



# Asia-Pacific Governance Watch

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### **1、 Government Policy and Legislation**

#### **Asia-Pacific**

##### **Laws Still Restrict Women’s Economic Opportunities Despite Progress, Study Finds**

Countries are inching toward greater gender equality, but women around the world continue to face laws and regulations that restrict their economic opportunity, with the COVID-19 pandemic creating new challenges to their health, safety, and economic security, a new World Bank report says. Reforms to remove obstacles to women’s economic inclusion have been slow in many regions and uneven within them, according to *Women, Business and the Law 2021*. On average, women have just three-quarters of the legal rights afforded to men. Women were already at a disadvantage before the pandemic, and government initiatives to buffer some of its effects, while innovative, have been limited in many countries, the report says. “Women need to be fully included in economies in order to achieve better development outcomes,” said David Malpass, World Bank Group President. “Despite progress in many countries, there have been troubling reversals in a few, including restricting women’s travel without the permission of a male guardian. This pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities that disadvantage girls and women, including barriers to attend school and maintain jobs. Women are also facing a rise in domestic violence and health and safety challenges. Women should have the same access to finance and the same rights to inheritance as men and must be at the center of our efforts toward an inclusive and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.”

*Women, Business and the Law 2021* measures the laws and regulations across 8 areas that affect women’s economic opportunities in 190 countries, covering the period from September 2019-October 2020. From the basics of movement in the community to the challenges of working, parenting, and retiring, the data offers objective and measurable benchmarks for global progress toward gender equality. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, this report also looks at government responses to the COVID-19 crisis and how the pandemic has impacted women at work and at home, focusing on childcare, access to justice, and health and safety. Overall, the report finds that many governments have put in place measures to address some of the impacts of the pandemic on working women. For example, less than a quarter of all economies surveyed in the report legally guaranteed employed

parents any time off for childcare before the pandemic. Since then, in light of school closures, nearly an additional 40 economies around the world have introduced leave or benefit policies to help parents with childcare. Even so, these measures are likely insufficient to address the challenges many working mothers already face, or the childcare crisis.

The pandemic has also contributed to a rise in both the severity and frequency of gender-based violence. Preliminary research shows that since early 2020, governments introduced about 120 new measures including hotlines, psychological assistance, and shelters to protect women from violence. Some governments also took steps to provide access to justice in several ways, including declaring family cases urgent during lockdown and allowing remote court proceedings for family matters. However, governments still have room to enact measures and policies aimed at addressing the root causes of this violence. “While it is encouraging that many countries have proactively taken steps to help women navigate the pandemic, it’s clear that more work is needed, especially in improving parental leave and equalizing pay,” said Mari Pangestu, Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships, The World Bank. “Countries need to create a legal environment that enhances women’s economic inclusion, so that they can make the best choices for themselves and their families.”

Despite the pandemic, 27 economies in all regions and income groups enacted reforms across all areas and increased good practices in legislation in 45 cases during the year covered, the report found. The greatest number of reforms introduced or amended laws affecting pay and parenthood. However, parenthood is also the area that leaves the most room for improvement globally. This includes paid parental leave, whether benefits are administered by the government, and whether the dismissal of pregnant women is prohibited. Reforms are also needed to address the restrictions women face in the type of jobs, tasks, and hours they can work, segregating them into lower paid jobs. And in 100 economies, laws do not mandate that men and women be paid the same for equally valued jobs. Achieving legal gender equality requires a concerted effort by governments, civil society, and international organizations, among others. But legal and regulatory reforms can serve as an important catalyst to improve the lives of women as well as their families and communities. Better performance in the areas measured by Women, Business and the Law is associated with narrowing the gender gap in development outcomes, higher female labor force participation, lower vulnerable employment, and greater representation of women in national parliaments.

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 02/23/2021

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## **CHINA: CPC Unveils Guideline for Strengthening Chinese Children's Organizations**

The Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee has issued a guideline for strengthening the work of the Chinese Young Pioneers (CYP). The CYP, a national mass organization for Chinese children founded and led by the Party, serves as a school for children to learn about socialism with Chinese characteristics and communism, and is a reserve force for the construction of socialism and communism, according to the document. Strengthening the CYP work in the new era is of great and far-reaching significance for building a modern socialist country, realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, preparing young people for the cause of the Party and the people, and passing on the traditions of revolution, it noted. The guideline stressed upholding the Party's leadership over the CYP work, and following the fundamental task of nurturing capable young people who are well-prepared to join the communist cause. Efforts are needed to enhance CYP members' sense of honor, increase their education as CYP members and ensure the CYP work keeps pace with the times, the document added.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/03/2021

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## **Xi's Village Visit Reflects New Focus on Rural Vitalization**

Visiting poor villages has been a key part of Xi Jinping's more than 80 domestic inspections since he was elected general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee in late 2012. His tour in the less-developed Guizhou Province this week, however, signals a change. As the country has gained a decisive victory in ending absolute poverty, the focus of work concerning agriculture, rural areas and farmers has shifted to promoting rural vitalization. A priority is to consolidate poverty relief achievements. The more difficult it is for a region to shake off poverty, the greater the need to consolidate and expand its poverty eradication results. By choosing Guizhou, home to the last nine counties removed from the country's poverty list, Xi wanted to see in person the living conditions of those who had shaken off poverty, and promote steady progress in rural vitalization.

He went to Huawu Village in Qianxi County that was once reeling under extreme poverty but has received support to develop rural industries and tourism. Xi visited a Miao embroidery workshop there, giving thumbs up to its role in promoting rural vitalization. He joined the family of Zhao Yuxue in Huawu Village to make a traditional snack for festivals and wished the family "a happier and sweeter life." As Xi has pointed out on various occasions, rural vitalization involves work in the following aspects: -- rural industries must be bolstered to turn farming into promising work; -- favorable conditions must be created for those who choose to stay in the countryside; -- cultural activities must be enriched; -- the environment and ecology



must be good and village-level organizations should be full of vigor. The message of shifting the focus in work concerning agriculture, rural areas and farmers has become clear over time.

