIA) has announced the number of contracts concluded by local insurance companies on compulsory real estate insurance, the AIA told Trend. According to the AIA, in the first 10 months of 2020, five companies that have distinguished themselves with particular activity in the market concluded 149,478 contracts of compulsory real estate insurance with the population and entrepreneurs. In the same period of 2019, the number of the aforementioned concluded contracts was equal to 53,000 units, said the association. According to the latest published summary data for the first 11 months of 2020, local insurance companies paid compulsory real estate insurance premiums worth 38.6 million manat (\$22.7 million), which is 6.5 million manat (\$3.82 million) more than in the same period of 2019. At the same time, insurance premiums worth 3.7 million manat (\$2.14 million) were paid for this type of insurance from January through November 2020.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/14/2021

Azerbaijan's Communication Operator Expands Its Coverage Area

In order to ensure the demand of citizens for telecommunication services in the regions of Azerbaijan, another project has been implemented, the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and High Technologies told Trend. According to the ministry, Aztelecom LLC, which operates under the ministry, has expanded its coverage area in the Zagatala district in order to improve the quality of telecommunication services provided to the population, enterprises, and organizations. As reported, the central line network in Zagatala has been repaired and brought up to the level of modern requirements, the cable-channel system has been brought into line with technical standards, the old poles have been restored, and the broken ones have been replaced with new ones. Moreover, in order to meet the needs of the population for telephone communication and the Internet, technical work was carried out in the villages of Uzungazmalar, Danachi, Ashagy Tala, Gozbarah, Lahyj, due to which the capacity of communication equipment was increased, said the ministry. "As a result of population growth and construction of new houses in the Suvagil village of the Zagatala region, the territory of the village has expanded significantly. Taking into account the numerous appeals of the villagers, Aztelekom installed modern equipment for using telecommunication services on the territory and in the houses of 384 families. Residents are provided

with access to broadband services,” the ministry noted. Over 2019, Aztelekom LLC has carried out a number of important works, has gradually implemented several infrastructure projects. “In the districts, work was carried out to expand the communication network, modernize the trunk and distribution networks. Along with the reconstruction of the network infrastructure, new electronic automatic telephone exchanges have been installed in the regions that have not been telephoned yet in remote areas,” the ministry said.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/18/2021

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How Much Azerbaijan's Population Spend on Automobile Fuel in 2020?

The Baku Stock Exchange (BSE) hosted an auction on placement of state medium-term bonds of the Azerbaijan Finance Ministry for a total of 20 million manat (\$11.8 million) on Jan. 26, 2021, Trend reports with reference to the stock exchange. The circulation term is 1,092 days. During the auction, 15 investors submitted 21 bids in the price range from 93.73 manat (\$55.13) with a yield to maturity (YTM) of 9.97 percent to 100 manat (\$58.8) with the YTM of 7.5 percent per bond. According to the decision of the Finance Ministry, the cut-off price of bonds amounted to 97.4 manat (\$57.3) with the YTM of 8.5 percent, and the weighted average price was 97.8 manat (\$57.5) with the YTM of 8.33 percent. The total amount of orders at nominal prices amounted to over 62.5 million manat (\$36.8 million), and the placement volume – 6.9 million manat (\$4.05 million). The maturity date of the bonds is Jan. 23, 2024. If during the auction the demand for government bonds exceeds the supply and the price is satisfied by the issuer, the volume of bonds offered by the issuer may be increased up to 50 percent. Auction participants must fulfill their obligations to purchase bonds till Jan. 27, 2021.

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Azerbaijan's State Customs Committee Talks Received Appeals on Use of E-Services in 2020

The State Customs Committee (SCC) of Azerbaijan received 4.6 million applications on the use of online customs services in 2020, Chairman of the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan, Safar Mehdiyev, wrote on his Twitter account, Trend reports. Earlier, the chairman noted that the State Customs Committee (SCC) of Azerbaijan exceeded the forecast of budget revenues by 102.83 percent in 2020. According to the chairman, deductions from the customs authorities of Azerbaijan to

the state budget totaled over 3.93 billion manat (\$2.31 billion), while the forecast of the State Customs Committee was 3.83 billion manat (\$2.25 billion).

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Iran and Russia Sign Memorandum of Cooperation on Cybersecurity

Iran and Russia have signed a memorandum of cooperation on cybersecurity, Trend reports citing Iranian MFA. The memorandum was signed during a meeting of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. According to the memorandum, Iran and Russia will cooperate in regional and international circles to strengthen information security, fight organized crime using communication and telecommunications technologies, provide technical assistance and guarantee national and international security.

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TURKMENISTAN: New Building of Fire Safety Put into Operation

An administrative building of the fire safety department of the Lebap regional police department has been put into operation in Turkmenistan, Trend reports with reference to Turkmenportal information portal. In the new building, all working conditions are created, offices are equipped with computers, telephone communication, split systems, there is a garage for office and duty cars. On the right bank of the Amu Darya on Bagtyarlyk contractual area, a separate fire brigade has been created, whose duties include servicing two gas processing plants. In the territory of Turkmenistan, the fire season usually falls in May-September. In this regard, an annual inspection of the Kopetdag foothills is carried out by the relevant services. During the raid, the state of forest plantations is assessed, as well as the availability of a set of fire-fighting equipment. "The complex of preventive measures includes the creation of row lanes, clearing vast areas of grass vegetation, " local media noted earlier.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Home Prices to Rise 10pc in 2021

Property prices in Australia's biggest cities could decline early in 2021 due to raised coronavirus restrictions for the latest infections in the eastern states. Tim Lawless, research director of property data group CoreLogic, said house prices would probably decline in the first couple of months as buyers become wary of the latest COVID-19 restrictions. "It stands to reason that the latest coronavirus changes will dent consumer confidence and the housing market could be negatively impacted," he said on Monday. States and territories from December have put entry conditions on travellers, mostly those from NSW, following the Sydney virus outbreak which has led to more than 100 infections. Some states, such as Queensland and Western Australia, have also put conditions on visitors from Victoria following coronavirus cases there.

NSW last week followed Victoria's lead in mandating masks be worn for indoor settings in most parts of the state. Mr Lawless said consumer confidence indices usually dipped following heightened measures. "We can see when consumer sentiment falls, we see a similar fall in transactional (property) activity," he said "Buying a property is a high commitment decision and you want to be confident about your household finances, your job, and the ability to get a mortgage." Yet there is better long-term news for owners, with Mr Lawless predicting a 10 per cent rise for the housing market this year. AMP Capital chief economist Shane Oliver said record-low mortgage rates, economic recovery and government home buyer incentives would help demand. Mr Oliver said risks included coronavirus lockdowns and the unwinding of government support programs such as JobKeeper, which could increase unemployment.

Australia's housing market increased in value in 2020, despite the drag on activity caused by the outbreak of coronavirus. The national home value index rose three per cent over the year to a median price of \$574,872, according to CoreLogic. Values in regional areas led the way with a 6.9 per cent increase for a combined median of \$420,502, compared to two per cent for major capital cities with a combined median of \$651,983. Mr Lawless said one reason for the gain in regional areas was the popularity of working from home. The coronavirus threat has forced many workers to stay at home, and some are finding better value living elsewhere. Living in less populated areas was another appeal of regional areas, Mr Lawless said. "The pandemic is fresh in people's minds and there is an appetite for low-density housing," he said. Melbourne was the only capital city to decline for the year - albeit on a relatively healthy median price of \$682,197 - after battling two waves of COVID-19 outbreaks.

The most expensive city was Sydney, with a median value of \$871,749, and the cheapest was Darwin on \$416,183. Mr Lawless said record-low borrowing rates supported the market in 2020, along with a "spectacular" rise in consumer confidence. Confidence was buoyed in the latter months of the year as COVID-related restrictions and border constraints began to be lifted. "Containing the

spread of the virus has been critical to Australia's economic and housing market resilience," Mr Lawless said. CHANGES IN CAPITAL CITY HOME VALUES IN 2020:
* Sydney - 2.7pct * Melbourne - down 1.3pct * Brisbane - 3.6pct * Adelaide - 5.9pct *
Perth - 1.9pct * Hobart - 6.1pct * Darwin - 9pct * Canberra - 7.5pct

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Economy Is Finding Its Feet Again: PM

The Australian economy needs to be weaned off government support to ensure there is a business-led recovery, Prime Minister Scott Morrison says. The federal opposition and welfare bodies have been critical of the move this week to reduce the level of the JobKeeper wage subsidy. The subsidy is due to finish in March. Mr Morrison said it was always going to be "temporary, targeted and proportionate" allowing workers to get through the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, which sent Australia into recession. He said thousands of businesses and over two million workers had "graduated" from JobKeeper back onto the regular payroll, with the government having spent \$77 billion on it. "The economy is regearing ... it's finding its own feet again," Mr Morrison told 2GB radio on Tuesday. "We've got to be careful the important supports we put in place during the worst of the pandemic then don't hold back the business-led recovery on the other side."

He compared the economic recovery to a hospital. "It's like coming out of the ICU and into the ward and then becoming an outpatient." The latest ANZ data shows job ads rose by 9.2 per cent in December to an 18-month high. It meant job ads were up five per cent on the year and rebounded 98.3 per cent in the past eight months. CommSec chief economist Craig James said the solid lift in hiring intentions should translate to higher employment in coming months, supporting spending. "The economic recovery continues," he said. Meanwhile, the government has announced a plan to provide more workers for the agricultural sector, which has been hard hit by travel restrictions. Student visa holders will be permitted to work more than the usual 40 hours per fortnight limit during semesters if they are working in the agriculture sector.

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2020 a Bumper Year for Motorbike Sales

Australians spent big on motorbikes in 2020, with retailers saying the increased buyer appetite was coronavirus-induced. The Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries on Friday released sales figures for last year, revealing nearly 20,000 more motorcycles and off-highway vehicles were sold in 2020 compared to 2019 - a

22 per cent increase. Of those, almost 7000 were off-highway vehicles, which include quad and dirt bikes - an increase in sales of that type of bike of 39 per cent compared to 2019. Off-road motorcycle sales rose by 30 per cent and road bike sales increased by nine per cent. The only type of motorcycle not to see a rise in sales in 2020 was the scooter, which dropped 11 per cent. Harley Heaven in Melbourne was busy in 2020 and salesman Abe Miller puts it down to people stuck at home with a lot of spare time. "A lot of them were bored," he told AAP.

The Harley Davidson retailer spent three months during Melbourne's strict second wave restrictions with its doors closed but was still flat out, showing buyers bikes via video call and delivering new vehicles via courier. Mr Miller also noticed sales of second-hand bikes also skyrocketed. The usual amount of new and used vehicles available on [bikesales.com.au](https://www.bikesales.com.au) was lower during 2020 than previous years, he said. Much of the demand for second-hand vehicles was because of massive delays in the shipping of motorbikes from the US and other manufacturing countries. Other people just wanted to keep themselves busy and tinker with new parts. It was faster for many to get a second-hand bike from within Australia than to wait months for a new one, Mr Miller said. Motorcycle retailers experienced, along with every other industry dependent on overseas shipments, months-long delays.

"I've probably got 30-plus motorbikes that I have sold that I can't get here," owner of Close Motorcycles in Sydney, Darryl Faddy, told AAP. He personally didn't experience a major up-tick in sales because he sells smaller capacity motorbikes and scooters, but said he knew bigger bikes and off-road bikes had been very popular. "It was a perfect storm for motorcycles," the Redfern retailer said. "Everybody just went nuts." People would usually spend \$20,000 on travel, but because coronavirus restrictions made that impossible, many looked to what adventures were possible closer to home, he said. Many people were sitting at home with money to burn and nothing to do, Mr Faddy said. While scooter sales were modest, he noticed more Sydneysiders wanted them to avoid using public transport for their work commute.

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Students Urged to Claim Benefits Early

Australian university and TAFE students are being urged to apply for financial help before classes resume this year. Subject to eligibility requirements, students under 25 can access up to \$503.20 a fortnight in Youth Allowance. Those over 25 can access up to \$462.50 each fortnight under Austudy. Indigenous Australian can also access payments help with study costs, boarding and travel from the student's home to their school, TAFE or university. In the 2019-20 financial year, 554,000 Youth Allowance and Austudy claims were processed, a significant jump on the 356,000

the previous financial year. Over 29,000 ABSTUDY claims were also processed in 2019-20, compared to 30,000 the year before. All three supports are currently supplemented with a coronavirus payment. School leavers from outer regional or remote areas can also for the first time apply for a one-off Tertiary Access Payment of \$5000 to help them relocate for full-time study. Students can apply up to 13 weeks before their course or apprenticeship begins, Minister for Government Services Stuart Robert said. "It has been truly inspirational to see the class of 2020 rise to the challenge and now we are encouraging you to claim early to give you more time to prepare for the next exciting chapter in your life," he said.

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Economists Predict Further Jobless Drop

Australia's economic recovery from recession has highlighted an unexpected rapid rebound in employment growth. Economists expect the latest labour force figures on Thursday will show a continuation of that trend contributing to a further fall in the jobless rate. They predict a further 50,000 people gained employment in December, building on the unexpectedly strong 90,000 rise in November, and aided by Melbourne emerging from a prolonged COVID-19 lockdown late last year. This is expected to see the jobless rate ease to 6.7 per cent from 6.8 per cent, and a further pullback from the 22-year high of 7.5 per cent seen in July last year and during the depths of the recession. Recent strong vacancy and job advertising figures suggest the labour market should see further strength in coming months, dating both Treasury's and Reserve Bank's forecasts.

Only last month Treasury forecast a jobless rate of 7.25 per cent by June this year, while in November the RBA predicted a rate of 7.5 per cent by then. Figures on Wednesday showed skilled vacancies advertised on the internet rose 1.4 per cent in December, the eighth consecutive monthly increase since hitting a record low last April and during Australia's economic downturn. They now stand 11.1 per cent higher than a year earlier. Notably, the National Skills Commission's report showed demand for labourers in December surged 6.3 per cent to be 55 per cent up on the year. This coincides with a strengthening home building sector, which is being buoyed by low interest rates and government stimulus grants. Separately, a survey found restaurant owners are more confident coming out of the recession, anticipating home delivery will remain a pivotal part of their business operations in 2021. The survey of more than 300 restaurant owners, released by take-away delivery firm Deliveroo, found more than half feeling positive about their future business prospects. More than four in five respondents expected to hire more staff in 2021. "Last year's survey saw a nervous sector but just six months later we are all pleased to see a more positive outlook emerge for the year ahead," Deliveroo CEO Ed McManus said.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 01/21/2021

CPI Ticks Up on Child Care, Tobacco Costs

Sharp increases in the cost of child care and tobacco were key drivers in a larger-than-expected rise in inflation in the final three months of 2020. But with annual inflation still an extremely benign 0.9 per cent, a rise in interest rates remains a long way off despite signs of the economic recovery strengthening. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' consumer price index also rose by 0.9 per cent over the December quarter, slightly higher than the 0.7 per cent increase predicted by economists. It came as other figures showed business conditions growing to a two-year high in December, while consumer confidence recovered to a recent 14-month peak after overcoming recent jitters surrounding local COVID-19 lockdowns. The International Monetary Fund has also upgraded its global growth forecast for 2021 to 5.5 per cent from 5.2 per cent, reflecting expectations of a coronavirus vaccine strengthening activity later this year.

"The fact that our economy is recovering and the jobs are coming back significantly ... is a function of us getting the virus under control," Treasurer Josh Frydenberg told ABC radio on Wednesday. "The vaccine and its rollout is going to be critical to maintaining that momentum." The ABS said the December quarter CPI was primarily impacted by an increase in tobacco excise and the introduction, continuation and conclusion of a number of government schemes. The final unwinding of a free child care subsidy introduced during the depths of last year's recession led to a further 37.7 per cent jump in costs, with out-of-pocket expenses now returning to pre-COVID levels. Tobacco increased by 10.9 per cent, but a 0.7 per cent rise in the cost of new homes would have been higher if not for government stimulus measures, like the \$25,000 HomeBuilder grant.

Underlying measures of inflation - which smooth out wild price swings and are closely monitored by the Reserve Bank in terms of monetary policy - averaged an annual rate of 1.3 per cent. This is still well below the Reserve Bank's two to three per cent inflation target. "The underlying weakness will remain for quite some time, notwithstanding the strength of the economic recovery thus far," BIS Oxford Economics chief economist Sarah Hunter said. "There is still some way to go before the labour market reaches full employment and upward pressure on wages resumes." The National Australia Bank business survey for December showed conditions rose to a level last seen in September 2018. "The improvement in conditions is broad-based and, importantly, driven by a big move back into positive territory for employment conditions," NAB chief economist Alan Oster said. Consumers have also been buoyed by the decline in the unemployment rate to 6.6 per cent in December.

"The absence of community transmitted COVID-19 cases for a number of days and the relaxation in border rules has likely also supported confidence," ANZ head of Australian economics David Plank said. The ANZ-Roy Morgan consumer confidence index - a pointer to future household spending - recouped its losses seen either side of the Christmas and New Year break. Separately, the Westpac-Melbourne Institute leading index - which indicates the likely pace of economic activity three to nine months in the future - eased slightly in December after its recent strong recovery. "It is still signalling healthy above-trend growth for the Australian economy in the first half of 2021," Westpac chief economist Bill Evans said. "This is consistent with Westpac's view that the economy will grow by four per cent in 2021."