A key session of the 19th CPC Central Committee last October called for efforts in consolidating achievements secured in poverty eradication and fully promoting the strategy of rural vitalization. At the annual central rural work conference held in last December, Xi stressed that China should push forward rural vitalization in an all-round way as "a historic shift" in the focus of its work concerning agriculture, rural areas and farmers. The year 2021 marks the start of China's 14th five-year plan for economic and social development and its new journey toward fully building a modern socialist country. In that pursuit, the rural areas remain where the most formidable tasks, as well as the broadest and most profound foundations, lie. Xi's Guizhou tour is expected to point out the future direction for promoting rural vitalization. As he has said, being lifted out of poverty is not an end in itself but the starting point of a new life and a new pursuit.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/04/2021

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## **China Mulls Strengthening Regulations on Investor-relations Management**

China's top securities watchdog has started to solicit public opinion on a draft guideline on investor-relations (IR) management to improve the quality of listed companies and protect the legitimate rights and interests of investors. The draft document has clarified the definition of IR management, while offering more methods to manage IR and summarizing practices that have been proven effective, Gao Li, a spokesperson with the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), told a press conference Friday. Listed firms will be subject to stricter regulations, with prohibited activities and relevant regulatory requirements further specified, the CSRC said. At a forum last month, a CSRC official pledged efforts to improve the quality of public companies, vowing "zero tolerance" for securities misconduct.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/05/2021

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## **China Unveils Anti-trust Guidelines on Platform Economy**

The State Council, China's cabinet, on Sunday unveiled anti-trust guidelines on the country's platform economy to ensure fair market competition and promote the innovative and healthy development of the sector. To identify market dominance abuse behaviors in the sector, it is usually necessary to define the relevant market

and analyze whether a platform operator has a dominant position in the market, according to the guideline. Specific case analysis should be further completed to decide whether the operator abuses its market dominance, says the guideline. Factors for determining or presuming a platform operator's dominant market position include its market share, ability to control the market and financial and technical conditions, as well as the competition intensity and accessibility of the market, according to the guideline. It also specifies behaviors that constitute abusing market dominance, such as unfair pricing, sales below cost, refusal-to-deal, restricted trading, tie-in sales, attaching unreasonable trading conditions and differential treatment. The guideline aims to solve typical problems related to platform operators while strengthening the legal compliance of all kinds of market entities in the sector.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/07/2021

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## **Xi Signs Order Promulgating Regulations on Int'l Military Cooperation**

Xi Jinping, chairman of the Central Military Commission, has signed an order promulgating regulations on international military cooperation. The regulations are of great significance for safeguarding China's sovereignty, security, and development interests, promoting global and regional peace and stability, as well as building a community with a shared future for humanity. With 48 articles in eight chapters, the regulations specify the major tasks and scopes of international military cooperation. The regulations also establish the planning, risk management, safeguard and assessment systems for international cooperation, as well as procedures and methods of organizing such projects. The regulations will go into effect on March 1.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/19/2021

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## **State Council Releases Guideline to Boost Green, Low-carbon Economy**

The State Council, China's cabinet, has released a guideline to accelerate the development of a green and low-carbon circular economic development system. The guideline urges efforts to firmly implement the new development philosophy, boost efficiency in the use of resources, strengthen protection of the ecological environment, and effectively control greenhouse gas emissions. By 2025, China will see a marked rise in the scale of green industries, a continued drop in major pollutants, and a slashed carbon emission intensity, according to the guideline. By 2035, energy and resource utilization efficiency in key industries and for key products is expected to reach an internationally-advanced level, and the goal to build a

beautiful China will be basically reached, says the guideline. To meet the targets, the document outlines key measures, including the development of green and low-carbon production, consumption and circulation systems. China has announced that it will strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/22/2021

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## **Chinese SOEs Mull Development Plans for 2021-2025**

China's centrally-administered state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are making growth plans for the 14th Five-Year period (2021-2025), with a focus on high-quality development to underpin broader economic and social development. The growth targets of China's central SOEs will be specified once the country's 14th five-year plan for economic and social development is approved by the top legislature, said Hao Peng, chief of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), at a press conference on Tuesday. In the coming five years, the high-quality development of the central SOEs will be further enhanced, with progress seen in their business scale and profitability, according to Hao. The central SOEs are also expected to double their efforts in research and development to make new breakthroughs in core technologies and key industries. Hao said industrial layout for the central SOEs will be further optimized, and their presence in strategic emerging industries would be consolidated from 2021 to 2025. Central SOEs have long played a pillar role in China's economic development.

The total assets of these enterprises reached 69.1 trillion yuan (about 10.71 trillion U.S. dollars) by the end of last year, representing an annual growth rate of 7.7 percent during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020). In the meantime, their total profits and net profits showed average annual growth rates of 8.8 percent and 9.3 percent, respectively. In the overseas market, the operating revenue of the central SOEs surpassed 24 trillion yuan and total profits reached nearly 600 billion yuan over the same period. Currently, the overseas assets of China's central SOEs stand at 8 trillion yuan, with presence in more than 180 countries and regions. At the press conference, SASAC spokesperson Peng Huagang said the debt risks of the central SOEs are generally controllable. Peng noted that the commission will implement an early-warning mechanism of financial risks for SOE corporate bonds and formulate guidelines to strengthen risk controls of local SOE corporate debts. Centrally-administered SOEs have focused on preventing corporate default risks in recent years and their average debt-to-asset ratio declined to 64.5 percent by the end of 2020, Peng added.

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## **China Unveils Guidelines on Developing Comprehensive Transport Network**

China has unveiled plans to build the country's strength in the transport sector over the next 15 years, setting long-term goals for the industry, with the aim of developing a modern, high-quality and comprehensive national transport network. By 2035, the country's transport network should be convenient, cost-effective, green, intelligent and safe, according to the guidelines jointly released by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council. The transport network should feature higher domestic and international connectivity, multi-channel access to major cities, and effective coverage of county-level nodes, the guidelines said. China should be at the global forefront in terms of the quality, intelligence and green levels of transport infrastructure, they said. By the middle of the century, a modern, high-quality and comprehensive national transport network will be built in an all-round way, with a world-class transport infrastructure system, according to the guidelines.

Amid efforts to optimize the country's comprehensive transport layout, the total scale of the national comprehensive transport network will reach about 700,000 km by 2035, excluding the mileage of overseas sections of international land passages, air and sea routes and postal routes. Among them, there will be about 200,000 km of railways, 460,000 km of highways and 25,000 km of high-grade waterways, with 27 major coastal ports, 36 major inland ports, about 400 civil-transport airports and about 80 postal express-delivery hubs, the guidelines said. China will work to build a national comprehensive transport-hub system that consists of integrated transport-hub clusters, hub cities and hub ports, the guidelines said, stressing faster construction of about 20 international comprehensive transport-hub cities and about 80 national ones. Calling for further integrated development of transportation with other industries, the guidelines also stressed efforts to empower transport infrastructure with new technologies and coordinate the development of intelligent connected vehicles and smart cities.