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Warning Sounds over Cost of Climate Change

The economic alarm has again been sounded over climate inaction, with an environmental group warning the cost of extreme weather has more than doubled over the last 50 years. The cost reached \$35 billion for the decade after 2010, according to a new Climate Council report. It comes as a parliamentary inquiry prepares to put an independent MP's widely-supported climate change bill under the microscope. The Climate Council's report says by 2038 the cost of extreme weather events and sea level rise could cost the Australian economy \$100 billion every year. Climate Council spokesman Will Steffen says the world will continue seeing consequences from not acting on climate change sooner. "No developed country has more to lose from climate change-fuelled extreme weather, or more to gain as the world transforms to a zero-carbon economy, than Australia does," Professor Steffen said.

The findings have prompted the group to call on the federal government to adopt a goal of net zero emissions by 2040 at the latest. It's a step up from pressure for net zero by 2050. The Morrison government hasn't put a time frame on achieving net zero emissions, instead saying it hopes to achieve the goal "as soon as possible". Representatives from government departments and a wide range of groups including the Property Council of Australia, National Farmers' Federation and Australian Industry Group will appear at a hearing on Friday to examine a climate change bill. It has been introduced to parliament by independent MP for Warringah Zali Steggall, and rubber-stamps net zero emissions by 2050 while setting up a Climate Change Commission. Submissions to the inquiry show strong support for the national framework on climate it would provide.

"Having a very clear set of government policy 'goal posts' would enable company directors to focus their resources and efforts more efficiently with respect to climate-related transition risks," the Business Council of Australia said in its

submission. Unilever and Origin Energy are also supportive, reflecting the growing trend of businesses adopting their own net zero emissions targets and calling for certainty from government. Local councils, Sydney's Pitt Street Uniting Church and scores of individual citizens have written in support of the proposal. Ted O'Brien, the Liberal MP chairing the inquiry into the bill, has previously said it would assess information "with dispassionate independence before drawing conclusions". Federal politicians are preparing for parliament to resume next week for the first sitting of the year. Both major parties are battling internal issues on climate and energy policy, with the Nationals again urging the Liberal Party, its senior partner in government, to help fund new coal-fired power stations. Labor is still yet to find a united voice on the future of more renewable energy sources and the transition away from fossil fuels.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 01/27/2021

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Environment Watchdog Needed, Review Finds

The final report into Australia's environmental protection laws has reiterated the need for an independent watchdog, a role previously rejected by government. Former competition watchdog chair Graeme Samuel's final report into the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act has been released on Thursday. Key recommendations are for new, legally enforceable national environmental standards as well as an independent environment assurance commissioner. As in the interim report, it outlines the stark reminder that the "environmental trajectory is currently unsustainable". "Australia's natural environment and iconic places are in an overall state of decline and are under increasing threat," it says. "The environment is not sufficiently resilient to withstand current, emerging or future threats, including climate change."

The watchdog was floated in the interim report and was rejected by the federal government. In response to the interim report the government introduced laws to shift federal decision making powers to the states, in a bid to cut red tape. The draft laws are currently in the Senate and face stiff opposition by Labor, the Greens and independents. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has discussed the issue with state and territory leaders at national cabinet. They recently agreed to press on with shifting decision making to the states and to develop national environmental standards. Environment Minister Sussan Ley said other changes could happen later. "Further phases of reform would build on these streamlining efforts and address any further changes and improvements, including to environmental standards, taking into account the recommendations of Professor Samuel," she said.

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Asia-Pacific

World Bank Kicks Off 2021 Benchmark Program with CAD 1.5 Billion Sustainable Development Bond While Raising Awareness for Health and Gender Equality

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) today priced its inaugural benchmark transaction of 2021, a 5-year CAD 1.5 billion global bond that matures on January 14, 2026. The World Bank launched the Sustainable Development Bond while raising awareness for the World Bank's strategy, projects and programs that focus on gender equality and health and highlight how COVID-19 disproportionately impacts women. The 5-year benchmark pays a semi-annual coupon of 0.625% p.a. and has an issue price of 99.750% and a final spread of +28.25 bps over the 0.50% CAN September 2025 reference bond, offering investors a yield of 0.676% (semi-annual). Joint lead managers for this transaction are BMO Capital Markets, National Bank Financial Markets, Scotiabank, and TD Securities. Jingdong Hua, Vice President and Treasurer, World Bank, said: "We are pleased to see a robust start to 2021 with continued support for the World Bank's sustainable development mandate from Canadian dollar investors. Investor interest in elevating topics like gender equality and strong and equitable health systems helps to raise awareness for these challenges and highlight the importance of channeling finance to where it is needed most. Recognition of the purpose of investment and impact are key to creating a sustainable and resilient future for all".

Investor Distribution by Investor Type		Investor Distribution by Region	
Banks/Bank Treasuries/Corporates	38%	Americas	61%
Asset Managers/Insurance/Pension Funds	33%	Europe/Middle East/Africa	25%
Central Banks/Official	29%	Asia	14%

The World Bank's goals of ending extreme poverty by 2030 and promoting shared prosperity in a sustainable manner are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Increasingly, investors and other market participants are using the SDGs as a framework for investment and a way to communicate support for specific development priorities. With this Sustainable Development Bond, the World Bank is raising awareness for SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Investing in World Bank bonds offers investors an opportunity to align financial and social objectives. Sean Hayes, Managing Director & Head of US

Syndicate & Credit Sales, BMO Capital Markets, said: "The World Bank kicks off a fourth consecutive year with a triumphant reopening of Canadian dollar primary markets. The World Bank's regular presence in CAD speaks to its leadership and commitment to maintaining curves across non-USD currencies for its global investors focused on sustainability. This issuance highlights current global challenges encompassing health and gender equality. The CAD 1.5 billion 5-year benchmark matches the World Bank's largest Canadian primary new issue and demonstrates strong domestic and international demand for sustainable bonds".

Scott Graham, Managing Director, Head of US Government & SSA Finance said: "The World Bank once again demonstrates its exceptional leadership and its resounding commitment to both sustainability and the Canadian bond market by consecutively reopening the Maple market with a 5-year offering for the 2nd year in a row. The overwhelming global support for the World Bank continues to be magnified by its underlying sustainability principles that reinforce its overall purpose of eliminating global poverty, with this latest transaction highlighting SDG 3 (Health and Well-Being) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), while providing continued assistance to developing countries affected by COVID-19. Congratulations to the World Bank team on continued success in the Canadian market". Cesare Roselli, Head of SSA Origination, Scotiabank said: "Scotiabank is proud to support the World Bank in its debut capital markets offering of 2021, focusing on health and well-being and gender equality (SDG 3 and 5). With this transaction, the World Bank reinforced its commitment to the Canadian dollar market as a strategic currency of its funding program. The issue received strong sponsorship from both the domestic and international ESG investment community, thus cementing the recognition of the World Bank in an increasingly important market for sustainable issuance".

Laura O'Connor, Managing Director, Fixed Income Origination & Syndication, TD Securities said: "Congratulations to the World Bank for an impressive start of 2021 with a CAD 1.5 billion deal. The demand from the full spectrum of domestic and international investors reflects the exceptional track record of the World Bank in the CAD market. This global Sustainable Development Bond highlights SDG 3, Good Health, and SDG 5, Gender Equality, which draws investor attention to the continued challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic".

Summary terms:

Issuer:	World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD)
Issuer rating:	Aaa/AAA (Moody's/S&P)
Amount:	CAD 1,500,000,000
Settlement date:	January 14, 2021
Maturity date:	January 14, 2026
Issue price:	99.750%
Issue yield:	0.676% semi-annually
Coupon:	0.625% per annum
Denomination:	CAD 1,000
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	CA459058JP94
Clearing system:	CDS, Clearstream, Euroclear
Joint lead managers:	BMO Capital Markets, National Bank Financial Markets, Scotiabank, TD Securities

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 01/05/2021

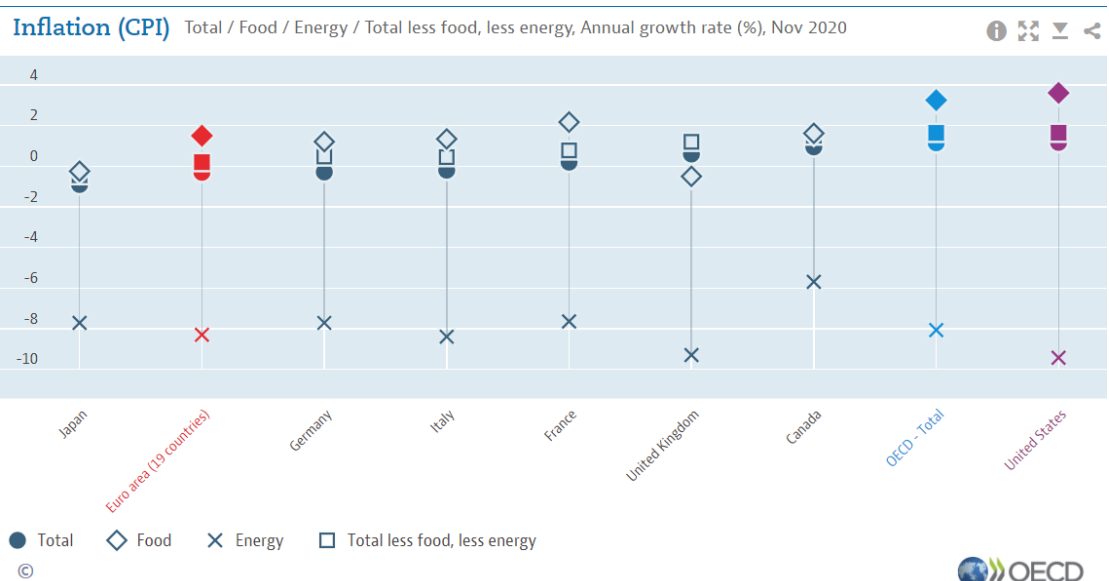
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OECD Annual Inflation Stable at 1.2% in November 2020

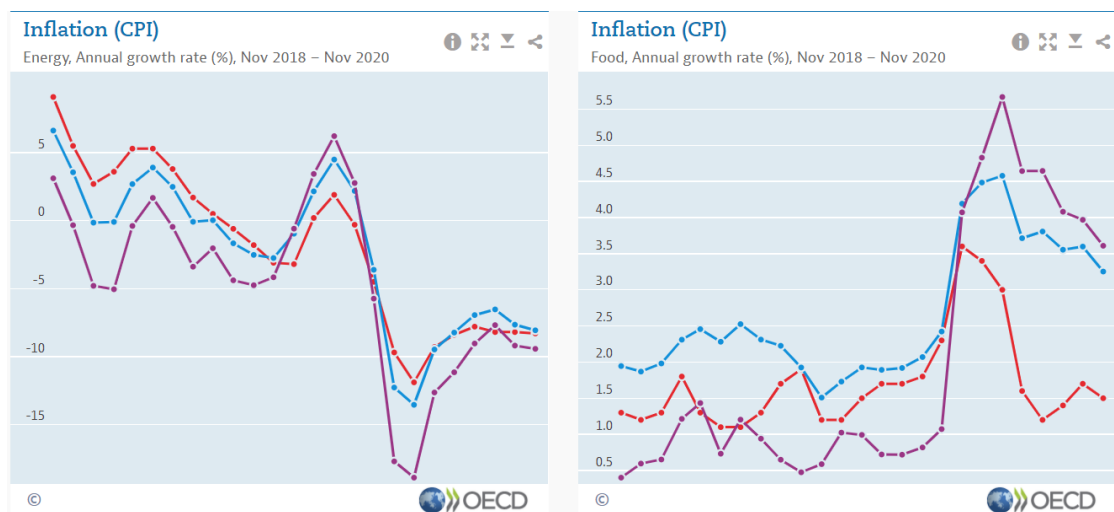
7 Jan 2021 - Annual inflation in the OECD area was stable at 1.2% in November. Energy prices declined by (minus) 8.1%, a faster pace than in October (minus 7.7%), while food price inflation slowed to 3.3%, compared with 3.6% in October. OECD annual inflation excluding food and energy was also stable at 1.6% in November 2020.

Consumer prices, selected areas

November 2020, percentage change on the same period of the previous year, %



Energy (CPI) and Food (CPI), selected areas
November 2018 – November 2020, percentage change on the same period of the
previous year, %



From <https://www.oecd.org/> 01/07/2020

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World Bank Prices Global Dual Tranche SOFR Index-Linked Offering and Raises USD 3.5 Billion

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) priced a new USD 2.35 billion 2-year benchmark bond and raised an additional USD 1.15 billion for its August 2027 bond – both linked to the Secured Overnight Financing Rate (SOFR) index. These transactions continue to meet investor demand from US financial institutions and global bank treasuries seeking high-quality, SOFR-linked floating rate product. The proceeds from the USD 3.5 billion dual tranche offering will be used to finance the World Bank’s sustainable development activities. The high-quality orderbook closed with USD 3.7 billion of interest with broad global distribution across the two tranches and 70 orders. Joint lead managers for the transactions are BMO Capital Markets, RBC Capital Markets, and Wells Fargo Securities. Jingdong Hua, Vice President and Treasurer, World Bank said, “This is an amazing result. With these transactions, we are extremely pleased to be able to continue contributing to the development of the SOFR market at both ends of the curve. By offering investors the opportunity to participate in liquid World Bank SOFR transactions in both 2- and 7-year maturities on the same day, we were able to attract a growing investor base of domestic and international investors to the SOFR market. We want to thank investors for the support and strong showing in the World Bank’s first SOFR transactions of 2021”.

Joint Lead Manager Quotes

Sean Hayes, Managing Director & Head of US Syndicate & Credit Sales, BMO

Capital Markets said, “World Bank kicks off 2021 USD funding in ground-breaking fashion. As the Sovereign, Supranational and Agency (SSA) borrower community focused on fixed rate offerings, the World Bank printed a first-of-its-kind SOFR floater deal. Raising USD 3.5 billion across a dual-tranche SOFR outing marks the largest ever SSA SOFR deal, including the largest single-tranche in the 2-year maturity. Increasing liquidity by re-opening the world’s longest outstanding SOFR bond by means of the 7-year tap illustrates continued leadership and market development by the World Bank as the bond market continues to transition away from LIBOR. From the innovation of World Bank to the remarkable investor support to bring this transaction to fruition, BMO was thrilled to be a partner”. Jigme Shingsar, Managing Director, RBC Capital Markets said, “World Bank’s record setting return to the SOFR market sets a new standard for liquidity and breadth of distribution while continuing the World Bank’s pioneering work developing the long end of the SOFR curve. This transaction is another important milestone for SOFR and comes at a time when the market needs more case studies demonstrating successful navigation of benchmark reform and the transition to risk-free rates”. Carlos Perezgrovas, Head SSA Origination, Wells Fargo Securities LLC said, “With this dual tranche USD 3.5 billion issuance, the World Bank continues to lead the way in the growing SOFR funding market. This trade exhibited strong demand on both parts of the curve from new investors in the Americas and Europe, Middle East and Africa regions, highlighting the constructive tone of the SOFR market. It was a pleasure working with the World Bank team on this transaction”.

Investor Distribution

By Geography	2-year	Aug-2027 Tap
Americas	67%	56%
Europe, Middle East, Africa	32%	44%
Asia	1%	0%
By Investor Type		
Asset Managers, Insurance, Pension Funds	51%	28%
Banks, Bank Treasuries, Corporates	28%	67%
Central Banks, Official Institutions	21%	5%

Transaction Summary

Tranche:	2-year	Aug-2027 Tap
Issuer:	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development	
Issuer rating:	Aaa / AAA (Moody's/S&P)	
Amount:	USD 2,350,000,000	USD 1,150,000,000
Settlement date:	January 14, 2021	January 14, 2021
Maturity date:	January 13, 2023	August 19, 2027
Re-offer spread:	Compounded SOFR + 13bps	Compounded SOFR + 34 bps
Compounded SOFR:	Calculated on the basis of the evolution of the value of the SOFR Index from the SOFR Index _{start} value date to, but excluding, the SOFR Index _{End} value date with regard to the relevant interest period	Calculated on the basis of the evolution of the value of the SOFR Index from the SOFR Index _{start} value date to, but excluding, the SOFR Index _{End} value date with regard to the relevant interest period
Coupon payment dates:	Paid quarterly January 13, April 13, July 13, and October 13 each year, from and including April 13, 2021, to and including the maturity date	Paid quarterly on February 19, May 19, August 19, and November 19, from and including November 19, 2020, to and including the maturity date
Reoffer Price:	100.00%	100.593%
ISIN:	US459058JQ75	US459058JF11
Clearing systems:	Fedwire, Euroclear, Clearstream	
Listing	Luxembourg Stock Exchange	
Joint lead managers:	BMO Capital Markets, RBC Capital Markets, Wells Fargo Securities, LLC	

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 01/07/2021

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World Bank's EUR 2 Billion 40-Year Sustainable Development Bond Responds to Long-End Euro Investor Demand

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) priced its first Euro-denominated benchmark of 2021, a EUR 2 billion 40-year Sustainable Development Bond maturing in January 2061. It was the issuer's first Euro denominated benchmark bond in the tenor. The transaction was timed to respond to investors seeking high credit investment options, long duration, as well as diversification to non-European issuers. The deal attracted over 110 orders totaling more than Euro 3.6 billion. There was particular interest from pension funds, insurance companies, as well as asset management firms looking for investment opportunities that help manage the duration of long-term liabilities. BofA Securities, Goldman Sachs International, HSBC and Natixis are the lead managers for the transaction. The bond will be listed on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange. The bond priced with a final spread to mid-swaps of +23 basis points and an equivalent annual yield of 0.203%. This equates to a spread vs. the reference Bund of +31.5

basis points. “We are pleased to be able to respond to investor demand for long-dated Euro denominated bonds from diverse and high-credit quality issuers with this transaction,” said Anshula Kant, Managing Director and Chief Financial Officer, World Bank Group. “Raising funds at efficient costs, as we have done again with this transaction, maximizes the World Bank’s support for sustainable development projects and programs in our members countries, so that they can overcome immediate challenges and reach their long-term development objectives.”