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## **Senior Chinese Official Stresses Building, Using National Law Database**

A senior Chinese official on Wednesday highlighted the importance of the construction and application of a national database of laws and regulations to advance the rule of law in China. The database will make legal services more accessible to the general public, said Wang Chen, a member of the Political Bureau

of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, at the launching ceremony for the database. Wang stressed the need to build the database into an authoritative, effective, convenient and smooth platform, urging efforts to make full use of modern information technologies such as big data to improve the quality and efficiency of legislation work. He also called for efforts to listen to users' opinions and suggestions to improve relevant services. Users can access the database by visiting the website <https://flk.npc.gov.cn> or logging into the WeChat mini-program designed for the database.

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## **China Outlines Key Tasks for Rural Work in 2021**

China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs unveiled guidelines on the country's rural work for 2021 on Thursday, stressing efforts to push rural vitalization and accelerate the modernization of agriculture and rural areas. The guidelines outlined 34 specific tasks to be achieved this year, covering areas including ensuring agricultural supply and enhancing the sector's technological strength. The ministry will step up policy support to help grain output stay above 650 billion kg this year amid efforts to ensure food security, and upgrade agricultural machinery and apply new technologies to modernize the agricultural sector. The guidelines also detailed policies to make agriculture greener and improve living conditions in rural areas. The guidelines went public after the country unveiled its "No. 1 central document" for 2021 on Sunday, which lists the targets and tasks concerning agriculture and rural areas for 2021, as well as a broader vision up to the year 2025.

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## **China's Top Court Issues Guideline to Support Yangtze River Conservation**

The Supreme People's Court (SPC) on Thursday released a guideline requiring people's courts to provide effective judicial services and guarantees for ecological conservation and green development in the Yangtze River basin. The guideline on implementing the Yangtze River conservation law, which will take effect on March 1, called for judicial efforts to strengthen environmental protection and restoration in the basin, and ensure the reasonable and efficient utilization of resources so as to promote green development. Comprising 16 articles in four parts, the guideline focuses on water pollution in the Yangtze River basin, according to SPC Vice

President Yang Linping, adding that biodiversity protection efforts will also be stepped up. The document also supports administrative agencies in clamping down on illegal sand mining in accordance with the law, and ensuring the smooth operation of major ecological restoration projects, said Yang.

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## **JAPAN: New Law Regulating Tech Giants' Commerce Platforms Takes Effect**

A new law to ensure that technology giants do business with small companies on fair terms came into force Monday. The law for the transparency and fairness of digital platform services obligates tech giants to disclose terms of contracts with business partners and submit reports regularly to the government. Online shopping website operators with annual domestic sales of 300 billion or more and app store operators with annual domestic sales of 200 billion or more are subject to the law. They are expected to include U.S. powerhouses Google LLC, Apple Inc. and Amazon.com Inc., as well as Japanese companies Rakuten Inc. and Yahoo Japan Corp., a unit of Z Holdings Corp. The government plans to make its final decision on which companies are bound by the law in around spring to fully implement the new law's rules. The law is aimed at protecting small companies doing business with tech giants, which may use their strong bargaining power to impose unfair business terms on their smaller partners.

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## **Japan Enacts Revised Anti-Virus Laws**

Japanese lawmakers have just enacted legislation that will allow tougher enforcement of anti-virus rules. The legal revisions come as eleven prefectures -- including Tokyo -- remain under a state of emergency. The revised laws will allow officials to fine people or businesses that break rules. That includes those who test positive for the virus and are told to check into a hospital, but refuse. Individuals who lie to health officials or refuse their inquiries will also face punishments. Government efforts to stem the spread of the virus include shortening operating hours for bars and restaurants. Under the new rules, businesses that don't comply can be fined up to about 3,000 dollars. Prefectural governors will also be able to put in place anti-virus measures even before the central government declares a state of emergency. The government recently decided to extend its state of emergency for all but one of the affected prefectures for one month... until March 7. Meanwhile, the health ministry says it has discovered a glitch in its coronavirus contact-tracing app,

COCOA. It anonymously collects information on people who have come into close contact with users and then allows them to notify others of a positive coronavirus test. But the app has not been collecting or sending out data for android users since September. Officials aim to fix the problem by mid-February. New case numbers in Japan have been declining in recent weeks. In Tokyo, 676 new infections were reported on Wednesday. The daily tally has been below 1,000 for six days in a row.

From <https://newsonjapan.com> 02/03/2021

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## **Japan to Bolster Support for Asia's Shift to LNG for Power Generation**

Japan will strengthen efforts to support Asian countries' shift from coal to liquefied natural gas for use in power generation to reduce carbon emissions, in the hope of lowering procurement costs for the energy source, the industry ministry said. Japan, the world's largest LNG consumer, expects increased demand for the fuel, which is less polluting than coal, to lead to greater production by countries in the region and a diversification of suppliers, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry said. Japan is looking to broaden LNG procurement from its main suppliers such as Australia, Qatar and the United States to include more Asian producers, which mostly do not have sufficient infrastructure for exports. The efforts to reduce purchasing costs and ensure stable supply come as the country faced a depletion of LNG stocks amid unseasonably cold weather this winter. The world's third-largest economy, which relies on LNG for nearly 40 percent of total power generation, doubled its public-private investment initiative to \$20 billion in 2019 to help Asian countries build LNG terminals, storage tanks and other facilities necessary for shipments overseas.

LNG is mostly traded under long-term contracts with prices linked to those of crude oil. Such trading makes it difficult to procure LNG in a timely manner at prices based on supply and demand conditions. Japan hopes more producers and buyers would make it possible to establish an LNG market with flexible pricing. Coal is still a major fuel source for rapidly growing economies in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, due to its affordability. But LNG produces around half the carbon dioxide emissions that coal does when burnt for power generation. If seven Asian countries -- India, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar -- shift from coal-fired to gas-powered plants, it would reduce carbon dioxide emissions by around 864 million tons, equivalent to 71 percent of Japan's annual greenhouse emissions, according to ministry data. It is estimated such a shift would create additional LNG demand of 166 million tons, more than double Japan's annual imports, the data showed. Japan's imports of LNG rose sharply in the absence of nuclear power generation following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear crisis, triggered by the devastating earthquake and tsunami in the northeast of the country in March

2011.

From <https://japantoday.com> 02/25/2021

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## **Government to Strengthen Law Against Use of GPS Tools for Stalking in Japan**

The government on Friday adopted a bill designed to prevent through law the abuse of GPS monitoring devices for stalking. The bill to revise the law on stalking is also aimed at criminalizing the collection of location information from targets through new means expected to become available as technology develops. The government plans to submit the bill, which was adopted at a Cabinet meeting, to the ongoing session of the Diet. The bill calls for criminalizing the installation of GPS monitoring devices without consent from targets and the collection of location information without permission through such items as smartphone apps that belong to targets. The bill uses the expression "equipment that records and sends location information" when referring to GPS device so that the use of future technologies to collect such information for stalking can be regulated without needing to revise the law. If stalkers obtain location information by using devices attached to targets' belongings, such as their cars, they could be arrested before receiving an order to stop stalking under the revised law, according to the National Police Agency.

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## **Governors Urge Central Gov't to Deliver Vaccine Rollout Plan**

Prefectural governors urged Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government on Saturday to present a comprehensive coronavirus vaccination rollout plan as soon as it can. In a set of proposals soon to be submitted to the government, the National Governors' Association requested targets be set for the public vaccine rollout and that details be provided about a system being created to track the progress of inoculations. About 40 of Japan's 47 prefectural governors attended an online meeting Saturday and reached a broad consensus on the proposals, with vaccinations for medical professionals having begun earlier in February. According to the proposal, the governors asked the government to swiftly deliver on its plan, including making available a timeline of when people in Japan can expect to get their shots. They also requested that the central government shoulder the majority of the cost associated with the nationwide vaccination drive. "The volume of vaccine supply and estimates of future supply the government has shown represent only a small part of required levels," Fukushima Gov Masao Uchibori said. "I would like the government to present a long-term plan soon."



The meeting came a day after Suga said Japan will lift its COVID-19 state of emergency for Osaka and five other prefectures at the end of the month. The participants pushed the government to continue employing measures to curb infections in the six prefectures to prevent another resurgence of the virus. They requested measures be implemented to maintain employment, especially for those in the tourism and restaurant sectors hit hard by the pandemic. In January, Suga declared a state of emergency for 11 prefectures following a spike in virus infections. Of the 10 prefectures under the emergency, Aichi, Gifu, Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo and Fukuoka will be removed from the list a week earlier than the scheduled end date of March 7 as the number of daily new infections has dropped significantly and the strain on hospitals has eased. However, Tokyo and the neighboring prefectures of Chiba, Kanagawa and Saitama will remain under the emergency declaration, which calls for people to stay at home as much as possible and for restaurants to close early. Japan is set to inoculate its 36 million residents aged 65 or older in April before expanding the rollout to the rest of the populace.

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## **SOUTH KOREA: To Launch New-Format Social Distancing Campaign in March, Moon Says**

President Moon Jae-in said Monday his government will introduce new social distancing rules next month as South Korea is gearing up for full-fledged COVID-19 vaccine shots. The focus will be on minimizing compulsory measures and encouraging voluntary ones, he said during a weekly meeting with his senior Cheong Wa Dae aides. "It would be changed to disease control and prevention based on autonomy and responsibility from a one-size-fits-all compulsory way," Moon said. He cited "accumulated fatigue" among the people over toughened social distancing restrictions that lasted for more than two months. This has driven the livelihoods of small business owners and the self-employed to the edge of the cliff, he added.

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## **New Legislation Toughens Punishment for Perpetrators of Fatal Child Abuse**

The National Assembly has approved a law revision that would step up the punishment for perpetrators of fatal child abuse in the wake of a series of recent deaths of abused children. The bill to revise the act on child abuse crimes passed a plenary National Assembly session Friday. The revised law newly codifies the crime

of child abuse homicide, stipulating the maximum capital punishment and a minimum seven-year imprisonment for perpetrators. Before the revision, the worst cases of child abuse resulting in death were judged by the Criminal Act, under which the minimum punishment for homicide perpetrators is five-year imprisonment. The new bill was prompted by a series of recent fatal child abuse cases that sparked public outrage, including the death of a 16-month-old toddler in October. The baby named Jung-in allegedly died after being beaten by her adoptive mother, who was charged with child abuse and murder. Her adoptive father was also indicted for abuse and neglect.

At least two more children died this month allegedly as a result of maltreatment by their parents or guardians. Also on Friday, the assembly approved a revision to the law on tax exemption, allowing temporary tax benefits for landlords who offer discounted rent to tenants gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the revision, those "good" landlords will be given up to a 70 percent discount in income and corporate taxation for six months till the end of 2021, an increase from the current benefit of 50 percent discounts. Another bill to revise the contagious disease and prevention law was approved in the Friday plenary session, which will order heavier punishments for those who obstruct pandemic-related epidemiological surveys in an organized, systemic manner or disobey pandemic-related quarantine orders, resulting in the infection of others.

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## South-East Asia

### **INDONESIA: Making Micro Lockdowns New Measure to Tackle COVID-19**

Amid the soaring number of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia, the country's government has decided to take a new measure on micro lockdown in an effort to control the lingering pandemic. President Joko Widodo has asked the regional administrations to implement a micro lockdown covering the scope of villages and smallest administrative units. "Do not let the whole city be locked down if only one person get infected with the virus in a smallest administrative unit. Here is what we often get wrong," the president said at the opening of the sixth National Conference of the Association of Indonesian City Governments at the State Palace on Thursday. The regional administrations have to work in detail on a micro scale, he said, adding that the micro lockdown would not damage economic growth and people's economic activities, as the measure is taken at the level of villages, sub-districts and the smallest administrative units. According to the president, as the COVID-19 outbreak is not over yet, heads of regional administrations should work harder to find new

ways to solve the problem and even take advantage of the crisis to achieve significant progress.

Among the regional governments that have been implementing the micro lockdown policy is Yogyakarta region on the main island of Java. Yogyakarta implements the micro lockdown in two ways - one that is limited to certain fields including in the education sector, and the other carried out in villages, Kadarmanta Baskara Aji, secretary to the Yogyakarta administration, was quoted by Kompas.com as saying recently. The region is now moving all the schooling activities online, Aji said. The Yogyakarta administration continues to provide schools in remote areas with internet networks, he said, admitting that there are still 49 inaccessible areas in the region. Meanwhile, Airlangga Hartarto, chairman of the Committee for Handling COVID-19 and National Economic Recovery, said the main goal of micro lockdown is to reduce positive cases and flatten the curve as the main prerequisite for a success in handling COVID-19. In addition, the policy on the micro lockdown also aims to restore the national economy, Hartarto, who is also the Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, told a virtual press conference.

The rules on the implementation of micro lockdown include efforts to increase the implementation of 3T (Testing, Tracing and Treatment). The testing is carried out by conducting free antigen swab tests to the people. The government also provides basic necessities to people in the virus-prone areas and face masks to all people in villages. Likewise, the government requires 50 percent of employees of an office to work from home, and allows schooling only online. Companies in the essential sector dealing with public basic necessities are allowed to fully operate by applying health protocols. The policy requires restaurants to limit the number of diners by 50 percent of their seat capacities and shopping centers to open until 9 p.m. local time, while take-away orders are allowed to run as usual. A construction project is allowed to fully operate under more stringent health protocols, and a mosque is required to accommodate 50 percent of its capacity. During the micro lockdown period, public facilities and socio-cultural activities are closed, while the capacity and operational hours of public transportation are limited.