Lead Manager Quotes

“Congratulations to the World Bank team on their 40-year Euro transaction. They achieved a truly exceptional result with a large and diverse investor interest reflected in their longest dated benchmark deal to date. Going forward, this transaction will establish a valuable new reference point for Euro investors,” said Adrien de Naurois, Managing Director of SSA Syndicate, BAML. “A truly fantastic outcome for the World Bank, executing their longest EUR benchmark to date. The World Bank capitalized on strong demand for duration, collecting an orderbook of exceptional quality and enabling them to price the largest transaction in this segment by a supranational entity, at the same level as their 30-year EUR benchmark in November. This is especially impressive because the trade priced at a level consistent with its peer group despite the World Bank not being included in the European Central Bank’s Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme. Many congratulations to the World Bank team on this incredible success,” said Maud Le Moine, Head of SSA Origination, Goldman Sachs International.

“The World Bank has once again demonstrated its ability to set new precedents in the international capital markets, printing the first 40-year Euro benchmark from a non-European Supranational, Sovereign and Agency (SSA) issuer to date. The World Bank’s ability to access this very rare tenor for an impressive EUR 2 billion print is a notable achievement. This, combined with the pricing the World Bank was able to achieve, underlines the World Bank’s strong recognition and support from capital markets investors,” said Asif Sherani, EMEA Head of Syndicate, HSBC. “The transaction accomplished by the World Bank today speaks for itself. This was an astounding result for an audacious 40-year issuance which provided duration and diversification, impressing both peers and investors alike. It is always a privilege to team together with the World Bank as they continue to demonstrate their dynamism as a leader in the Euro market. We can only imagine what awaits this issuer in the future, but for today hope they enjoy the results of their hard work,” said Emmanuel Smiecench, Co-Head Public Sector, Natixis.

Investor Breakdown by Type

Asset Managers/Insurance/Pension Funds	87%
Banks/Bank Treasuries/Corporates	11%
Central Banks/Official Institutions	2%

Investor Breakdown by Geography

Germany	42%
France	22%
UK	10%
Rest of Europe	25%
Other	1%

Transaction Summary

Issuer:	World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD)
Issuer rating:	Aaa /AAA (Moody's/S&P)
Amount:	EUR 2,000,000,000
Settlement date:	January 21, 2021
Maturity date:	January 21, 2061
Issue price:	99.885%
Issue yield:	0.203% annual
Denomination:	EUR 1,000 and multiples thereof
Coupon:	0.200% p.a., payable annually
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	XS2289410420
Clearing system:	Euroclear/Clearstream
Joint lead managers:	BofA Securities, Goldman Sachs International, HSBC, Natixis

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Better Use of Energy Taxes Could Strengthen Developing Country Finances While Cutting Pollution

Developing countries could raise much-needed public revenues, while cutting emissions and air pollution, by making better use of energy taxes and reducing energy subsidies, according to a new OECD report. Taxing Energy Use for

Sustainable Development: Opportunities for energy tax and subsidy reforms in selected developing and emerging economies examines energy taxation in 15 developing and emerging economies in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. The report finds that well-designed energy and carbon taxes can strengthen efforts to improve domestic revenue mobilisation. While the revenue potential varies across countries, the report finds that, on average, the countries could generate revenue equivalent to around 1% of GDP if they set carbon rates on fossil fuels equivalent to EUR 30 per tonne of CO₂. Energy tax and subsidy reform is key to achieving the triple objectives of decarbonisation, domestic revenue mobilisation, and access to affordable energy. Developing and emerging economies battling to recover from the COVID-19 crisis with much lower tax revenues than advanced economies would benefit from better-designed energy taxes accompanied by targeted support to low-income groups. Tax-to-GDP ratios in the 15 countries studied average just 19% compared to 34% across OECD countries.

None of the 15 countries applies an explicit carbon price or uses CO₂ emissions trading systems. To support poor households, fossil fuels used for heating, cooking and lighting are often taxed at low rates or subsidised, yet this weighs on public finances and in some cases can encourage excessive fuel use. In four of the 15 countries, the cost to public finances of energy subsidies exceeds income from energy taxes. Reducing subsidies, which tend to benefit wealthier consumers, and improving tax design could provide additional revenues for more targeted support to enhance energy access and affordability. Across the 15 countries in the report, 83% of energy-related CO₂ emissions are entirely untaxed. In the 44 OECD and G20 countries included in *Taxing Energy Use 2019*, around 70% of energy-related emissions are untaxed, underlining the need for all countries to do better in aligning tax policy with the negative effects of energy use.

On a positive note, five of the 15 countries do not use any coal and the use of wind and solar energy is growing fast. However, Morocco and the Philippines still use coal extensively for electricity generation. Importantly, the report notes that 13 of the 15 countries have experience with fuel excise taxes, meaning carbon tax reform would be relatively straightforward to implement in administrative terms. Providing reliable and affordable access to clean energy is crucial for strong economic development. A long-term commitment to carbon pricing and phasing out fossil fuel subsidies can incentivise infrastructure investments that are in line with low-carbon and development objectives and reduce the risk of stranded assets and jobs. Carbon pricing can also help to tackle the high levels of informality that weigh on developing country economies as energy taxes are harder to avoid than direct taxes.

The 15 countries studied are Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and Uganda in Africa; the Philippines and Sri Lanka in Asia; and Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Jamaica and Uruguay in Latin America and the Caribbean. None of the countries are high emitters, but all have signalled an

interest in energy tax and subsidy reform through their participation in the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action (CFMCA) the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition (CPLC), or recent reforms. The OECD will publish Effective Carbon Rates 2021 in the coming months, analysing how the price put on carbon emissions from energy use in advanced and emerging countries compares with actual climate costs.

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World Bank Issues SEK 2 Billion 8-Year Green Bond

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) today issued a SEK green bond due January 2029, raising SEK 2 billion. Swedish investors made up the majority of investors in the transaction with pension funds, insurance funds and asset managers accounting for 84% of participation. Banks picked up the remaining share. The bond offers an annual coupon of 0.250% and a yield of 0.313%. Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken (SEB) was the sole lead manager for this transaction. The World Bank has issued over 160 green bonds in 22 currencies, totaling nearly USD 15 billion equivalent since its inaugural issue in 2008. World Bank Green Bonds support the financing of projects in member countries that meet specific criteria for low carbon and climate resilient growth, seeking to mitigate climate change or help affected people adapt to it. The types of eligible projects include renewable energy installations, energy efficiency projects, and new technologies in waste management and agriculture that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help finance the transition to a low carbon economy. They also support the financing of forest and watershed management and infrastructure projects that prevent climate-related flood damage and build climate resilience.

Transaction Summary

Issuer:	World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD)
Issuer rating:	Aaa /AAA (Moody's/S&P)
Amount:	SEK 2 billion
Settlement date:	January 29, 2021
Maturity date:	January 29, 2029
Issue price:	99.503%
Issue yield:	0.313%
Denomination:	SEK 10,000
Coupon:	0.250% per annum
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	XS2293578592
Clearing system:	Euroclear/Clearstream
Lead manager:	Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken AB (publ)

For more information on World Bank Green Bonds and impact reporting:
<https://treasury.worldbank.org/en/about/unit/treasury/ibrd/ibrd-green-bonds>

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 01/29/2021

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ADB Sells \$4.5 Billion 5-Year Global Benchmark Bond

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) priced a \$4.5 billion 5-year global bond, proceeds of which will be part of ADB's ordinary capital resources. "The dollar market has seen a very active start to the new year," said ADB Treasurer Pierre Van Peteghem. "ADB is very pleased with the strong reception to our first outing in 2021 which allowed us to issue \$4.5 billion in the 5-year maturity. This issuance will support the much-needed assistance that we provide to our borrowers through this global pandemic." The 5-year bond, with a coupon rate of 0.5% per annum payable semi-annually and a maturity date of 4 February 2026, was priced at 99.759% to yield 14.43 basis points over the 0.375% US Treasury notes due January 2026. The transaction was lead-managed by Bank of America Securities, Citi, HSBC, and

Morgan Stanley. A syndicate group was also formed consisting of Daiwa Capital Markets, Danske Bank, Mizuho Securities, Natwest Markets, and Swedbank. The issue achieved wide primary market distribution with 38% of the bonds placed in Asia; 32% in Europe, Middle East, and Africa; and 30% in the Americas. By investor type, 52% of the bonds went to central banks and official institutions, 33% to banks, and 15% to fund managers and other types of investors. ADB plans to raise around \$30 billion–\$35 billion from the capital markets in 2021.

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East Asia

CHINA: Fixed-Asset Investment Recovers Steadily in 2020

China's fixed-asset investment (FAI) steadily recovered in 2020, with the investment in the high-tech industry and private sector rising rapidly, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed Monday. The country's FAI went up 2.9 percent year on year in 2020, according to the NBS. The growth was 0.3 percentage points higher than that recorded in the first 11 months last year. The FAI amounted to 51.89 trillion yuan (about 8 trillion U.S. dollars) in 2020, according to the NBS. On a month-on-month basis, the country's fixed-asset investment climbed 2.32 percent in December 2020. Investment by the private sector expanded to 28.93 trillion yuan last year, up 1 percent year on year, the data showed. Investment in the primary industry went up 19.5 percent year on year, while that in the secondary industry edged up 0.1 percent. Investment in the tertiary industry added 3.6 percent, up by 0.1 percentage points from the growth seen in the first 11 months of 2020. Meanwhile, investment in high-tech manufacturing and services jumped 11.5 percent and 9.1 percent year on year, respectively. Last year, the investment has played a vital role in supporting China's economic growth, said Ning Jizhe, head of the NBS. Citing the tasks listed in the country's annual economic work conference held in December last year, Ning said that in 2021, the investment policies will play their due role in strengthening areas of weakness. The fixed-asset investment includes capital spent on infrastructure, property, machinery and other physical assets.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/18/2021

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China's Stock Market Attracts over 18 Mln New Investors in 2020

Around 18.02 million investors in China opened accounts to trade stocks on the Shanghai and Shenzhen bourses in 2020, industry data showed. The amount saw a 36.04-percent increase from 2019 hitting a record high since 2017, according to the China Securities Depository and Clearing Corporation Limited. By the end of 2020,

the number of investors with A-share accounts reached around 177.77 million. In December alone, about 1.62 million investors opened accounts in the country's stock market, up 100.39 percent compared with the same period of the previous year, the data showed.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/24/2021

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JAPAN: To Provide Up to ¥25 Million Financial Support to Cover Event Cancellation Costs

The government will provide up to ¥25 million to businesses that either cancel or postpone events due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry announced on Tuesday. The money is expected to be used to cover cancellation costs and ticket refund fees. The financial support will be provided to the 11 prefectures under a state of emergency, as well as areas that have implemented measures in accordance with the emergency declaration. Organizers of such events as music and theater performances and operators of amusement parks are eligible to apply. If multiple venues are used for an event, each venue will be eligible for support of up to ¥25 million. The government will begin accepting applications as early as February. The government is calling for the operators of events in areas under the state of emergency to limit attendance to 5,000, or 50% of venue capacity. However, there is a risk that some businesses will ignore the request because lower attendance would make their businesses unprofitable. The government is seeking cooperation in infection control measures by providing support to subsidize the costs involved in cancellations. The financial support will also be used to cover the rehearsal and promotion costs of canceled events.

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As Pandemic Prolongs Easing, BOJ Warms to Idea of Wider Band for Yield Target

The Bank of Japan is dropping hints it will consider allowing long-term interest rates to deviate further from its 0% target, a move that could undermine the purpose of its policy aimed at controlling the shape of the yield curve. BOJ Governor Haruhiko Kuroda told reporters the idea could be among options discussed in March, when the bank will review its tools to make them "sustainable and effective." The move would highlight the difficulty of maintaining yield curve control (YCC) as deflationary pressures from the coronavirus crisis threaten to prolong the BOJ's already protracted battle to hit its elusive 2% inflation target. "YCC wasn't intended to last this long. With the pandemic, the BOJ must now find a way to forever sustain this policy as inflation won't hit 2% for years," said Kazuo Momma, a former BOJ executive with

experience drafting monetary policy. Markets have been rife with speculation the BOJ may widen the implicit band under which it allows 10-year bond yields move around its 0% target, from the current 40 basis points.

Widening the band, or clarifying the BOJ's intention to let market forces drive yield moves more, would help bring life back to a market numbed by years of heavy-handed intervention. By allowing yields to rise more, the BOJ could also address the main side-effect of YCC: excessive falls in super-long yields that hurt returns for pension funds. "As our monetary easing is prolonged, we'll aim to make daily operations of YCC more sustainable," Kuroda said on Thursday, suggesting that loosening the BOJ's grip on yields would be a key purpose of the March review. When the BOJ last widened the band in 2018, 10-year yields crept up to 0.16% that year before slumping to near -0.3% in 2019. "The BOJ's decision will be based on the need to keep yields around 0%, and the cost of doing so such as distorting market functions," said a source familiar with the bank's thinking. Some analysts question the effect. There is no guarantee bond yields will rise under a wider band, as many investors bet the BOJ will maintain ultra-loose policy for years to come.

"Long-term rates won't rise much unless markets begin to price in prospects of an exit from ultra-easy policy, which isn't going to happen any time soon," said Izuru Kato, chief economist at Totan Research and a long-time BOJ watcher. Softening the yield target would also take the teeth out of YCC and signal a setback for Kuroda's stimulus program, which initially used clear numerical targets to communicate the bank's policy intentions, said former BOJ policymaker Takahide Kiuchi. "The BOJ is trying to water down both its asset-buying and interest rate targets, undermining the whole concept of YCC," he said. Allowing yields to rise further also risks giving markets the impression the BOJ is dialing back stimulus, something it wants to avoid at all costs. In softening its yield target, the BOJ could add forward guidance that pledges to keep long-term rates around zero until inflation nears 2%, said Momma. "The BOJ will probably come up with a package of measures which, as a whole, would appear as if it's enhancing the effect of YCC."

From <https://japantoday.com> 01/24/2021

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Japan Enacts ¥19 Tril Extra Budget to Fight Virus amid Criticism

Japan's parliament enacted Thursday a third extra budget for fiscal 2020 totaling 19.18 trillion yen to ramp up measures to fight the coronavirus pandemic, despite criticism of the government over how the money will be used. The supplementary budget for the current fiscal year ending March cleared the House of Councillors after passing the House of Representatives on Tuesday. Opposition lawmakers had demanded that non-urgent spending, such as for the government's controversial Go To Travel subsidy program, should be redirected to provide financial aid to medical

workers and people in need, but the ruling parties opposed revising the package. The extra budget contains 15.43 trillion yen in newly allocated funds, with the rest carried over from previously approved budgets for the current fiscal year. Japan has been facing a third wave of novel coronavirus infections since mid-November that forced Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to declare a second state of emergency covering Tokyo and 10 other prefectures earlier this month.

Approved by the cabinet last month, the extra budget includes 4.36 trillion yen for measures to prevent the virus from spreading, such as financial support for restaurants and bars cutting opening hours at the request of prefectural governments, and helping medical institutions to secure more beds for COVID-19 patients. To support the virus-hit domestic tourism sector, 1.03 trillion yen has been earmarked to extend the travel subsidy program to late June. Launched last July, the program was suspended nationwide in late December in response to the resurgence of infections. The government will use 2 trillion yen to establish a fund for companies developing green technologies as part of efforts to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and spur economic growth, one of Suga's signature policies.

The extra budget is part of the government's latest stimulus worth 73.6 trillion yen, which will also be financed by the initial budget for fiscal 2021 and private funds. The record fiscal 2021 draft budget totaling 106.61 trillion yen was submitted to the lower house last week together with the fiscal 2020 third extra budget and is expected to be approved by parliament by the end of March. With additional bond issuance worth 22.4 trillion yen, the supplementary budget will bring total government spending for the current fiscal year to a record-high 175.69 trillion yen. As a result, Japan's total new debt issuance for the year is set to hit an all-time high of over 112.55 trillion yen. Last year, Japan's parliament passed two extra budgets for fiscal 2020 totaling 57.6 trillion yen to finance economic stimulus steps to counter the pandemic. Among the past measures were 100,000 yen cash handouts to all of Japan's 126 million residents.