Following the first detection of COVID-19 case in Indonesia on March 2, 2020, the government called on Indonesians to apply social distancing to contain the spread of the virus in the country. Since then some policies have been made including those on the large-scale social restrictions, locally known as its acronym PSBB, and enforcement of restrictions on people's activities (PPKM). The government has issued a policy on micro lockdown effective from Feb. 9 to 22, 2021, as the number of COVID-19 cases increased with the highest daily tally in Indonesia recorded at 14,224 on Jan. 16, 2021. The Health Ministry said on Saturday that the COVID-19 cases in Indonesia rose by 8,844 within one day to 1,210,703, with the death toll adding by 280 to 32,936, According to the ministry, 11,919 more people were discharged from hospitals, bringing the total number of recovered patients to

1,016,036.

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## **MYANMAR: To Have Friendly Cooperation with All Countries**

Myanmar will conduct friendly cooperation with all countries while the country's foreign policy will not change, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Sen-Gen Min Aung Hlaing said on Monday. In his first televised message to the public after the declaration of a one-year state of emergency, he said that during the period, there will be no change in foreign, executive and economic policies and Myanmar will continue its current political path. Min Aung Hlaing, in his capacity as chairperson of the State Administration Council, reiterated a five-point roadmap to be implemented during the state of emergency. Under the roadmap, the Union Election Commission, which was recently reformed, has been reviewing the electoral process of last year's general elections, he said. The ongoing preventive measures against COVID-19 will continue to be implemented without losing momentum, while emphasis will be put on distributing vaccines all over the country.

Arrangements are being made to help the businesses which were affected by COVID-19, the commander-in-chief said, calling for investment from both home and abroad. The council's chairperson stressed plans to achieve eternal peace across the country in accordance with a nationwide ceasefire agreement and called for cooperation of the ethnic people and ethnic armed organizations to achieve the lasting peace. The council will hold free and fair general elections and the power of the state will be handed over to the political party which wins the elections in line with democracy standards after tasks were accomplished under the state of emergency, he said. The country declared the state of emergency after President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained by the military on Feb. 1. The military had demanded the postponement of new parliamentary sessions, citing massive voting fraud in the November 2020 elections, which saw the National League for Democracy win a majority of seats in both houses of parliament. Myanmar's Union Election Commission dismissed the allegation. Peaceful protests across Myanmar continued on Monday. Demonstrators demanded the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, among others. The Myanmar military called for stability, public security and rule of law in the country amid ongoing protests earlier on Monday.

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## **Myanmar's State Administration Council Amends Law on Protecting Citizens' Personal Freedom, Security**

Myanmar's State Administration Council led by Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Sen-Gen Min Aung Hlaing on Saturday issued an order amending the Protection of the Citizens for the Personal Freedom and Personal Security Law. According to the order, Sections 5, 7 and 8 of the law will be suspended during the state of emergency declared on Feb. 1. The suspended Section 5 says that the relevant ministry and responsible authorities shall ensure that there is no damage to the privacy and security of the citizen except where this occurs in accordance with existing law, and when acting in accordance with existing law, the authorities shall not enter into a person's residence or private places for the purpose of search, seizure, or arrest, unless accompanied by minimum of two witnesses from local administration organizations. The suspended Section 7 of the law says that no one shall be detained for more than 24 hours without permission from a court unless the detention is in accordance with existing law. The Section 8 limited entering into a citizen's private residence or room for the purpose of search, seizure, or arrest, surveilling, spying upon or investigating any citizen which could disturb their privacy and security or affect their dignity, intercepting or disturbing any citizen's communication with another person or communications equipment in any way, demanding or obtaining personal telephonic and electronic communications data from telecom operators without order, permission or warrant in accordance with existing law or responsible authority.

It also prohibited opening, searching, seizing or destroying another person's private correspondence, envelope, package or parcel, unlawfully interfering with a citizen's personal or family matters or act in any way to slander or harm their reputation and unlawfully seizing the lawfully owned movable or immovable property of a citizen or intentionally destroying either directly or by indirect means. The one-year state of emergency was declared in Myanmar after President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained along with other officials from National League for Democracy (NLD) by the military on Feb. 1. The state power was handed over to Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Sen-Gen Min Aung Hlaing and the State Administration Council was formed later. The military had demanded the postponement of new parliamentary sessions, citing massive voting fraud in the November 2020 general elections, which saw the NLD win a majority of seats in both houses of parliament. Myanmar's Union Election Commission dismissed the allegation.

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## **PHILIPPINES: Congress Passes Bill Creating Indemnity Fund for Vaccine Takers**

The Philippine House of Representatives passed on Monday a bill that creates an indemnity fund to pay Filipinos "in case of death, permanent disability or

hospitalization" due to serious side effects after receiving the coronavirus vaccine shots. The COVID-19 vaccination bill, which includes a provision that allocates an indemnification fund of 500 million pesos (roughly 10.3 million U.S. dollars), also seeks to hasten the government's purchase of the coronavirus vaccines. "The claim for indemnification for serious adverse event directly arising from the administration of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine must be filed within five years from the day of inoculation," the House bill reads. The proposed law is vital after vaccine makers Pfizer and AstraZeneca demanded an indemnification agreement and indemnity law at the last minute, causing the delay in delivering vaccines under the COVAX facility. The House bill also allows the local government units to buy vaccines through a multi-party agreement involving the national coronavirus task force, the Department of Health (DOH), and the vaccine supplier.

The bill also allows provinces, cities, and municipalities to make an advance payment of 50 percent of the total costs to the vaccine manufacturers. It also seeks to exempt vaccines from customs duties, value-added tax, excise tax, donor tax, and other fees. The bill tasked the DOH to issue vaccine passports to record the vaccinations received by individuals. The Philippine Senate is crafting its version of the bill. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has rejected the proposal to ease the country's quarantine restrictions "unless there is a rollout of vaccines," presidential spokesman Harry Roque said on Monday. Roque said Duterte "recognizes the importance of re-opening the economy and its impact on people's livelihoods." "However, the President gives a higher premium to public health and safety," Roque said. Roque said Duterte wants vaccination "to start the soonest possible time to ease the community quarantine." The Philippines' Food and Drug Administration has granted emergency use authorization for the vaccines made by Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and China's Sinovac in the Philippines. The government aims to buy 148 million doses of vaccines to inoculate 50 million to 70 million Filipinos this year, starting with health care workers, the elderly, and the poor communities. The Philippines now has 563,456 confirmed COVID-19 cases, including 12,094 deaths.