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SOUTH KOREA: To Invest Over 250 Bln Won in AI, Software Education in 2021

South Korea's ICT ministry said Thursday it will invest 262.6 billion won (US\$242 million) to foster education in artificial intelligence (AI) and software this year as part of the country's digital New Deal program that seeks to boost jobs in new tech industries. South Korea last year unveiled the digital New Deal, which aims to spend 58.2 trillion won on key tech investments, such as AI, to create around 900,000 jobs by 2025. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it plans to educate around 16,000 AI and software specialists this year as part of its goal to foster a total of 100,000

high-tech workers in the sectors by 2025. The ministry plans to add two additional graduate programs that specialize in AI this year, leading to a total of 10, and also provide support to 42 software research labs that focus on AI and big data technologies. It added it will designate around 500 elementary and middle schools for AI education as well as establish a new software-focused school in the southern port city of Busan.

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S. Korea to Invest over 380 Bln Won in Smart Farm Tech Through 2027

South Korea's ICT ministry said Wednesday it will invest 386.7 billion won (US\$353.3 million) to develop smart farms over the next seven years as part of the country's efforts to introduce new technology to the agriculture sector. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it launched a foundation to research and test next-generation smart farm technology, such as big data and artificial intelligence, to develop automated farms with improved productivity and produce quality. The foundation, jointly operated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the Rural Development Administration, seeks to boost current smart farm technology, such as remote farm climate control. The ICT ministry added that it aims to export the smart farm model to other markets. The smart farm project will use 333.3 billion won in state funds and 53.4 billion won from the private sector.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/13/2021

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S.Korea to Spend over 160 Bln Won on Biz-Focused 5G Tech in 2021

South Korea's ICT ministry said Tuesday it will invest 165.5 billion won (US\$150 million) this year to develop new business-focused technology that incorporates 5G, such as self-driving cars and virtual reality (VR) services, in a move to boost the country's use of the latest generation network. While local 5G users have rapidly grown since the network's commercialization in April 2019, surpassing the 10 million mark in November last year, business applications of the high-speed network mostly remain in testing. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it aims to speed up their development by spending 88.4 billion won on developing infrastructure for self-driving cars and 45 billion won on VR and augmented reality services. It will use the rest of the amount in developing 5G technology for smart factories, smart cities and digital health care services. South Korea sees the latest generation network as a major part of its digital New Deal program, which targets to create over 900,000 jobs

by spending 58.2 trillion won by 2025.

The ICT ministry added that it targets to establish 5G coverage in 85 cities across the country this year and plans for telecom operators to share their 5G networks in remote coastal and farm towns to reach nationwide 5G coverage next year. The ministry also plans to provide 5G frequency bands to companies other than telecom operators this year to spur more investment in 5G services. South Korea has so far allocated 28 gigahertz (GHz) and 3.5 GHz bands for 5G operation only to the country's three major telecom operators -- SK Telecom Co., KT Corp. and LG Uplus Corp. The ministry said it will distribute 600 megahertz of bandwidth between 28.9 GHz to 29.5 GHz in the first half of this year to other companies that seek to operate 5G services. The ministry added that it is considering allocating additional bandwidth in the sub-6 GHz range for non-telecom operators.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/26/2021

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Investment Reaches Over 58 Bln USD Last Year, 1.1 Pct Higher Than Target

Indonesia recorded an investment realization of 826.3 trillion rupiahs (about 58.76 billion U.S. dollars) during 2020, or 1.1 percent higher than the target of 817.2 trillion rupiahs (some 58.11 billion dollars), said the Investment Coordinating Board on Monday. "It means that there is an increase of nine trillion rupiahs from the target," the board's head Bahlil Lahadalia said. Of the 826.3 trillion rupiahs, 413.5 trillion rupiahs (about 29.40 billion dollars) or 50.10 percent represented domestic investment, while 412.8 trillion rupiahs (some 29.35 billion dollars) or 49.9 percent were in foreign direct investment. Annually, the domestic investment realization grew 7 percent, compared to that in the previous year when it totaled 386.5 trillion rupiahs (about 27.48 billion dollars). This growth was supported by the transportation, warehouse, and telecommunications sectors, the construction sector, the housing, industrial estates and office sectors, the electricity, gas, and water sectors, and the chemical and pharmaceutical industry sectors, among others. The realization of foreign direct investment in 2020 fell 2.4 percent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to that in the previous year when it reached 423.1 trillion rupiahs (about 30.08 billion dollars). The largest foreign investor for Indonesia in last year was Singapore with 9.8 billion U.S. dollars. Meanwhile, the investment realization in the fourth quarter of 2020 grew 3.1 percent year on year to 214.7 trillion rupiahs (some 15.26 billion dollars).

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THAILAND: Cabinet Okays Bt24.4bn Budget for Science, Research and Innovation Next Year

The Cabinet has approved a budget of Bt24.4 billion for science, research and innovation in 2022, said National Higher Education Science Research and Innovation Policy Council president Kitipong Promwong on Friday. Of that total, Bt14.640 billion will support strategic works while the remainder will go to the basic research fund and functional-based research fund.

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Finance Ministry Told to Help Those Left Out of Govt Schemes

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has tasked the Finance Ministry in finding ways to provide relief to those not covered by the government's existing schemes, Finance Minister Arkhom Termpittayapaisith said. He added that he is considering whether the new endeavour should apply to state and private workers earning less than Bt100,000 per year or people hired at a daily wage of Bt350. The government has launched a few subsidy and co-paying schemes to help people suffering from the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak. However, some groups have been left behind as they don't meet the eligibility criteria.

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VIETNAM: HDBank Achieves 2020 Targets, Bad Debts Ratio at a Mere 0.93%

The HCM City Development Joint Stock Commercial Bank (HDBank, HoSE: HDB) has released its 2020 financial statements showing consolidated pre-tax profit of VNĐ5.82 trillion (US\$253.6 million), which represents an increase of 15.9 per cent from the previous year and 102.8 per cent of its target. HDBank overcame numerous challenges in 2020 to achieve high growth, in the process exceeding all its targets. Its total consolidated assets grew by 39.1 per cent to VNĐ319 trillion (\$13.88 billion), or 104.5 per cent of the target. Loans outstanding increased by 23 per cent, nearly two times the industry average. Its non-performing loans ratio was well controlled at just 0.93 per cent, among the lowest in the industry, a status it has enjoyed for many years. The bank increased provision to be able to deal with any risks that appear. Earnings from services went up by 51.8 per cent, while its insurance business achieved good results. Its return on equity (ROE) and return on assets (ROA) were 20.6 per cent and 1.7 per cent. HDBank's safety indicators have been constantly improving. The ratio of short-term deposits used for medium- and long-term loans is

only 24.8 per cent as against the permitted maximum level of 40 per cent. Its capital adequacy ratio was 12 per cent while Basel II and the State Bank of Vietnam prescribe 8 per cent.

HDBank was one of the first in Việt Nam to achieve all three pillars of Basel II before the schedule set by the central bank. Last year it issued \$160 million worth of convertible bonds to large, reputed financial institutions in Europe and the region, which supplemented its tier 2 capital and helped finance its high-growth strategies. HDB shares are a favourite with investors thanks to their high liquidity and low price-earnings (P/E) ratio. International credit rating agency Moody's recently announced it is maintaining the B1 credit rating for HDBank, and appreciated its capital capacity, operational efficiency and growth potential. The bank opened 22 new branches and transaction offices last year, raising the total number to 308, while HD SAISON's consumer finance transaction point system was expanded to more than 19,500. To diversify its products and services, offer better experiences to customers and more effectively serve millions of retail customers in its eco-system, HDBank is cooperating with reputed international consulting companies to develop a digital banking strategy and enhance its adoption of 4.0 technologies. Last year it offered preferential credit and waived or reduced transaction fees to help customers overcome the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The bank has also taken measures to ensure the safety and the health of its employees and customers. In 2020 it donated nearly VNĐ10 billion to the Việt Nam Fatherland Front to support the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year it won many prestigious honours from renowned Vietnamese and international organisations including for Top 50 Best Listed Companies, the Vietnam - ASEAN Outstanding Enterprise award, Mid-sized Domestic Retail Bank of the Year award, and Best Companies To Work For in Asia award for a third consecutive year. Its programmes for sustainable development and social responsibility and environmental protection have had a good impact. So it was also honoured with the Top 10 Sustainable Businesses in Việt Nam award for a second straight year by the Việt Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry and named among the top 20 companies in the Sustainable Development Index basket put out by the Hồ Chí Minh Stock Exchange. Amid the challenges of 2020, these results once again affirm HDBank's high and sustainable growth capacity, which has made the bank more confident about completing its 2021 plans and beginning a new, bright stage of development.

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HCM City to Invest \$23.9 Million for Motorbike Emission Control

HCM City needs VNĐ553 billion (US\$23.9 million) to invest in the motorbike

emission control programme in the city by 2030. Of that, the city plans to check exhaust emissions for impoverished households free of charge between 2023-2025. At a conference on reviewing the pilot programme on motorbike emission control held on Wednesday, a representative of the city's Transport Department said the programme focused on the assessment on exhaust gas discharged from motorbikes in the city. It also implemented a survey on evaluating the socio-economic impact of motorcycle emission controls on residents, State management agencies and relevant organisations; and the building of policies and roadmaps for piloting motorcycle emission control. Results from testing 10,682 motorbikes showed that more than 1,850 vehicles, accounting for 17.3 per cent of the total, did not meet the national emission criteria's level 1; while more than 2,410 vehicles, accounting for 22.6 per cent, failed to meet level 2. There were 2,740 vehicles with a service life of 10 years or more. Đinh Trọng Khang, deputy director of Institute of Transport Science and Technology's Institute of Environment, said currently there are 7.4 million registered motorbikes in the city. The percentage of motorcycles with a service life of over 10 years accounts for 67.89 per cent, which is higher than that of Hà Nội.

If the city applies the emission control policy, it can reduce 13.1 per cent of total carbon monoxide (CO) emissions and 13.8 per cent of total HC (hydrocarbon concentration) emissions annually. In the 2023-2025 period, the programme will focus on inspecting emissions at the cost of VNĐ50,000 per vehicle per year in Districts 1, 3, and 5 as a trial. The task will be deployed in Districts 1, 3, 5, 10 and Tân Bình District in 2026 and in 13 districts in 2028 with all vehicles with a service life of more than five years. The total cost of the task by 2030 is estimated at about VNĐ553 billion. Khanh said the emissions inspection will be implemented at vehicle maintenance agencies in the city centre and then other areas across the whole city. The proposed inspection cost is VNĐ50,000 (\$2) per vehicle per year. Poor households will have their vehicles inspected for free. Previously in 2010, the Government launched a project to control exhaust emissions of motorbikes in big cities. Bùi Hoà An, deputy director of the Department of Transport, said that traffic congestion, noise and air pollution, and vehicles with poor emissions were causing health problems among local residents. Emissions were normally assessed when automobiles are manufactured, imported or registered, but the procedure did not exist for motorbikes. Through the pilot programme, motorbike emissions will be evaluated and the socio-economic impact of monitoring emissions will be assessed.

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South Asia

INDIA: West Bengal Inks \$105mn Pact with World Bank for Developing Inland Water Transport Infrastructure

With an aim to improve the inland water transport infrastructure in Kolkata, the Government of India, the Government of West Bengal and the World Bank signed a \$105 million project on January 5, 2021. The project will facilitate passenger and freight movement across the Hooghly river; undertake spatial planning to improve accessibility in the Kolkata Metropolitan area; enhance the quality of life of its residents; and contribute to the growth of the state's logistics sector. inland water transport

Dr CS Mohapatra, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, stated that "The inland waterways are now emerging as a cost-effective and an environment-friendly option for passenger and freight movement. The project with World Bank will help improve the river transport infrastructure in West Bengal and help in the economic development of the state by connecting the hinterland with markets and job centres in Kolkata's Metropolitan Area". Dr CS Mohapatra, on behalf of the Government of India; Rajdeep Dutta, Deputy Resident Commissioner, on behalf of the Government of West Bengal; and Junaid Ahmad, Country Director, India, on behalf of the World Bank inked the pact. The project will cover the five most populous districts of southern West Bengal, including its urban agglomeration – the Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA) where around 30 million people or one-third of the West Bengal's population live. As per Junaid Ahmad, "This operation will allow the state to invest in Kolkata's economic productivity by making its waterways and ferry services part of an efficient and safe urban mobility strategy... Importantly, given Kolkata's strategic location, the project is also ensuring that the metropolitan area emerges as a transport and logistics hub for the sub-region, leveraging the EDFC and connecting to the north-east and the land-locked countries of Nepal and Bhutan."

In the first phase, the project will enhance the capacity and improve the safety of the Inland Water Transport system; including rehabilitating existing jetties, buying new ferries with enhanced design; and installing electronic gates in 40 locations. In the second phase, it will support long-term investments for passenger movements, including in terminals and jetties; improve the design of the inland water transport vessels; ensure night navigation on the most hazardous and trafficked routes and crossing points; and encourage the private sector to invest in Ro-Ro vessels that will allow easier movement of trucks across the Hooghly river. Further, to better cope with increased precipitation and flooding, climate-smart engineering solutions will be applied, including modular floating designs for ferry access points at the passenger terminals. In addition, the project will facilitate disabled-friendly amenities, ensure women's safety and encourage women's employment in the IWT Department as well as with the ferry operators.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 01/05//2021

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World's Worst Internet Shutdowns Cost India \$2.8 Billion in 2020

Internet shutdowns cost India \$2.8 billion, putting the South Asian nation at the top of a list of 21 countries that curbed citizens' web access in 2020. India -- the second-worst-hit nation by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of overall confirmed infections -- accounted for about three-quarters of the \$4 billion lost worldwide to internet curbs. Its losses more than doubled compared to 2019, a report from a U.K.-based digital privacy and security research group showed. Some countries known to limit Internet access or censor material like China and North Korea were not included in the report because researchers relied on publicly available open source information and documented internet and social media shutdowns. With 8,927 hours of blacked out or curbed bandwidth access, India restricted internet use more than any other nation, as restrictions originally imposed in 2019 continued throughout 2020, according to the Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns report released by Top10VPN.

Blackout Costs

Bandwidth restrictions in Kashmir -- where the government in 2019 revoked the special autonomous status of the country's only Muslim majority state -- affected access for medicines, businesses and schools despite the easing of a seven-months-long closure in March, it said. India's ministry of information and technology didn't respond to an email seeking a response to the report's findings. The cost of internet blackouts were calculated using indicators from groups including the World Bank, International Telecommunication Union, and the Delhi-based Software Freedom Law Center. It includes social media shutdowns in its calculations. Belarus suffered the most economically after India, with \$336.4 million lost to 218 hours of blackouts and curbs affecting 7.9 million people, amid protests following a controversial presidential election. During the period of restrictions, the report documented a 650% spike in demand for virtual private networks in Belarus, the report said. Myanmar imposed blackouts and throttled bandwidth for 5,160 hours in 2020 amid continuing restrictions in the Chin and Rakhine regions, it said. Yemen lost \$237 million to 912 hours of internet disruptions. At 27,165 hours, major internet disruptions recorded worldwide in 2020 were higher by 49% compared to the previous year and affected 268 million people, according to the report. About 42% of the shutdowns were associated with additional human rights abuses including restrictions on freedom of assembly, election interference and infringements on freedom of the press, it said.

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SRI LANKA: Central Bank Expects Payment Receipt Facility for SL from Payment Providers Like PayPal

Sri Lanka's Central Bank has already commenced discussions with international

payment service providers, such as PayPal, to enable payment receipt facilities for Sri Lankan residents, Governor W D Lakshman said. Introducing the monetary and financial sector policies for 2021, Governor said that he expects positive outcomes in this regard in the near future. “The Central Bank is actively seeking possibilities to develop and promote other forms of payment mechanisms to attract capital flows and to enable e-commerce, thus facilitating cross-border trade. An implementation framework for Open Banking in Sri Lanka is being investigated,” he highlighted. “As the future of the global financial architecture is essentially digital, the Central Bank will continue its deliberations with local and international stakeholders on its treatment of digital currencies, using thorough cost-benefit analyses and a long-term perspective.”

From <https://www.lankabusinessonline.com> 01/04/2021

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Central Bank Advises Public to Be Watchful About Online Financial Frauds & Scams

The Central Bank strongly advises the public to be watchful about online financial frauds & scams and not to share any confidential information. The Central Bank said it has received information regarding several types of financial frauds and scams being operated through social media, Internet-based applications and mobile payment applications. Most of these scams are conducted through web or mobile app based easy loan schemes that attract the public. During such loan application evaluation process, the fraudsters entice the public to share confidential personal customer information/data such as; Debit/Credit Cards – card number, personal identification numbers (PINs), card verification digits commonly found at the back of the card and referred to as CVV, CVC or CVS numbers, card expiry date, transaction verification information such as One-Time-Passwords (OTPs). Internet Banking – user ID/ username, password, OTP. Mobile Banking (Payment Apps) – user ID/username, password, OTP

The public is strongly advised to:

- exercise due diligence and care to avoid becoming victims of the scams operating in the guise of money lending businesses
- obtain full information of the financial transaction and the lending party before entering into an agreement
- conduct financial transactions with regulated/authorised entities
- be extremely vigilant when dealing with easy/instant loan schemes
- avoid entering into agreements that it is difficult to fully understand the implications of the contents of the terms and conditions
- be cautious when applying to easy/instant loan schemes with characteristics such as the following;

Attractive slogans which lure customers in such as zero interest for the first loan. Extremely high interest rates even though the initial interest rates may be low. Advertised as requiring no/less documentation. Adequate information of the money lenders cannot be found. Loan extensions can be requested and are granted at any time despite the circumstances. Advertised as quick approval. Asking the consent to access the contact list, photographs, files and documents in the phone. The Central Bank strongly advises the public to be watchful about these frauds and scams and not to share any confidential information, especially account usernames, passwords, PINs, OTPs or other information required for account verification, with anyone and not to give consent to money lenders to access information stored in the phone. Further, the Central Bank requests the public to obtain real-time notification services, such as SMS alerts, from their banks or non-bank financial institutions, so that they would become aware of any fraudulent activity that takes place using their accounts, instantly.

From <https://www.lankabusinessonline.com> 01/22/2021

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CBSL Requests Banks to Refrain from Entering into Forward Contracts of Forex for 3 Months

Sri Lanka's Central Bank requests licensed commercial banks to refrain from entering into forward contracts of foreign exchange for a period of three months with immediate effect. The new banking act direction has been issued in view of the need to avoid excess volatility in the foreign exchange market and the impact on banks' risk management.

From <https://www.lankabusinessonline.com> 01/25/2021

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What Investors Want to Know: Impact of Sri Lanka National Scale Recalibration on Bank Ratings

Following Fitch Ratings' downgrade of Sri Lanka's sovereign rating to 'CCC' from 'B-' on 27 November 2020, the Sri Lankan National Rating scale was recalibrated to reflect changes in the relative creditworthiness among Sri Lankan issuers. The recalibration of the Sri Lankan National Rating scale resulted in the revision of some ratings due to changes in relativities in the portfolio. After the recalibration, the highest national rating for domestic banks with ratings driven by their intrinsic credit profile is 'AA-(lka)'. This is the highest point on the national scale that corresponds to an international scale rating of 'CCC'. We now have six banks rated at 'AA-(lka)': Bank of Ceylon (BOC), People's Bank (Sri Lanka), Commercial Bank of Ceylon PLC (CB), Hatton National Bank PLC (HNB), Sampath Bank PLC and Cargills Bank Limited. The National Ratings of other Sri Lankan banks rated below this level on the

national scale were not affected by the recalibration. Sri Lanka's national scale ratings are denoted by the unique identifier '(lka)'. National scales are not comparable with Fitch's international ratings scales or with other jurisdictions' national rating scales. The following are some recent questions from investors about the recalibration and impact on bank ratings in Sri Lanka: What Was the Reason for the Recalibration of the National Ratings on Sri Lankan banks? Why Are Sri Lankan Banks Not Rated Above the Sri Lankan Sovereign? Is the Sovereign Rated 'AAA' on the National Rating Scale? Which Sri Lankan Bank National Ratings were Affected by the Recent National Scale Recalibration? What Effect Did These Rating Revisions Have on Other Ratings Linked to These Banks? Why Were the National Ratings on Other Banks Not Affected by the Recalibration? What is the Difference Between a Rating Revision and a Rating Upgrade or Downgrade?

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Extending Financial Sector Aiding Measures Due to COVID-19

The Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) has extended the validity of decisions and recommendations regarding measures to support the country's financial sector due to the continuation of measures to support businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic until April 1, 2021, Trend reports referring to the CBA. The above decisions and recommendations' validity was extended in order to synchronize the regulatory policy of the CBA with the state policy of supporting the economy, reduce the regulatory burden of credit institutions, as well as protect consumer rights. It was also decided to extend the term of benefits associated with loans, covered and restructured state support mechanisms, the minimum threshold for the capital adequacy ratio, accounting for operational and market risks in capital and a countercyclical capital buffer until April 1 this year, as well as non-accrual of interest and other penalties until the appointed date and advise credit institutions to report on delays in credit obligations of borrowers to the credit bureau with a special note.

For the aim to stimulate non-cash payments during a pandemic and reduce the costs of economic entities for these services, the decision of the Central Bank on reducing the service fees charged to banks in interbank payment systems, acquiring tariffs for payment cards of entrepreneurs by 50 percent, as well as deadlines for providing securities market participants with regulatory benefits, tariffs for transactions in the securities market, as well as tariffs for listing on the Baku Stock Exchange was also decided to extend until the above date. As earlier reported, in pursuance of the Decree of the President of Azerbaijan 'On measures to reduce the negative impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the resulting sharp fluctuations in the

world energy and stock markets on the Azerbaijani economy, macroeconomic stability, employment in the country and business entities' and approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in connection with the implementation of clause 10.2 of Order No.

1950 dated March 19, 2020 'Action Plan' on the provision of regulatory leave to credit institutions in order to regulate the obligations of entrepreneurs working in the areas affected by the pandemic during the quarantine regime, the Board of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) adopted Resolution No. 16 dated April 24, 2020 approved a package of additional measures to support the financial sector and adopted the 'Procedure for the Temporary Regulation of Credit Institutions in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic.' Later, the CBA published a statement in September 2020, according to which after the expiration of the initial period established by the package of measures, the period for the application of the vast majority of the relevant decisions and recommendations in view of the continuation of the pandemic conditions had been extended until the end of September. As part of measures to support individuals and entrepreneurs affected by the pandemic, as well as modifications to the regulatory framework for the banking sector until January 1, 2021, regulatory requirements for loan classification were relaxed and dividend payments were limited, and benefits for loan classification were applied to subsidized business loans and the restructuring of loans from public funds.

Besides, credit institutions were recommended not to charge additional interest and other fines to lenders, as well as provide information about the negative credit history of borrowers to the credit bureau with a special note until January 1, 2021. According to the CBA's latest statement the decline in economic activity and income of enterprises, as well as households, observed against the background of the reintroduction of quarantine measures and restrictions in some areas of economic activity, doesn't remain without consequences for the financial sector. Given the above factors, the Central Bank decided to extend all the support measures for the financial sector until April 1, 2021.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/02/2021

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Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy Talks Tax Revenues to State Budget for 2020

Tax revenues to the state budget amounted to 7.4 billion manat (\$4.3 billion) in Azerbaijan in 2020, Azerbaijani Minister of Economy Mikayil Jabbarov said on Jan. 18, Trend reports. "The funds which are transferred to the state budget are the strength of Azerbaijan and the social well-being of its citizens," the minister added. "Each taxpayer, who pays taxes fully and in a timely manner, contributes to the

progress of the country." Earlier, Jabbarov stressed that the volume of the shadow economy greatly decreased thanks to the reforms carried out in the tax sphere. As a result, the volume of tax revenues reached the maximum level, amounting to 7.7 billion manat (\$4.5 billion) in 2019.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/18/2021

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Azerbaijani Finance Ministry Auctions State Medium-Term Bonds

The Baku Stock Exchange (BSE) hosted an auction on placement of state medium-term bonds of the Azerbaijan Finance Ministry for a total of 20 million manat (\$11.8 million) on Jan. 26, 2021, Trend reports with reference to the stock exchange. The circulation term is 1,092 days. During the auction, 15 investors submitted 21 bids in the price range from 93.73 manat (\$55.13) with a yield to maturity (YTM) of 9.97 percent to 100 manat (\$58.8) with the YTM of 7.5 percent per bond. According to the decision of the Finance Ministry, the cut-off price of bonds amounted to 97.4 manat (\$57.3) with the YTM of 8.5 percent, and the weighted average price was 97.8 manat (\$57.5) with the YTM of 8.33 percent. The total amount of orders at nominal prices amounted to over 62.5 million manat (\$36.8 million), and the placement volume – 6.9 million manat (\$4.05 million). The maturity date of the bonds is Jan. 23, 2024. If during the auction the demand for government bonds exceeds the supply and the price is satisfied by the issuer, the volume of bonds offered by the issuer may be increased up to 50 percent. Auction participants must fulfill their obligations to purchase bonds till Jan. 27, 2021.

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KAZAKHSTAN: Disclosing Projects Approved for Financing Within 'Almaty Business-2025' Program

A briefing on the measures of financial support for entrepreneurs within the "Almaty business-2025" program was held at the site of the regional communications service in Kazakhstan, Trend reports with reference to Kazinform news agency. Earlier, "Almaty Finance" credit organization was created within the regional business support program upon the initiative of governor of Almaty city Bakytzhan Sagintayev. During the briefing, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Almaty Finance LLP Zangar Salimbayev said that the Almaty Finance company approved 42 projects for financing in the amount of 8.3 billion tenge (\$0.019 billion). Some 26 of those projects have already received financing in the amount of 6.8 billion tenge (\$0.016 billion). The projects worth 800 million tenge (\$1.9 million) are being thoroughly considered. More than a hundred jobs will be created as a result of the implementation of projects.

The loans were used to implement the projects in various spheres. Among them are the opening of a new laboratory capable of carrying out more than 1,000 different research, the creation of a workshop for roasting coffee beans, the opening of a sewing workshop, the production of furniture and furniture accessories, metal products, stationery, hygiene products, the construction of an industrial park, as well as projects in the IT industry, organizing of e-payments and processing services, the creation of a three-component integrated system, etc. The biggest number of the issued loans accounts for the projects of light industry - six projects, furniture industry - five projects, healthcare sector - for projects, education sector and sports - two projects. "Almaty Finance" company was established within the "Almaty Business-2025" regional entrepreneurship development program in 2019. The company finances start-up and operating businesses registered only in Almaty.

Loans are issued in tenge at two percent per annum - for those who implement business in an industrial park with a maximum loan amount of 70 million tenge (\$0.166 million); and six percent - with a credit limit of up to 500 million tenge (\$1.188 million) for other spheres of business. The loan term is up to seven years, purpose is replenishment of working capital and investment goals. The "Almaty Business-2025" regional entrepreneurship development program is aimed at creating favorable conditions for doing business, increasing the availability of financing, reducing administrative barriers, developing the infrastructure for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), training, supporting entrepreneurs and attracting investors. The "Qolday", "Almaty Finance" business centers and "Almaty" microfinance organization were created within the program.

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UZBEKISTAN: Approving Three-Year Investment Program Worth \$37.5 Bln

President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has signed the decree on measures to implement the investment program for 2021-2023, Trend reports citing Kabar. The 2021-2023 Investment Program includes a cumulative investment forecast for 2021-2023, as well as an investment and loan forecast for the coming three years, with a centralized and non-centralized investment of 928.7 trillion soums (88 206 532 USD), including \$37.5 billion in foreign investment. The document includes a targeted program for the creation of 226 new production facilities and more than 34,000 jobs in 2021. It also approved:

- Consolidated Targeted Investment and Credit Development Program for 2021, as well as its quarterly performance forecasts;
- Targeted program of investment projects to be implemented in 2021 with the

involvement of foreign loans under the state guarantee, as well as with the attraction of foreign direct investment and loans; • List of investment projects for which pre-project and project documents need to be developed, agreed and approved; • List of prospective investment projects to be developed in 2021. Recently, in his address to the parliament, the President set a target of mastering \$23 billion investments in 2021.

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Uzbek Central Bank to Update Currency Rate Based on Average Prices on Stock Exchange

Starting from February 2021, the Central Bank of Uzbekistan will daily update the currency rate based on average prices on the stock exchange, Trend reports referring to the Central bank of Uzbekistan (CBU). According to Deputy Chairman of the Central Bank Behzod Khamroev starting February currency exchanges will work daily from 10:00 to 15:00 (GMT+5). At the end of the working day, the Central Bank will update exchange rates on a daily basis, based on the average prices on the stock exchange," he said. Khamroev also noted that one of the main plans of the Central Bank this year is to reduce the dependence of the national currency on foreign currency and ensure that the inflation rate does not exceed 10 percent. "Entrepreneurs will also be able to buy currency directly by ordering online from commercial banks," he added. The CBU also mentioned the transition from the current method of fixing to the method of continuous auction (matching) in determining the exchange rate in December 2020. It was noted that until now, foreign exchange trading in the domestic foreign exchange market of Uzbekistan was carried out by the "fixing" method. Most developing countries, as well as all countries that have switched to inflation targeting, bid on the basis of continuous "matching" auctions. "When using the continuous auction method, foreign exchange trading in the domestic foreign exchange market will last longer, buyers and sellers will trade at different rates at mutually agreed orders, as a result of which the role of market participants in determining the exchange rate will increase," the message said. The CBU added that this method will make it possible to more widely implement market principles in the formation of the exchange rate, ensuring its formation entirely on the basis of supply and demand, and also increase its flexibility to changes in macroeconomic conditions.

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Uzbekistan's Central Bank Plans to Update Daily Money Market

Indicators

The Central Bank of Uzbekistan (CBU) plans to update daily money market indicators (MMI) - UZOIA (Uzbek Overnight Index Average) and UZWIA (Uzbek Weekly Index average) starting from January 18, Trend reports referring to the press service of the CBU. According to the message, the indicators can serve as a basis for determining the value of money resources by market participants. MMIs are indicators of the market where money and highly liquid short-term liabilities with maturities up to a year are traded. At the moment, one of the main indicators is the overnight repo rate (the rate at which the central bank of a country lends money to commercial banks in the event of any shortfall of funds) in Uzbekistan amounting to 15 percent, and the base rate – 14 percent. Earlier it was reported that the CBU will update currency exchanges on a daily basis, based on the average prices on the stock exchange. Starting from February currency exchanges will work daily from 10:00 to 15:00 (GMT+5). The CBU will update exchange rates at the end of the working day. It was also noted that one of the main plans of the CBU this year is to reduce the dependence of the national currency on foreign currency and ensure that the inflation rate does not exceed 10 percent.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Changes Made to Bankruptcy Threshold

The threshold at which Australians in financial strife can be made bankrupt has been dropped to \$10,000. It was temporarily lifted from \$5000 to \$20,000 in March to give some breathing space to those impacted by the coronavirus pandemic downturn. As well, from this week the amount of time an individual has to respond to a bankruptcy notice will be 21 days, reduced from six months. And temporary debt protection will allow for 21 days of relief from creditors, instead of six months. CommSec chief economist Craig James said the government was understandably unwinding some of its temporary support. "But it is a sign of confidence on the economic recovery," he told AAP. "The government can't leave support measures in place too long but if there are fresh signs of weakness in the economy these decisions can and should be quickly reversed."

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Tax Cuts and Concessions Easing Virus Pain

Tax cuts and concessions worth \$7 billion have been distributed to nearly eight

million Australians over the past six months. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg expects billions more dollars in tax relief to flow into people's pockets in coming months, coupled with other economic initiatives rolled out during the coronavirus pandemic. But he is adamant the JobKeeper dole payment will end in March as planned. "There is a whole sweep of measures that the government has implemented that will help the economy face its biggest economic shock since the great depression," Mr Frydenberg said on Monday. Taxpayers pocketed \$1.1 billion through the federal government's stage two tax cuts between July 1 and January 3. Another \$5.9 billion has been paid under low and middle income tax offsets to 7.8 million people.

New figures are expected to confirm retail spending accelerated in the run-up to Christmas, while consumer confidence readings this week will indicate whether the mood to shop will continue in the early stages of 2021. The Australian Bureau of Statistics will release its final retail trade figures for November on Monday. Its preliminary data released just before Christmas showed retail turnover surged seven per cent in the month to 13.2 per cent compared to a year earlier, aided by a return of Victorian shoppers after their lengthy COVID-19 lockdown. Such strength coincided with much improved consumer confidence as the economy recovers from recession. However, there are concerns how the local flare-ups of the virus will affect confidence, and in turn spending, in coming months. "Closed borders cost jobs, there is no secret in that," Mr Frydenberg said.

"But I can tell you what is a lot worse for the economy, and that is if you get a third wave of (coronavirus) cases, because that does force lockdowns and introduce a lot more uncertainty for business and affect investment." NSW locked down Sydney's northern beaches area just before Christmas as a COVID-19 cluster emerged in Avalon, with restrictions only eased on Sunday. Queensland also declared a snap lockdown in the Greater Brisbane area over the weekend - ending at 6 pm on Monday - after a case of the highly infectious UK strain was detected. The Queensland government will on Monday reveal if the lockdown be extended. Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox is unhappy about border closures tied to the Brisbane lockdown, accusing premiers and medical officers of making decisions at a drop of a hat. "It impacts on business confidence in a significant way," he told Sky News. "It sends business the very clear signal that they're the poor cousins in all of this and they just have to tolerate what governments decide to do with very little warning."

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Strong Demand for Home Loans Expected

New figures are expected to show Australians took out another wad of home loans during the final stages of 2020, building on the record high set in October. The

Australian Bureau of Statistics will release monthly lending figures for November on Friday. In October the value of home loans for owner-occupiers rose by 0.8 per cent to a record high \$17.4 billion, to be more than 30 per cent higher than a year earlier. The ABS said such strength coincided with the implementation of the federal government's HomeBuilder grant scheme in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a notable large increase in first home buyers applying for construction loans. Last week, figures showed building approvals for houses soared to their highest level in 21 years in November, aided by low interest rates and government housing stimulus schemes. Economists are predicting a further one per cent increase in home loans for November.