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## **Philippine President Signs Law to Speed Up COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout**

Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte signed into law on Friday a bill that speeds up the procurement and administration of COVID-19 vaccines in the Southeast Asian country. The new law or COVID-19 Vaccination Program Act of 2021 also creates a national indemnity fund to compensate any person inoculated in case of death, permanent disability, or hospital confinement due to serious adverse events. "We are confident that the signing of this landmark piece of legislation would expedite the procurement and administration of vaccines for the protection against COVID-19,"

presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said in a statement. Roque did not go into the details of the new law. But he said the law "covers the creation of an indemnity fund to cover compensation for those who would experience serious adverse effects to the vaccine." "Indeed, we remain committed in our fight against the coronavirus pandemic, and we are using necessary means, such as the enactment of this (law), certified urgent by (Duterte), as a way to start our vaccine rollout," Roque said. The Philippines aims to kick off the coronavirus vaccine rollout next week using Sinovac vaccines donated by China due to arrive on Sunday. The government aims to inoculate up to 70 million Filipinos this year, starting with health care workers and soldiers. The elderly and the poor communities are next in the priority list. The Philippines has so far reported 571,327 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 12,247 deaths.

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## **THAILAND: Extending COVID-19 Emergency Rule, Eases Some Restrictive Measures**

The Thai government announced Monday to extend the emergency rule against COVID-19 for another month, but ease some restriction measures as the country's daily new caseload fell below 100 in recent days. The Center for the COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) extended the emergency rule until the end of March to effectively stem the domestic pandemic, said CCSA spokesman Taweessin Visanuyothin. The emergency rule, which has been put in place since March last year and extended several times on a monthly basis, allows the government to streamline disease-control measures without multiple approval procedures. The CCSA also lifted a ban on restaurants and bars serving alcoholic beverages in several provinces including the capital Bangkok but excluding Samut Sakhon province, where the new wave of outbreak was first detected. Alcoholic beverages can only be served until 11:00 p.m., Taweessin said. Samut Sakhon now remains the only province under the highest risk category with continued containment measures. Live music performances are also allowed at restaurants and bars but no customers are allowed to dance at such venues as yet, Taweessin said. On Monday, Thailand confirmed 89 new COVID-19 cases, taking its total caseload to 25,504, with a total death toll of 83.

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## **VIETNAM: Ministry to Boost Trade Defence Measures in Line with Int'l Commitments**

As trade protectionism is forecast to grow further around the world in 2021, the

Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) is set to step up trade defence measures in accordance with international law and commitments. Lê Triều Dũng, Director of the MoIT's Trade Remedies Authority of Vietnam (TRAV), said the ministry will accelerate current trade remedy probes into imports so as to take timely action to protect domestic manufacturers. An early warning system on trade remedy risks for certain exports will be completed this year so that enterprises can gear themselves up early. Additionally, MoIT will coordinate with relevant agencies to boost action against origin fraud and illegal transshipments aimed at evading trade remedies, while working to improve the trade remedy-related capacity of domestic businesses and State agencies, Dũng said. Since becoming a member of the WTO and free trade agreements (FTAs), Việt Nam has opened its market and slashed import tariffs on a large number of goods, exposing its businesses to strong competition from imports.

Trade defence measures, which are policy tools permitted by the WTO, he said, have an important role to play in ensuring effective economic integration and minimising its adverse impact on businesses. Between 2016 and 2020, MoIT launched 13 trade remedy investigations into imported commodities such as DAP fertiliser, monosodium glutamate (MSG), steel, and BOPP film. Remedies applied so far have proved effective in addressing losses caused by surges of imports and protecting domestic producers, he said. He pointed out that State agencies and some enterprises have worked to promote their trade remedy-related capacity, but many shortcomings remain, so a new policy and legal framework that matches provisions in the FTAs Việt Nam has joined is needed. The issue of trade defence as stipulated in Chapter 5 of the Law on Foreign Trade Management, but one chapter cannot provide all detailed regulations. This has led to certain limits in the investigation and implementation of trade defence measures.

New issues frequently emerge in the field, which also requires that relevant State agencies and businesses have in-depth knowledge about law and finance. The complex developments of COVID-19 last year also hampered support to enterprises, he acknowledged. Meanwhile, trade remedy probes targeting Vietnamese exports in foreign markets also increased considerably in 2020 and are projected to rise even higher this year. Given this, he said, MoIT has recommended local businesses equip themselves with knowledge on trade remedy regulations, particularly those of Viet Nam and export markets while readying resources to cope with possible foreign trade remedies. They should also keep a close watch on the import of related products so as to detect any signs of dumping or subsidies in a timely manner and prevent losses for domestic manufacturers.

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**VN's Health Ministry Details COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout Plan, Lists Priority Groups to Receive the Shots**



With the first COVID-19 vaccine doses slated to arrive in the country later this month, the Vietnamese health ministry has issued its initial vaccination rollout plan, including the priority groups to be given the jabs. The vaccines are from the WHO-led Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative, created mainly to ensure supplies for developing countries. Việt Nam as an eligible recipient is set to receive 30 million doses throughout 2021. The 11 priority groups are identified based on the outbreak situation and given the current limited supply of vaccines in Việt Nam: medical workers; people in the anti-pandemic efforts (COVID-19 prevention and control steering committees of all levels, quarantine facility staff, reporters, etc.); diplomats, customs officers and people working entry and exit procedures; military personnel; public security forces; teachers; elders above 65 years old; essential workers (aviation, transport, tourism staff, utility workers, etc.); people with chronic health issues; people who want to study or work overseas; and people in virus-hit regions.

The priority ranking is evaluated based on criteria such as areas where COVID-19 cases are present, areas with COVID-19 deaths occurred, major cities with high population density and localities considered traffic and transit hubs. According to the plan signed off by Deputy Minister of Health Đỗ Xuân Tuyên, the vaccination drive will aim to eventually inoculate 80 per cent of the Vietnamese population against the COVID-19 in a bid to achieve herd immunity. However, with the current limited supply that they have secured, health authorities are targeting 20 per cent coverage in the 2021-22 period, with 95 per cent of high-risk groups being vaccinated. The majority of doses from the first batch of 4,886,000 doses from the COVAX mechanism – 25-35 per cent delivered in the first quarter of 2021, and 65-75 per cent delivered in the second quarter – will be given to medical workers.