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Aust Shares Higher Before Biden Era Begins

Investors have enjoyed gains of 0.41 per cent after the ASX closed higher, helped by market giant BHP raising iron ore production targets and US stimulus expectations. The S&P/ASX200 benchmark index closed higher by 27.8 points, or 0.41 per cent, to 6770.4 on Wednesday. The All Ordinaries closed higher by 36 points, or 0.51 per cent, at 7051.0. Information technology had the biggest gains, 2.54 per cent. Afterpay fetched a record \$142.30 then closed higher by 5.22 per cent to \$141.00. Cargo management software provider WiseTech Global closed up 4.81 per cent to \$31.18. The next best gains were in industrials (1.51 per cent) and energy (1.34 per cent). The heavyweight materials sector rose 0.82 per cent after BHP raised its iron ore production target for the financial year. Earlier, US markets closed higher after US Treasury Secretary nominee Janet Yellen called on Congress to provide hefty stimulus. Incoming president Joe Biden will be sworn in on Thursday.

CMC Markets chief strategist Michael McCarthy called the ASX result modestly positive. He said the market was fairly subdued in its response to the looming US stimulus. "We've been trading in a fairly narrow band, and that's been the case since the beginning of December," he said. "We're still stuck at this stage and looking for our next leg up." The ASX200 is at the levels of late February, a little below the record 7197.2 set on February 20, before coronavirus worries began. Mr McCarthy said it had appeared the surging price of iron ore, and the benefits for miners supplying Chinese steel-makers, might have taken the ASX to greater levels. However he said something with wider appeal seemed to be needed. Iron ore still helped BHP shares close higher than those of major rivals. The miner raised its iron ore production target for the financial year after restarting a mining operation in Brazil.

BHP gave a half-year production update and said it would produce between 245 and 255 million tonnes of iron ore. The company in December restarted the Samarco joint

venture, five years after a dam collapsed and killed 19 people in Brazil's biggest environmental disaster. Shares closed higher by 0.94 per cent to \$46.30. Fortescue was up 0.04 per cent to \$24.83 and Rio Tinto ended better by 0.14 per cent to \$119.80. Among big improvers was supplier of materials for lithium batteries, Novonix. It jumped 13.97 per cent to \$2.08 after Tuesday's news that it recruited a professor who works with electric vehicle maker Tesla. Family social networking provider Life360 climbed 10.8 per cent to \$4.00 after the company recruited Randi Zuckerberg, the sister of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Ms Zuckerberg worked for Facebook in its early years and will join Life360 as a non-executive director.

Medical device manufacturer PolyNovo jumped 7.26 per cent to \$2.66 after it said distributors in Poland and Turkey will carry its NovoSorb product, which can help treat wounds. Surgeons can use NovoSorb to help close wounds and grow new tissue, for conditions such as ulcers, burns and lacerations. In banking, the big four and Macquarie all closed less than one per cent lower. On Thursday, December jobs data will be published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. A 50,000 rise in the number of people employed is tipped, after a 90,000 jump in November. This would see the jobless rate ease to 6.7 per cent from 6.8 per cent. The Aussie dollar was buying 77.29 US cents at 1712 AEDT, higher from 77.17 US cents at Tuesday's close. ON THE ASX * The S&P/ASX200 benchmark index closed higher by 27.8 points, or 0.41 per cent, to 6770.4 on Wednesday.

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6、 Private Sector

Asia-Pacific

APEC BEST Award Announced Top Female Entrepreneurs

The annual APEC Business Efficiency and Success Target Award, known as the APEC BEST Award, announced its 2020 winners, from a diverse group of effective entrepreneurs, innovators and managers around the APEC region. Producer of gluten-free, healthy food products, Svetlana Shmakova, from Russia, won the top prize of APEC BEST Award with her company, Foodcode. "The idea of Foodcode is not only about business, but also about protecting family and ensuring that we put health and well-being of people first, through quality, healthy and sustainably produce products," Shmakova explained. "The contest provided us with a unique opportunity to learn more about other business models, connect with fellow entrepreneurs and managers, explore new partnerships and expand our markets," she added. Meanwhile, Cherrie De Erit Atilano from the Philippines, founder and

chief executive officer of sustainable food system and inclusive agribusiness of her company, AGREA, won the category of Best Top Manager in the post-pandemic economy.

“Inclusive and sustainable agriculture plays an even more critical role in the post-pandemic world,” Atilano said. “This award is a testament to the resiliency and compassion of women in the agricultural supply chain alongside men who persevered in bringing food to the table of both producers and consumers.” “Women should play a significant role in our concerted efforts to recover and rebuild better as a region,” said Carolina Cuevas, Chair of the APEC Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy. “The innovation, creativity and resiliency shown by our women entrepreneurs and managers involved in the APEC BEST Award are the embodiment of this spirit.” The contest is an initiative of Russia with China, Japan, Malaysia and Mexico as co-sponsors of this year’s contest. This year’s contest featured 20 nominees from 11 APEC economies, competing under the theme of “Women Business Leadership in Post-Pandemic Recovery.” “All of us live in extremely challenging times now with the lingering negative impact of the economic and health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Natalia Strigunova of Russia’s Ministry of Economic Development. “We believe that women’s entrepreneurship should be a strong driver for post-pandemic recovery.”

Besides the 2020 APEC BEST Award grand prize and the award in the Best Top Managers category, the contest also awarded six winners in the following categories:
Best Growth Potential: Lu Yunjuan, Beijing Snowlotus Biotechnology from China
International Attractiveness: Winnie Chan Wei Wei, Bynd Artisan from Singapore
Best Business Sustainability in Tackling the Pandemic: Norzilawaty Binti Mohd Isa, Lykke Familie Enterprise from Malaysia
Fourth Industrial Revolution Project: Hanna Kim, Grip Corporation from Korea
Best Family Business Support: Daniela Carolina Schneider Alvear, Celifamily Gluten Free from Chile
Best Social Impact: Carys Mihardja, Carys Cares from Indonesia

“The goal of the APEC BEST Award is not only to promote women’s leadership and best practices amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to provide support to female entrepreneurs, replicate the best business models and expand their networks beyond their home economies to encourage more women to establish their own businesses,” added Irina Saltykova, who leads the APEC BEST Award project.

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Mastercard Launches One-Stop Resource Site to Support SMEs’ Digital Transformation in Asia Pacific

To help small and medium enterprises (SMEs) recover from the pandemic,

Mastercard has launched the Digital Acceleration for Small Businesses microsite across most of its Asia Pacific websites with information and resources on how to digitalise and run businesses more efficiently. The one-stop centre features guides on digital transformation, e-learning courses, information about Mastercard products and services for SMEs, cybersecurity insights and tools to reduce vulnerabilities and access discounts on business software solutions, e-commerce platforms and digital marketing services. “SMEs have taken a particularly hard hit from the pandemic, so it’s vital for them to get the knowledge, skills and resources they need to offer an omnichannel shopping and payment experience that drives business and builds customer loyalty in the physical and digital worlds,” said Sandeep Malhotra, Executive Vice President, Products & Innovation, Asia Pacific, Mastercard. “With consumer buying habits and expectations evolving so quickly, this initiative is just one of the ways that Mastercard is fostering financial inclusion and helping small businesses to go digital across their operations to reduce costs, increase efficiency and improve cash flow management – all while staying safe and protected from cyber risks and fraud,” said Malhotra.

The Digital Acceleration for Small Businesses centre is available across Mastercard’s English-language websites for Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong, India and Southeast Asia. It will be rolled out selectively on non-English sites in the future. To enhance the resources for SMEs, Mastercard has joined forces with popular website builder Wix and with Zoho, a cloud solutions provider with more than 60 million users. These partners are sponsoring online guides and articles on various topics – from creating an online store and choosing the right domain name to migrating to an online expense management and accounting platform. “This initiative will further enhance and deepen digital awareness and know-how, allowing business owners and top management to make informed decisions when selecting solutions that best support evolving business needs,” said Gibu Mathew, Vice President and GM, Asia Pacific, Zoho Corp. The resources site in Asia Pacific is part of Mastercard’s global efforts to help SMEs “Get Paid, Get Capital and Get Digital” through new product development, partnerships and distribution channels. These include initiatives in North America, the Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand. After reaching its goal to bring 500 million people into the financial system, Mastercard strengthened its commitment to inclusion by pledging to help a total of 1 billion people get access to the digital economy by 2025, including 50 million small businesses and 25 million women entrepreneurs.

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ADB Appoints Suzanne Gaboury as Director General for Private Sector Operations

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has appointed Ms. Suzanne Gaboury as

Director General of its Private Sector Operations Department. Ms. Gaboury assumed office in early January. Before joining ADB, Ms. Gaboury was Chief Investment Officer at FinDev Canada where she was responsible for strategic vision, including defining business markets, clients, product investment strategy, and development. She has 28 years of professional experience spanning 85 developing and emerging economies. A Canadian national, Ms. Gaboury holds a BA (Economics) from the University of Alberta, Canada, and a Master's degree in Business Administration from the UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, Ireland. In 2020, ADB committed private sector investments totaling \$1.4 billion for 38 projects, mobilized long-term cofinancing of \$2.0 billion for the private sector, and supported \$6.0 billion in trade and supply chain finance transactions. Ms. Gaboury replaces outgoing director general Mike Barrow, who retired from ADB after serving in several senior roles over nearly two decades.

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East Asia

CHINA: New Government Service Platform Sector Enables Inter-provincial Service

The China national government service platform, established by the General Office of the State Council, recently brought online a new sector that lifts the digital provincial border, which once obstructed the process of several most-needed government services. With the platform's aid, applicants for 58 services can have the errands done in any province in the country. These include market entity registration, old-age pension insurance transfers, and verification of professional qualifications. Of the 58 unified services, 47 are available online. In the meantime, manual service channels still exist to address the needs of senior citizens who have difficulties in applying for services online. Unifying services through online platforms is among the country's efforts to create a favorable market environment and provide greater convenience for the people.

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Over 10,000 Chinese Enterprises Veer to Cross-border E-commerce

More than 10,000 Chinese enterprises moved to cross-border e-commerce hubs for foreign trade in 2020, according to the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) on Thursday. With the impact of the epidemic, Chinese enterprises have prioritized cross-border e-commerce development in conducting foreign trade. The volume of imports and

exports on the cross-border e-commerce platforms has grown by 31.1 percent year on year, said Li Xingqian, an official with the ministry. The export volume through market procurement trade methods in the country's 31 pilot markets hit a record high of around 100 billion U.S. dollars in 2020, said Li. China launched the market-procurement trade trial scheme in 2014 in markets of 14 regions. They are suitable for goods exports that involve a variety of products in small batches. The MOC will make every effort to stabilize foreign trade and work with relevant departments to increase maritime transport capacity, stabilize cargo freight in the market, and strive to enhance comprehensive foreign trade competitiveness, Li said.

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China Invests Big in Civil Aviation Infrastructure over 2016-2020

China has been enhancing its civil aviation infrastructure sector over the past five years, with big investment and significant progress achieved, according to the country's civil aviation authorities. During the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), a total investment of 460.8 billion yuan (about 71.2 billion U.S. dollars) was injected into the sector, according to data from the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC). China positioned the civil aviation industry as an important strategic industry for the country's socio-economic development. Significant progress has been made in the scale and speed of construction as well as the volume of investment in airports, which represent the key infrastructure of the civil aviation industry, the CAAC said. As of the end of 2020, China's total number of certified civil transport airports and general airports reached 241 and 313, respectively.

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Beijing Sees Robust Growth in Animation, Mobile Game Industries in 2020

The total output value of the animation and mobile game industries in Beijing exceeded 100 billion yuan (about 15.43 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020, up 32 percent year on year, according to Beijing Animation and Game Industry Alliance. The output value accounted for 19.3 percent of China's total, the alliance said. In 2020, the number of mobile game users in Beijing hit 5.08 million, an increase of 166,000 over 2019. The alliance noted residents' digital entertainment consumption demand was stimulated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 epidemic, which was the major factor driving the growth of the industries. Online game products independently developed by Beijing enterprises have covered more than 100 countries and regions worldwide.

Data shows that Beijing's total output value of game exports in 2020 was 41.93 billion yuan, up 30 percent from 2019.

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China's Small Firms Receive More Inclusive Loans in 2020

China's small and micro firms received more inclusive loans in 2020 as the country stepped up measures to help them through the epidemic, official data shows. By the end of last year, outstanding inclusive loans to small and micro firms had topped 15 trillion yuan (about 2.32 trillion U.S. dollars), up more than 30 percent from a year ago, according to the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission (CBIRC). By the end of November, balances of credit loans and roll-over loans increased respectively by 31.34 percent and 50.33 percent from the beginning of 2020, and the balance of mid and long-term loans rose 11.79 percent compared with the level at end of last January. China has rolled out a set of measures to help small and micro businesses overcome difficulties caused by COVID-19, including encouraging financial institutions to provisionally defer loan repayments and increasing lending at concessional rates. The interest rate of new inclusive loans to small and micro businesses was 5.88 percent in the first 11 months of 2020, down 0.82 percentage points from the 2019 whole-year level. The CBIRC said it will continue to strengthen financial services for small and micro firms to boost the quality and efficiency of lending, maintain steady growth in the total credit amount, improve the credit structure, and maintain borrowing costs at a reasonable level.

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Alibaba's Tmall Global Helps Global SMEs Open Online Stores

Alibaba Group's online marketplace Tmall Global on Tuesday announced a string of service solutions to facilitate overseas small- and medium-sized companies to open stores on its platform. The company will provide tailored registration, consultation, logistics, operation and language services to global brands, allowing them to open online stores in as quick as 30 days. According to Tmall Global, experts on cross-border business will offer one-on-one online guidance in nine languages to merchants from over 20 countries within three working days. Complete international supply chain services will also be provided to guarantee smooth delivery of goods, and quality agent operators are available for beginners. The streamlined procedures and comprehensive services provided by Tmall Global will help global brands, particularly small- and medium-sized business players, boost cross-border business and offset difficulties brought up by the COVID-19 pandemic, said Maggie Liu,

general manager of Tmall Global, at the 2021 Tmall Global New Seller Virtual Summit on Tuesday. So far, more than 29,000 overseas brands from 87 countries and regions have opened stores on the e-commerce platform of Tmall Global, covering over 5,800 categories.

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Tencent, Automaker Geely Team Up on Expanding Digital Service

Chinese automaker Geely Auto Group and technology giant Tencent signed an agreement on Tuesday to carry out cooperation in various fields, including digital marketing, autonomous driving and low-carbon development. The two companies will work together to realize industrial digitalization in terms of product development and research, manufacturing, marketing, user operation and after-sales service. Cooperation will also be conducted on the integration of mobile applications with multi-media services on vehicles and exploring opportunities in intelligent transportation. Tencent will help Geely realize digital upgrading, sustainable development and low-carbon development, said Tang Daosheng, senior executive vice-president of Tencent, adding that the two companies will join hands to train high-tech talents. Geely expects to improve user experience by upgrading its industrial chain through digital means, said An Conghui, president of Geely Holding Group and CEO of Geely Auto Group. In 2018, Geely and Tencent cooperated for the first time to develop digital services on high-speed trains along with China Railways Investment Co., Ltd.

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China to Build 30 "Fully Connected" 5G Factories by 2023

China aims to build 30 "fully connected" 5G factories in 10 key industries by 2023, as the country has fast-tracked industrial Internet development through integration with 5G technologies. Three to five industrial Internet platforms with international influence will come into being and a big data center for industrial Internet will be established by 2023, said an action plan on industrial Internet development for the next three years, which was unveiled by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). The action plan pointed out that the next three years (2021-2023) will be the period of the rapid growth of China's industrial Internet. Emerging business formats will prevail such as intelligent manufacturing, network-based collaboration and personalized customization during the period, it said. The industrial Internet, also known as the Internet of Things (IoT) for industry, refers to the broader

adoption of advanced technologies such as next-generation wireless networks, big data and artificial intelligence and IoT. MIIT data showed China has already nurtured over 70 industrial Internet platforms into regional influence, connecting about 60 million sets of industrial equipment and more than 400,000 industrial enterprises.

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China's Banking, Insurance Sectors to Strengthen Support for Real Economy

China's banking and insurance sectors will ramp up support for the real economy and unveil measures to prevent financial risks in 2021, the country's top banking and insurance regulator said on Wednesday. Banking institutions will further improve their financial services and shore up small businesses with more loan issuances, according to the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission. These institutions issued new loans worth 19.6 trillion yuan (about 3.03 trillion U.S. dollars) last year, up by 12.8 percent year on year. A total of 2.2 trillion yuan of new loans flowed to the manufacturing industry, data from the commission showed. To prevent and mitigate financial risks, the commission urged the banking sector to keep the macro leverage ratio stable and strengthen the disposal of non-performing assets. Calling for efforts to improve risk management and impose more severe crackdowns on illegal financial behaviors, the commission vowed to tighten regulation on shadow banking and internet finance. It will also seek multiple approaches to replenish the capital for small and medium-sized banks, including encouraging local governments to issue special bonds.

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China's Private Consumption to More Than Double by 2030: Report

China is expected to see the size of its private consumption more than double in the next decade, with the share of services slated to outgrow goods, according to a research report from Morgan Stanley. The country's private consumption is likely to reach 12.7 trillion U.S. dollars by 2030, making China a global consumption powerhouse and matching the size of the current U.S. market, the investment bank forecast. A key shift in China's consumption structure over the next 10 years is that consumption of services will overtake that of goods, with the share of services in consumption reaching 52 percent by 2030, the report noted. The expansion of the country's consumption market will come along with fundamental changes in the

domestic consumption landscape. The purchasing power of Chinese consumers is expected to further grow in the next 10 years as disposable income per capita is projected to double by 2030, according to the report. Demographic changes, an important factor impacting consumer behavior will also occur in the 10-year span.