In the first quarter, the health ministry expects to inoculate 95 per cent of 500,000 frontline medical workers and 116,000 anti-pandemic staff. 1.2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine are to be used (each will be given two shots as per recommendations). In the second quarter, the health ministry aims to inoculate 95 per cent of 9,200 customs officers, 4,080 diplomats, 1,027,000 military officers, 304,000 public security officers, and 550,000 teachers that are considered in high risks categories. All in all, 3.6 million doses are to be used in this period for 1.8 million people. In the third and fourth quarter, if the promise of COVAX Facility to provide enough doses to cover 20 per cent of each eligible recipient country's population is fulfilled, Việt Nam will inoculate nearly 16.5 million with 33 million doses. 95 per cent of 750,000 teachers, 7,600,000 elders above 65 years old, 1,930,000 essential service workers, and 7,000,000 adults with chronic health issues are to be given the jabs.

### **Budget**

To get protection for the majority of the population, Việt Nam needs to diversify supplies of vaccines – including vaccines manufactured in the country and

maximising the resources from the society (businesses and local administration's budgets) in addition to the State budget to get the vaccination efforts running, deputy health minister Thuận said. Even localities with sufficient budget which want to purchase the vaccines for their populace will have to follow the central Government's approved plan, he said. The budget needed to give vaccine shots for 20 per cent of the population is estimated at VNĐ 6.739 trillion (US\$293.67 million), but over 90 per cent of this cost – about VNĐ 6.3 trillion – is shouldered by the COVAX initiative. The State budget will chip in VNĐ24 billion, some municipal and provincial governments have pledged some VNĐ163 billion, the remaining VNĐ202 billion – will need to be mobilised from other sources. In addition to the 30 million doses committed by COVAX, Việt Nam Vaccine JSC (VNVC) signed a commercial deal with AstraZeneca to buy 30 million doses with its own budget, but the company is not allowed to distribute the vaccines however it wants to and has to follow the health ministry's plan to ensure that the vaccine drive is implemented in a fair, equitable and effective manner. Four vaccine manufacturers in Việt Nam are also researching COVID-19 vaccines, with Nano Covax by Nanogen slated to begin phase two of human trial later this month, and another vaccine by VABIOTECH preparing to enter human trials.

### **Transport and storage**

The health ministry said it would only choose to purchase COVID-19 vaccines that are deemed safe and effective, have received prequalification from the World Health Organisation, have obtained approval from a Stringent Regulatory Authority, and have affordable price tags, and preferably, ones that can be stored at the 2-8 degrees Celsius (normal refrigeration temperature which Oxford/AstraZeneca can be kept at, while Pfizer and Moderna vaccines require ultra-cold chain storages). Vaccines supplied via the COVAX mechanism will enjoy import fee waive, will be imported via Nội Bài International Airport in Hà Nội and Tân Sơn Nhất International Airport in HCM City, automatically given the clearance when they arrived at the airports and then transported directly to State-managed storages to be examined by health authorities. The transport of vaccines to local areas will be carried out by trained vaccination personnel, the health ministry said. The health ministry has also surveyed the existing cold chain storage situation in the country and said that at the same time, the available facilities can store 3 million doses at ultra-cold condition (-70 degrees Celsius), 1.8 million doses at -25 degrees Celsius, and tens of millions of doses at standard cold storage temperature 2-8 degrees.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn/> 02/23/2021

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## **VIETNAM: HCM City Approves Water Supply Master Plan**

HCM City authorities have pledged to continue to carry out “drastic” measures to

prevent water pollution, groundwater exploitation and lack of clean water for local use. “Clean, safe water will continue to be supplied to all city households in every district,” the People’s Committee said. The municipal government recently approved a master plan on water supply in the 2020-2050 period, and another on clean water supply and ending the exploitation of underground water by 2030. Under the master plan, the city will strive to meet water demand in the 2020 – 2050 period, between 5 – 10 per cent lower or higher than the total forecasted demand. By 2025 the city plans to ensure that every resident has access to tap water. Under the plan, the municipal water supply capacity will reach 3.6 million cubic metres per day, using only 100,000cu.m of groundwater by 2030. From 2030 to 2050, the supply capacity will increase an additional 2.4 million cubic metres a day.

The city is also gradually relocating its water supply sources further upstream of the Sài Gòn and Đồng Nai rivers to ensure clean water for local use. The city will build reservoirs to store water for treatment to combat salinity caused by the impact of climate change and the pollution of water sources from regional socio-economic activities. The city will also upgrade more than 1,430km of old pipelines and install more new pipelines by 2025. It targets lowering water losses to 15 per cent. In addition, the city will continue to develop a smart water supply system and carry out a pilot project to install drinking water taps in public areas such as parks, schools and hospitals.

### **Pollution downstream**

According to the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, water in downstream Sài Gòn River is suffering from severe microbiological pollution and slight oil contamination. Pollution indicators like ammonia, microorganisms and manganese have all increased, exceeding the permitted standards of Việt Nam and the World Health Organization. Dr. Hồ Long Phi, director of the Centre for Water Management and Climate Change under the National University of HCM City, said that pollution in the Saigon River has become more serious. He said the city would need a huge investment in building new pumping stations with extremely large capacity of millions of cubic metres a day, as well as investment in long and large-scale pipelines. Experts have warned that rapid urbanisation has put pressure on the city’s water infrastructure, which is ageing. It is a great challenge for the city to maintain water supply and keep pace with economic growth. In addition, the city plans to reduce the exploitation of groundwater by 2025 to prevent land subsidence and protect residents’ health. More than 700,000cu.m of groundwater are being exploited daily in the city. Half of the total serves households, while the rest is for manufacturing activities. Water samples collected from wells in the city have recently showed concentrations of iron, pH, E.coli bacteria and ammonia that failed to meet standards set by the Ministry of Health, according to a recent Preventive Health Centre investigation.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 02/25/2021

## **Bắc Giang Improves Master Plan on IPs Development**

The northern province of Bắc Giang is improving a master plan on the development of industrial parks (IPs) and complexes, as well as land use planning, according to its provincial Party Committee. The province is also refining a master plan on urban areas for the 2021-30 period to attract investment. It built a project on supporting start-ups in the locality, towards strongly developing the private economy, and issued a list of projects in need of investment in the fields of agriculture and rural development. The locality considered building mechanisms to support investment in hotel construction projects and high-end services. In particular, Bắc Giang will step up administrative reform, improve the provincial competitiveness index, pool resources to build key socio-economic infrastructure while enhancing the quality of human resources and State management on projects. The province will actively assist investors and businesses in tackling difficulties and accelerating projects, especially those regarding infrastructure construction and business in IPs. From 2016 to the end of 2020, the province drew 909 projects worth over US\$5.88 billion, marking a 3.5-fold rise from 2011-2015, 616 of them were domestic ones with total registered capital of over VNĐ55.7 trillion, and \$3.84 billion were foreign direct investment. It is now home to 1,786 valid projects, including 1,311 domestic ones worth more than VNĐ92.2 trillion and 475 foreign-invested ones valued at over \$6.2 billion. Projects are mostly in industry with 54.3 per cent, trade and services with 40.5 per cent, and agriculture with 5.6 per cent. Since 2016, Bắc Giang has granted licences to over 6,000 enterprises and 705 branches and representative offices, with a combined registered capital of more than VNĐ64.3 trillion. Its gross regional domestic product has expanded by 14 per cent annually. Cumulatively, there are 10,837 businesses so far in the province, including 466 foreign ones with a registered capital of \$3.542 billion and more than 10,300 others with over VNĐ84.9 trillion.