The focus of China's consumption demand will shift from the current needs of young consumers to household and retirement services, as people aged between 35-44 and over 55 are expected to dominate the country's purchasing power, according to the bank's calculations. Meanwhile, continuous government support will contribute to unleashing the country's consumption potential, the report noted. Chinese policymakers on many occasions underscored enhancing domestic consumption as part of its efforts to promoting the "dual circulation" development paradigm. Efforts should be made on leveraging the role of consumption in boosting economic development, fostering new consumption models and widening market access in the services consumption sector, according to the country's proposals for the 14th Five-Year Plan. The report also highlighted other factors in promoting a consumption boom in China, such as the wide adoption of digital technologies, which will improve consumption efficiency, and Chinese families' traditional values of providing strong financial support.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/28/2021

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China to Promote Development of Basic Electronic Components Industry

China will push forward the development of the basic electronic components industry to achieve breakthroughs in the next three years, according to an action plan released by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology on Friday. The three-year action plan said the breakthroughs are expected to be achieved in major sectors such as smart terminals, 5G and industrial internet, and the annual total sales of electronic components are expected to reach 2.1 trillion yuan (about 324.5 billion U.S. dollars) by 2023, according to the plan. By the end of 2023, the competitiveness of advantageous products and industrial chains' safety and supply levels will be further enhanced, according to the ministry. Specifically, the ministry said that patents of key products such as multi-layer ceramic capacitors (MLCCs) and optical fiber communication devices would be better leveraged to forge a batch of enterprises with competitive advantages in the global market. A mobile phone contains more than 1,000 MLCCs, and a new energy vehicle uses more than 10,000 MLCCs. China boasts a generally complete domestic supply chain of electronic components, but it has yet to reach an advanced international level in terms of technology and industrialization, said Yang Xudong, an official with the ministry. The ministry said it will beef up policy support, encourage more investment including social capital in the industry and deepen international exchanges and cooperation.

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China's Software, IT Service Sector Posts 2020 Profit Growth

China's software and information technology (IT) service industry reported a 7.8-percent year-on-year increase in combined profits last year, official data showed. The sector's total profits reached nearly 1.07 trillion yuan (about 165.4 billion U.S. dollars), according to data from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. Last year, the software and IT service sector raked in an accumulated revenue of 8.16 trillion yuan, up 13.3 percent from one year earlier. The sector's exports dipped 2.4 percent on a year-on-year basis to 47.87 billion U.S. dollars. A breakdown of the data showed that revenue from software products went up 10.1 percent year on year to 2.27 trillion yuan, and that of IT services rose 15.2 percent to 4.99 trillion yuan. Meanwhile, the sales revenue of information security-related products and services totaled 149.8 billion yuan, 10 percent higher than in 2019.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 01/30/2021

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JAPAN: Major Japanese Firms Urge Gov't to Bolster 2030 Renewables Goal

Major firms including Sony, Panasonic and Nissan on Monday urged the Japanese government to make its 2030 renewable energy target twice as ambitious. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga last year set a 2050 deadline for Japan to become carbon-neutral, but the country's shorter term renewables goal has long been criticised as lagging. Japan currently aims to source between 22 and 24 percent of its power from solar, wind and other renewables by 2030, a target set three years ago and soon to be reassessed as the government revises its energy strategy. A group of 92 corporations known as the Japan Climate Initiative on Monday urged ministers to double this goal to 40-50 percent. Many of Japan's biggest firms, from Fujifilm to Toshiba, as well as household names in insurance, electricity and food and drink, signed the petition. "In order for Japan to meet its responsibilities to be one of the leaders in global efforts (against climate change), the target needs to be much more ambitious," they said in a statement.

"An ambitious target will stimulate renewable energy deployment, and Japanese companies will be able to play a greater role in the global business environment, where decarbonization is accelerating." Japan's renewable energy use was around 17 percent in 2017. And by some estimates it may have already hit its 2030 target

last year, due to a combination of growth in the green energy sector and a pandemic-related fall in demand. The country plowed \$16.5 billion into renewable energy in 2019, according to a U.N. report -- making it the world's fourth biggest investor in the sector, but still far behind China, the United States and Europe. However, Japan is still heavily reliant on fossil fuels, especially after public anger over the 2011 Fukushima meltdown pushed all its nuclear reactors temporarily offline. It has struggled to cut carbon emissions since the disaster, with a third of total electricity generation provided by coal, and nearly 40 percent by LNG-fired plants.

From <https://japantoday.com> 01/19/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: Ruling Party, Gov't Eye Loosening of Covid-19 Closure Rules for Small Biz

The ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the government agreed Thursday to seek ways to partially loosen restrictions imposed on private gyms and other indoor business establishments to control the latest wave of COVID-19. The understanding between the DP and top state health officials was reached during a meeting of the party's COVID-19 response committee, ahead of the government's planned deliberation on Saturday of whether or not to adjust the current social distancing scheme. The current Level 2.5 social distancing, the second-strongest in the country's five-tier scheme, has been in effect in the greater Seoul area since Dec. 8 and is tentatively scheduled to last until Sunday. Amid the prolonged distancing measures, the government allowed ballet, taekwondo and other physical educational classes with fewer than 10 people to partially resume earlier this month. But commercial gyms, karaoke rooms and cram schools were left to remain closed, causing complaints of unfairness among affected owners.

"(The DP and the health authorities) shared a broad understanding that new social distancing guidelines need to partially allow businesses to resume rather than banning them outright," Rep. Kim Sung-joo, the chairman of the party committee, said after the meeting. Instead, the new social distancing guidelines may leave the responsibility of infection prevention on the side of business owners, he added. "Most members (of the meeting) shared the idea that operations should be allowed (for fitness clubs and other indoor sports facilities) as much as possible, if risks of infection are low," Kim noted, adding that the final decision will be up to the top state COVID-19 response body. DP Chairman Rep. Lee Nak-yeon expressed his wish to speed up the process of completing the formation of collective herd immunity earlier than the envisioned schedule of November. He also said COVID-19 treatment drugs under development in South Korea should be provided for free. "I think (the cost of) COVID-19 medicine should be up to the government to shoulder," he noted.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/14/2021

S. Korea's Data Industry Grows 14 Pct in 2020

South Korea's data industry expanded more than 14 percent in 2020 from a year earlier to exceed the 19 trillion won level, a survey showed Tuesday. The local market for data stood at 19.3 trillion won (US\$17.4 billion) last year, up 14.3 percent from a year earlier, according to the survey by the Ministry of Science and ICT and the Korea Data Agency. Last year's growth rate was much higher than the 8.3 percent on-year increase posted a year earlier. Data sales and provision accounted for the largest portion of the market with 9.4 trillion won, followed by data establishment and consulting with 7.4 trillion won. The combined workforce of the data industry came to about 366,000 last year, up 6.2 percent from the previous year. In November last year, the government unveiled a national strategy for artificial intelligence with the aim of raising the size of the data industry to 43 trillion won and creating 900,000 jobs by 2025. The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,364 out of the country's 8,014 data-related companies between November and December.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/19/2021

S. Korea's Data Industry Thrives amid Pandemic

South Korea's data industry expanded more than 14 percent in 2020 from a year earlier to exceed the 19 trillion-won level, a survey showed. The local market for data stood at 19.3 trillion won (\$17.4 billion) last year, up 14.3 percent from a year earlier, according to the survey by the Ministry of Science and ICT and the Korea Data Agency. Last year's growth rate was much higher than the 8.3 percent on-year increase posted a year earlier. Data sales and provision accounted for the largest portion of the market with 9.4 trillion won, followed by data establishment and consulting with 7.4 trillion won.

From <http://www.koreaherald.com> 01/28/2021

S.Korea to Develop AI Translator in Support for OTT Industry

South Korea's ICT ministry said Friday it will develop an artificial intelligence-powered translator for local video streaming services as part of its broader support plan for the fast-growing over-the-top (OTT) media industry. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it is pursuing the development of the AI-based translation technology as the country's OTT market experiences rapid growth and

local OTT services begin eyeing overseas expansion with their Korean-language content. South Korea's OTT usage rate stood at 52 percent in 2019, compared with 42.7 percent the previous year, according to government data. Competition has become fierce, with local contenders Wavve, Tving, Watcha and Coupang Play eyeing a larger share of the local market against U.S. streaming giant Netflix Inc. The ICT ministry said it will strengthen support for local OTTs to capture more viewers, such as assisting coordination with device makers to target overseas markets.

The ministry also plans to provide tax credits to encourage original content production and pursue a legal revision for OTTs to adopt a self-rating system for their content to speed up their release. To support small and mid-sized digital media companies and one-person media, the government has promised to set up a 26 billion-won (US\$23.3 million) digital media fund. South Korea's efforts to support homegrown video streaming services come as Netflix holds a tight grip on the local market. Average monthly unique visitors to Netflix in South Korea reached 6.37 million last year, followed by Wavve at 3.44 million and Tving at 2.41 million, according to media research firm Nielsen Koreanclick. Homegrown OTTs will likely face more competition from global giants, with Walt Disney Co.'s flagship video streaming service Disney+ set to enter the country sometime this year.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 01/29/2021

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South-East Asia

VIETNAM: More Than 3,000 Firms Seek Support for Digital Transformation

More than 3,000 enterprises have sought the Government's support for digital transformation since early December, showing the great demand from Vietnamese businesses to catch up with global trends. This number was delivered at a seminar held in HCM City on Thursday to discuss opportunities and challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises in digital transformation. The event, hosted by the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), was within the framework of a joint programme of the two sides to support firms in digital transformation for 2021-25. Speaking at the event, Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment Trần Duy Đông said digital transformation was a solution of vital importance for businesses worldwide, including those in Việt Nam. Since the announcement of the programme on December 3, 2020, more than 3,000 enterprises had approached the programme for help, with some 500 micro, small and medium enterprises among them deemed to have a real demand for digital transformation.

The programme was assessing the enterprises' readiness for digital transformation

and would provide them in-depth consultation based on their specific needs, Đông said. During the past more than one month, the programme drew some 60 technological companies and experts in digital transformation, many of them are developing 'Make in Vietnam' platforms. USAID Vietnam Director of the Economic Growth and State Governance Office Gregory Leon said the MoPI had built online curricula to share digital transformation knowledge to enterprises, attracting thousands of visits. The five-year programme aims to help all companies gain a better awareness of digital transformation. At least 100,000 will receive technical support in the field, and a network of at least 100 organisations and experts will be established to supply digital transformation solutions to firms. Several experts proposed firms should improve customer experience, with a focus on distribution and marketing systems, and supply chain. The rate of Vietnamese firms using digital payment services is on par with several regional nations while the rate of fixed and mobile broadband subscriptions is relatively high compared to Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/22/2021

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Shipping Industry Needs State Support to Develop: Ministry

The domestic shipping industry needs support from the State to develop Việt Nam's fleet of cargo ships, according to the Ministry of Transport. The development of cargo ships is part of the strategy to develop Việt Nam's marine economy by 2030. Therefore, the ministry has proposed the Prime Minister consider and adjust financial mechanisms to support the development of the fleet, including loans with preferential interest rates. Investment in a fleet of ships requires huge and long-term capital, while local enterprises are unlikely to be able to invest in high-quality fleets, according to Deputy Minister of Transport Nguyễn Nhật. The shipping companies have received very little financial support from the Government in the past few years to carry out fleet development. Interest rates on bank loans in Việt Nam are from 8-10 per cent per year, higher than interest rates in other countries such as Japan (1-2 per cent), Singapore (3 per cent) and China (4.5 per cent). At the same time, when registering a ship to fly the Vietnamese flag, the enterprise must carry out procedures on importing ships and have to pay taxes and fees such as registration fee, value-added tax and import tax on ships. Some ship owners have registered ships with foreign nationality to reduce taxes and fees.

In addition, the ministry proposed the Government reduce the corporate income tax for shipping enterprises from 20 per cent to 15 per cent within 3 years and personal income tax for seafarers by increasing the threshold of wages that are subject to tax. To encourage the shipping companies to eliminate old ships with ineffective operations, the ministry has proposed exemption or reduction of taxes and fees, such as registration fees and VAT, when building or buying new and specialised

ships suitable for transport needs. It has also suggested that the State should have coastal fleet management policies to meet the domestic transport demand, promote freight by sea and improve connection among modes of transport. According to Nhật, most Vietnamese shipping companies are small sized businesses and they mainly transport cargo but do not provide logistics services, leading to low efficiency in business activities. The fleet structure is not developed properly with a large number of ships with small tonnage and lack of ships with large tonnage that could be used on international routes and specialised ships such as ships transporting liquefied gas, chemicals and bulk cement.

Vietnamese enterprises only have ships with a capacity of 1,800 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) while foreign firms have vessels of over 20,000 TEUs. In addition, Việt Nam's fleet of seagoing vessels is over 15 years old and many of them use old technology, which is not suitable for transporting import and export goods. They cannot compete with the new generation fleet of foreign enterprises. An unstable source of cargo means Vietnamese shipping companies have not dared invest in building new ships. Nhật said Việt Nam's fleets transport most types of cargo on the domestic sea routes, excluding liquid cargo (LPG) and bulk cement. For the type of cargo that the Vietnamese fleet is not eligible for transport, the ministry has licensed ships carrying foreign flags of Vietnamese enterprises to run domestic routes for a short time. To encourage the development of specialised ships, he said the ministry had requested enterprises to build or buy ships to replace foreign-nationality vessels, because Việt Nam would only license foreign-nationality ships until the end of 2023 to operate on domestic routes. According to the ministry, the percentage of import and export goods transported by local shipping companies fell by half from 10 per cent in 2015 to 5 per cent in 2020. That means foreign shipping companies transported 95 per cent of Việt Nam's import and export goods.

The foreign shipping companies have 10 different types of fees and surcharges besides freight for Việt Nam's import-export goods owners, including a container imbalance surcharge, bill fee and lead clamp charge. In addition, "the shipping companies have continuously increased surcharges and freight rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to higher transportation costs. That has impacted Vietnamese enterprises," Nhật said. Vietnamese enterprises have delivered and received goods at Vietnamese ports, so the right to hire vehicles is undertaken by foreign partners, Vietnamese shippers depend entirely on foreign shipping companies and are forced to pay surcharges implemented by those shipping companies, according to Nhật. According to the Ministry of Transport, the volume of goods through Việt Nam's seaports has grown steadily over the past five years with an average growth rate at 13.8 per cent. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of volume in 2020 was 4 per cent, slower than the annual average. Of which, the volume of container cargo through the local seaports in 2020 was estimated at 22.1 million TEU, up 13 per cent compared to 2019.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/26/2021

Vietnamese Manufacturers Urged to Embrace Industry 4.0

Việt Nam's capability to technologically upgrade the manufacturing industry was the central theme at a recent international webinar. Hosted by RMIT University's Centre of Digital Excellence (CODE) and ADVANTAGE AUSTRIA, the webinar, 'Towards Manufacturing 4.0' connected Government officials, universities and Vietnamese manufacturing companies with international partners, including industrial technology leaders from Austria. Head of CODE Associate Professor Jerry Watkins said the webinar is perfectly timed to help Vietnamese manufacturers plan their next technology investments as global markets continue their recovery. "One of the biggest opportunities for Việt Nam will be to upgrade the capability of its manufacturing sector using emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and the internet of things," he said. "We've already seen VinFast making a significant investment in robotics and automation, which is a clear signal of the kind of opportunities available to those Vietnamese manufacturers willing to invest in technology and innovation." According to Austrian Commercial Counsellor Dietmar Schwank, an objective of the Towards Manufacturing 4.0 webinar was to connect Austrian high-tech engineering and machinery companies with Vietnamese manufacturers who want to increase their competitiveness and cut costs.

Experts on smart manufacturing, robotics and machine learning from Austrian firms such as Bruker Alicona, Greiner Extrusion, RÜBIG Plant Engineering and WFL Millturn Technologies presented cutting-edge technologies and discussed their application in Việt Nam's manufacturing industries. An example of such technologies is FerRobotics' patented Active Compliant Technology, which optimises the sensitivity and flexibility of industrial robots used in automotive, metalwork, shipbuilding and furniture production. Vice President APAC of FerRobotics Thomas Konrad said: "We see Việt Nam as a top potential market, in part because of our two nations' growing bilateral ties under the EU-Việt Nam Free Trade Agreement. "But more than that, the country's vibrant innovation ecosystem and established reputation as a regional manufacturing hub are hinting at a fundamental shift to Manufacturing 4.0 which we want to be a part of." Guest speaker and Director at the Central Institute for Economic Management Nguyễn Ánh Dương said that while Vietnamese manufacturing companies are eager to take on more value-added roles in the global supply chain, many are not ready yet due to a lack of transformation management, digital or technological capabilities. "It's important to identify gaps in their current capabilities and find the right people and tools to fill those gaps. Firms often cannot do that alone and that's why international business networks, consultancy and knowledge sharing are so important," Dương said. The webinar was supported by the Austria-Vietnam Innovation Council, whose Advisory Board comprises entrepreneurs and experts from Vietnam's and Austria's innovation

ecosystems including RMIT CODE, 500 Startups, Vietnam Angel Network, TE-FOOD and Son Kim Retail.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/30/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: Tech Mahindra Joins Niti Aayog to Support Women Entrepreneurs

IT major Tech Mahindra on Monday announced a partnership with NITI Aayog to empower women entrepreneurs in the country. The company will provide mentorship, co-create solutions leveraging new-age technologies and support in partnership with the panel's Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP). "Our partnership with WEP will enable us to nurture an ecosystem for women entrepreneurs that can foster conditions as well as facilitate technological support for innovative ideas and better positioning," CP Gurnani, Managing Director and CEO, Tech Mahindra, said in a statement. Through this collaboration, Tech Mahindra and WEP will jointly focus on breeding new ideas, identifying gaps and providing technological prowess to develop innovative solutions for better positioning in the market and commercial success. The company's lab will support women entrepreneurs through joint research, building go-to-market strategies to drive their growth and by leveraging next-generation technologies to develop cutting-edge solutions. "This partnership with Tech Mahindra underscores our mutual commitment of leveraging new-age technologies to uplift societies and support the aspirations of women entrepreneurs in India," said Amitabh Kant, CEO, NITI Aayog.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Game Industry to Use Experience of Int'l Developers

The development of the gaming sector in Azerbaijan has begun to gain momentum over the past few years, Co-founder & CEO at Turkish Axell Studio company Onur Eyikul said, Trend reports. Eyikul gave the speech during the online 'Game Tech Azerbaijan' event. The company's CEO also spoke about the development of mobile games, the attraction of investments, and the gaming industry in Turkey. According to Eyikul, the latest trends in the gaming sector in Azerbaijan are online games. "According to our data, there are a sufficient number of computer and mobile games in Azerbaijan, as well as local companies of game developers. According to

analytical data, the resume of many Azerbaijani citizens with experience in programming and related industries indicates experience in the development of the gaming sector,” he added. “If we compare the development of this sector of Azerbaijan with Turkey, then in terms of opportunities and technologies they are equal,” Eyikul noted. In turn, the Founder of Game Tech Azerbaijan, Fidan Rustamli, stressed that Game Tech has begun working towards the development of our country’s gaming sector since January 2021. “The gaming sector of Azerbaijan is not popular.

The ecosystem of this industry requires development, and therefore, we, as Game Tech Azerbaijan, help the developers of this industry to apply the experience and skills of foreign developers by holding appropriate events,” she said. “The gaming sector of Azerbaijan is not popular. The ecosystem of this industry requires development, and therefore, we, as Game Tech Azerbaijan, help the developers of this industry to apply the experience and skills of foreign developers by holding appropriate events,” she said. According to Rustamli, in the direction of the development of the gaming ecosystem in Azerbaijan, the Game Tech team will hold various meetings with the heads of foreign companies of game developers. “From the first days of this year, every month we will hold various seminars, B2B meetings, and a number of other events that will contribute to the development of this sector of Azerbaijan,” the founder of the Game Tech Azerbaijan added.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/08/2021

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Azerbaijani Entrepreneurs Using New Special Apps to Promote Goods

Azerbaijani entrepreneurs use new digital marketing tools and special software applications to promote their products, Acting Director of the Research Institute of Economic Reforms under the Ministry of Economy Arzu Huseynova told Trend. “The level of industrialization in Azerbaijan is an order of magnitude higher than in neighboring states, which makes the country closer to achieving the goals of the fourth industrial revolution,” said Huseynova. Huseynova noted that a number of reforms aimed at the development of the agricultural and non-industrial sectors are being carried out in Azerbaijan to support the economy. Speaking about the results of the reforms carried out so far, Huseynova emphasized the growth of agricultural exports. “On the other hand, the government prioritizes mechanisms to support the private sector,” she added.

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Large-scale Work in Azerbaijan's Liberated Territories to Develop

Construction Sector

Significant growth in the performance of the construction sector in Azerbaijan is expected in 2021, Acting Director of the Research Institute of Economic Reforms under the Ministry of Economy Arzu Huseynova told Trend on Jan.13. According to Huseynova, this year large-scale construction work is expected in a large territory of the country. "The process of moving internally displaced persons to their lands will involve a large amount of work in the construction sector," she emphasized. "There are enough construction companies in the country that can be attracted to work on these lands after they are cleared from mines and other dangerous items. Azerbaijan is also interested in the active inflow of foreign direct investment and is ready to cooperate in this direction." Touching upon the topic of the state of the construction sector last year, the director noted that in 2020 the sector showed a certain stagnation.

"The decline in construction in our country is due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and quarantine. The limited labor force, which is a direct consequence of the coronavirus pandemic, has also negatively affected the construction industry. This year, all economic processes and investments will be directed to the restoration of the liberated (from Armenian occupation by Azerbaijan during the 44-day war from late Sept. through early Nov.2020) territories, to the growth of the construction sector," she summed up. For 11 months of 2020, non-state construction companies completed 87.5 percent of the total volume of construction work in Baku. Some 65.8 percent of the work performed by construction enterprises accounted for construction, reconstruction, and expansion, 6.5 percent for major repairs, and 5.6 percent for current repairs.

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State Property Service of Azerbaijan to Auction Small Enterprises

The State Property Service under the Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy will hold an auction on February 16, 2021, Trend reports on Jan.22 referring to the service. According to the data, 27 public property facilities (small public enterprises and facilities) will be put up for auction. "Everyone can take part in the auctions. Also, those interested in the process can observe the progress of the auctions both in the Space for the provision of property services of the State Property Service, and online," said the service. "Those wishing to participate in the auctions on the official website of the Service (emlak.gov.az) or the privatization.az portal, after registering, must pay a deposit of 10 percent of the initial auction price of the property, thereby obtaining the status of the customer," the service added. On the day of the auction, by selecting the section 'Electronic auction' on the e-services portal (e-emdk.gov.az), it is possible to join the auction.

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KAZAKHSTAN: Continues Introduction of Mobile Diagnostic Tools in Railway Sector

TransTeleCom JSC (TTS) continues to implement the project on the introduction of mobile diagnostic tools as part of the replication of the Automated Control System (ACS) "Magistral" in Kazakhstan, the company told Trend. The project itself started in 2019, says the report. The mobile diagnostic complex, implemented in the frames of the project, is used for diagnostics of railway routes in Kazakhstan. The project is implemented at the expense of the TTS's own funds. "The Magistra Automated Control System project is involved in ensuring the safety process on the railway, thus, the project did not stop during the coronavirus pandemic," the company noted. According to the representative of the company, in the course of implementation, approaches to service are changing, other available, less risky sources of supply are found, and the uninterrupted operation of mobile diagnostic systems is ensured by improving the competence of their specialists. TransTeleCom is one of the largest Telecom operators in Kazakhstan, specializing in providing a wide range of telecommunications services, digitalization, and system integration in the field of it, communications, automation, and energy.

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Uzbekistan, Georgia Discuss Co-Op in Innovation and Advanced Technology Sector

Uzbekistan and Georgia discussed the possibility of cooperating in the areas of introducing innovations and advanced technologies, including through the establishment of mutual exchange of experience, knowledge, personnel training, Trend reports citing the Ministry of Innovative development of Uzbekistan. The mentioned issues was discussed by Minister of Innovative Development of Uzbekistan Azimjon Nazarov and Chairman of the Agency for Innovation and Technology of Georgia Avtandil Kasradze during a meeting held with the assistance of the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Azerbaijan in order to discuss the prospects for the development of Uzbek-Georgian relations in the fields of innovation and high technologies. During the meeting, Azimjon Nazarov informed his Georgian counterpart in detail about the main activities of the Ministry of Innovative Development, the initiative of the Uzbek leadership to declare 2020 the Year of Science, Education and Digital Economy Development and the course of its implementation.

In turn, Avtandil Kasradze said that Georgia is closely watching the progress of large-scale transformations in Uzbekistan. In addition, touching upon the issue of cooperation with Uzbekistan, Kasradze noted that the realities of our time predetermine the need for constant efforts to intensify ties and identify new aspects on which it would be possible to effectively and fruitfully interact with foreign partners. In this context, he also noted that the parties could successfully cooperate in the areas of introducing innovations and advanced technologies, including through the establishment of mutual exchange of experience, knowledge, training and others. Following the meeting, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between countries to establish bilateral mutual cooperation.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 01/28/2021

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Green Shoots After COVID-19 Hit Car Market

Stung by the global COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's vehicle market fell by more than 13 per cent last year, with total sales dipping below one million for the first time since 2007. But the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries says green shoots are appearing with growth in both November and December, pointing to a stronger result in 2021. Chamber chief executive Tony Weber said while 2020 was clearly a "terrible" year with Australia hit by both a health and economic crisis, there were signs of recovery. "The trend is looking good. So we're optimistic the market will bounce back as the economy will," he told reporters on Wednesday. "I think it will be certainly north of where we are now and most probably over one million again, where it should be." The FCAI said 916,968 new cars and trucks were sold last year, down 13.7 per cent on the 1,062,867 retailed in 2020.

But after 31 consecutive months of declining demand, sales grew by 12.4 per cent in November and then by 13.5 per cent in December compared to the same months the previous year. That was a dramatic turnaround after sales fell 48.5 per cent in April and 35 per cent in May, as Australia endured the first wave of coronavirus cases. A key feature of the market in 2020 was also the sharp rise in demand for electric or hybrid-electric cars. The figures showed sales of pure electric vehicles grew by 16.2 per cent to 1769, while plug-in hybrids grew by 18.2 per cent to 1685. While demand for non-plug-in hybrids, exploded by 93.7 per cent to 60,417. "We see hybrid and plug-in hybrid vehicles as the natural progression for many to the adoption of fully electric vehicles," Mr Weber said. "And these figures send a clear message that low-emission vehicles are on the way and are part of the future."

Toyota was the top-selling brand in 2020, leading the market for the 18th year in a row. It's 204,801 vehicles put it well ahead of Mazda on 85,640 and Hyundai on

64,807. The company also had the top-selling vehicle with demand for the HiLux hitting 45,176 ahead of the Ford Ranger on 40,973 and the Toyota Rav4 on 38,537. Departing car company Holden sold just 16,688 vehicles in 2020 after General Motors announced its decision to axe the brand early in the year. Toyota's sales and marketing boss Sean Hanley said while 2020 had been an incredibly challenging year and the company's sales had fallen marginally, it still managed to retail more than 200,000 vehicles, something it had achieved in each of the past nine years. But he said its most impressive result was the sale of more than 54,000 hybrid vehicles, which would collectively save their owners more than \$20 million at the petrol pump and cut emissions by 35,000 tonnes in a single year. "That's how you have an impact on the environment," he said. "By selling tens of thousands of electrified vehicles that use less fuel and have lower emissions than conventional petrol vehicles of a similar size and performance."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 01/06/2021

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Industry and Govt at Odds over Quad Bikes

Australia's peak automotive body is urging the federal government to rethink plans to mandate rollover bars on ATVs or quad bikes, warning the move threatens the viability of dealers and could actually cost lives. The Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries (FCAI) says the rules, to come into effect this year, also fly in the face of safety research and have little regard to recent coronial recommendations, which have backed a tougher approach to training and helmet compliance. The chamber's concerns and moves by overseas manufacturers to possibly abandon the Australian market, come at a time when quad bike accidents claim an average of 16 lives in Australia each year. By mid-December the death toll in 2020 was 21, with about half of those the result of rollovers according to figures compiled by Safe Work Australia.

In 2019 the federal government revamped regulations for quad bikes and similar all-terrain vehicles, or ATVs, in a bid to reduce the number of injuries and deaths and bring safer products to the market. From October last year manufacturers have had to ensure all vehicles meet either European or US safety standards and include a rollover warning label. But from October 2021, they must meet stricter stability rules and must be fitted with an operator protection device (OPD), more commonly called a rollover bar. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission says the purpose of an OPD is to hold the quad bike off the ground, helping to protect the rider from being crushed or pinned in the event of a rollover. Two devices have been suggested and while the cost could go as high as about \$800 this is not considered an issue for the industry, with bikes retailing for between \$12,000 and \$25,000.

The FCAI says of most concern to manufacturers is a lack of data to support improved safety claims. A study by US vehicle safety company Dynamic Research

found that the risk of injury from the rollover bars was equal, and in some circumstances greater, than the safety benefits. They instead called for greater use of helmets. "Helmets have significant and substantial net injury benefits and very low risks," the company said. Opponents of the devices also talk about the "pogo" effect when a bike flips and lands on the bar, which could then cause it to flip again, and say serious injuries are also possible from riders striking the bars. They instead want more training for owners, stricter rules on the wearing of helmets and a ban on young children using the bikes. FCAI spokesman Mark Collins said ATVs were essentially the "modern-day horse". "They need to be treated with the same respect. You wouldn't jump on a horse without some training," he said.

Training was key in recommendations from Tasmanian coroner Simon Cooper, who investigated seven quad bike deaths in 2017. NSW deputy coroner Elizabeth Ryan, who investigated the 2019 death of a six-year-old girl who was a passenger on a bike when it struck a tree, pointed to previous inquests which had recommended the mandating of helmets and training, and called for a ban on children riding adult-sized bikes. Since those inquests, Tasmania has passed new laws to come into effect from July 2021 enforcing the use of helmets and requiring riders to undertake training. It has also outlawed the carrying of passengers on single-seat ATVs. The federal government's Assistant Treasurer Michael Sukkar told AAP that the government remained committed to improving the safety of quad bikes.

"The new standard will see improved safety information available to consumers, reduce the frequency of rollovers and provide increased protection to operators in the event of a rollover to reduce the risk of serious crush injuries and deaths," he said. As it stands, the FCAI said, the leading manufacturers of quad bikes are planning to withdraw from the Australian market rather than fit the new bars. It said that could have a major impact on the viability of dealerships, many in small regional centres, who currently sell about 15,000 bikes each year, largely to the farming sector. In turn, that could leave Australia with an ever-ageing fleet of bikes, with no requirement under the rules for them to be retrofitted with new safety devices.

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Difficult Finding Aussie Farm Workers: PM

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has lamented the difficulty in attracting local workers to address critical labour shortages on farms. Time is running out for fruit and vegetable growers with harvests under way across many parts of the country. A Queensland government scheme offering \$1500 for temporary relocation to pick crops attracted just 85 people with almost all of them quitting before the end of the eight-week program. Only 350 people have signed up to a federal incentive program that pays \$6000 relocation bonuses to local workers who take up picking jobs. Mr Morrison

conceded governments were having a hard time addressing the issue. "A lot of this work was being done by backpackers, but obviously because of COVID there are not as many around so that's putting the crunch on them," he told 2GB radio on Wednesday. "We've been upping the seasonal worker intake and working with states to try and get people in but it's very hard to get people to go and relocate."

The prime minister discussed agricultural labour shortages with Queensland mayors on Monday when he toured the state's west. Mr Morrison said a "shard of light" stemming from the pandemic was some fly-in, fly-out workers in mining choosing to permanently move to regional areas. He has refrained from joining senior Nationals colleagues in criticising the Victorian government for refusing to allow on-farm quarantine for overseas crop pickers. However, Agriculture Minister David Littleproud said the states need to "take that final leap of trust" and deliver ways to engage more workers while protecting health. "Otherwise it won't just be the farmers impacted - you will feel it at the checkout," Mr Littleproud told reporters in northwest Queensland. He said he was working with Foreign Minister Marise Payne to find solutions, but the states needed to work harder as the situation reached a "precipice".

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PM Praises Retailer for Repaying JobKeeper

The prime minister has praised a major retailer for returning JobKeeper payments after posting record online sales. Super Retail Group - which owns and operates Supercheap Auto, Rebel, Macpac and BCF - handed back \$1.7 million in taxpayer-funded income support this week. "What that says is people know when they need it, and they appreciate it when they need it, but they don't want to take advantage of it," Scott Morrison told 2GB radio on Wednesday. "We can't run the Australian economy on government money forever." ACT chief minister Andrew Barr has called on companies that received JobKeeper and went on to record big profits to repay the money to the federal government. Mr Barr suggested the money could then be allocated to tourism and hospitality businesses still struggling because of border closures. Federal Labor MP Andrew Leigh also urged large companies that have enjoyed "profit bonanzas" to repay their subsidies.

"Repaying JobKeeper isn't a legal obligation - it's just the right thing to do," he said. "If your profits went up in 2020, and if you can afford to pay executive bonuses, then your firm doesn't need a government subsidy." More than 450,000 businesses came off JobKeeper in September when payments were reduced and eligibility requirements reassessed. Mr Morrison wants to see other companies reliant on wage assistance get back on their own two feet. "It's all taxpayer money, it's all debt, and it's got to be paid back," he said. "We've got to be very careful with how we deal with these programs, they can't just continue endlessly." With JobKeeper set to end

in March, the prime minister again indicated he was open to providing targeted support to specific industries in financial strife, such as the tourism sector. "We will keep looking at the information and take it step-by-step," Mr Morrison said.

"There are still sectors that are struggling." The prime minister was also asked about unemployed people on temporarily boosted JobSeeker payments, which are set to expire at the end of March. He conceded people on welfare payments would find it challenging when the benefits are wound back. "That is the case," Mr Morrison said. "We have to reset it and that's what we have been doing, we haven't done it overnight." Unless the federal government decides to increase the rate of JobSeeker beyond March, the payment is set to return to just \$40 a day. The prime minister said his primary focus was on getting people back into work. "Before this COVID crisis, we were at the lowest level of welfare dependency in 30 years. I want to get back to that as soon as we can," he said. "That's going to be achieved by creating jobs and getting businesses investing."

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