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## **South Asia**

### **INDIA: Voluntary Scrapage Policy Details Will Be Released in 15 Days, Says Nitin Gadkari**

Nitin Gadkari, Union Minister for MSMEs and Road Transport & Highways, has welcomed the Voluntary Scrapage Policy announced by the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during her presentation of the Union Budget 2021. The Transport Minister said that declaration of the details of the policy will be done within 15 days from February 1. Following the budget release, in an interaction with media,

Gadkari said that the scrappage policy will lead to new investments of around Rs 10,000 crore and will generate as many as 50,000 job opportunities. As per the Minister, the scrappage policy would cover an estimated 51 lakh light motor vehicles (LMV) that are above 20 years of age, while another 34 lakh LMVs that are above 15 years. It would also cover 17 lakh medium and heavy motor vehicles, which are above 15 years, and those currently without valid fitness certificates. Such vehicles are estimated to contribute 10-12 times more to pollution than the new or recent vehicles. Outlining the benefits of the policy, he said it would lead to recycling of waste metal, improved safety, reduction in vehicular emissions, reduction in oil imports due to greater fuel efficiency of current vehicles, and stimulate investment. The minister was also appreciative of the increased budget allocation for the highways sector amounting to Rs 1,18,000 crore, with the highest-ever capital investment of Rs 1,08,000 crore. On this, Gadkari said, the Ministry's increased stress on the monetization of highways will help in expanding the road network in the country.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/02/2021

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## Central-West Asia

### **AZERBAIJAN: Setting Up New Program to Create Innovative Startup Ecosystem**

The opening ceremony of the 'Azerbaijan 500 ASAN Startup' program was held in Azerbaijan, the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations (ASAN Service) under the President of Azerbaijan told Trend. According to the Chairman of the ASAN Service Ulvi Mehdiyev, this program will contribute to the formation of an innovative ecosystem and infrastructure in the country in the context of the rapid development of technologies. Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan Rashad Nabiyev stressed during the ceremony that Azerbaijan has already achieved certain success in the startup ecosystem, a sustainable infrastructure has been built and work is underway to provide access to foreign investment in order to develop the ecosystem. Kristina Tsai, CEO, and Co-founder of the US '500 Startups' company welcomed support for startups in Azerbaijan, as well as measures to develop talented developers in the startup environment. "The goal of the 'Azerbaijan 500 ASAN Startup' program with the support of the Innovation Center and sponsorship of PASHA Holding is to generate enthusiasm and give impetus to innovative entrepreneurship among potential start-up developers in Azerbaijan," the ASAN Service said. Within the program, which will last six months, many online and offline events will be hosted. In November 2020, a memorandum of cooperation on the development of startups in Azerbaijan was signed between the State Agency for Public Service and Social

Innovations (ASAN Service) under the President of Azerbaijan, the US Venture Fund, and the '500 Startups' startup accelerator.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 02/16/2021

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## **KAZAKHSTAN: To Approve National Development Plan**

The National Development Plan till 2025 will be approved in Kazakhstan, Kairat Kelimbetov, Chairman of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Manager of the Astana international financial center, said at a governmental meeting, Trend reports with reference to Kazinform. "Since October 2020, the Agency has been actively involved in the development of the National Development Plan of Kazakhstan until 2025," Kelimbetov added. "The draft National Development Plan forms the main parameters of the country's new economic course in the medium term, aimed at accelerating the country's economic growth and increasing the well-being of people." "At the same time, the National Plan, being a document of the first level of state planning, will become the basis and basis for the development of national projects in the relevant sectors," chairman added. "In this regard, we consider it expedient to submit a draft presidential decree on the approval of the National Development Plan till February 10, 2021," chairman stressed.

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## **Karaganda Region of Kazakhstan to Launch 2 New Production Projects**

«Zhanaarka district of Karaganda region plans to put on-stream two production projects,» governor of the district Yurzhan Bekkozhin told an online meeting with participation of Governor of Karaganda region Zhenis Kassymbek, Trend reports citing Kazinform. It is planned to build a processing plant at the Vostochny Kamys field and a manufacturing unit, ERGRecycling LLP. 18 new facilities of small and medium-size business will open soon that will help create 41 permanent workplaces, he added. Last year small and medium-size businesses received 165 micro loans, 21 grants. 3 projects were backed under the Business Roadmap. This year 50 grants will be given to entrepreneurs under the Yenbek program. He also mentioned that this year it is expected to build 18,000 sq m of housing. Construction of a 9-apartment and 18-apartment rental houses is underway. Construction of a 16-apartment house will start this year. All this will let provide 51 families with new housing. 8 parks and 13 sports grounds will be built in the district. Construction of a

new school kicked off. Besides, two houses were put into operation. 20 large families were provided with housing.

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## **TURKMENISTAN: Number of New Agricultural Projects Planned to Be Implemented**

The Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan plans to implement 88 projects in the agricultural sector, Trend reports, citing the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Turkmenistan. The projects will be implemented as part of the Program for increasing the production of food and agricultural products for 2021-2025. It is noted that this was reported to President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov at a government meeting, during which the head of state was presented with a draft of the relevant program. The state provides targeted support for the development of the agricultural sector Turkmenistan. In particular, the entire production infrastructure of the agro-industrial sector is being re-equipped and modernized, the chemical industry is developing, and modern tractors, combines, and other equipment are being purchased. The country has created special agricultural land funds for growing agricultural products from arable land. Thus, land plots for up to 99 years are allocated from these funds for use by joint-stock companies, farmers, other legal entities, and citizens of Turkmenistan. Also, state purchase prices for wheat and cotton have been increased since 2019. In addition, farmers, agricultural joint-stock companies and research institutes, farmers, private entrepreneurs, and other agricultural producers can take advantage of preferential bank loans, including for the purchase of special equipment. At preferential prices, farmers receive mineral fertilizers, high-quality seeds, and chemical plant protection products. Reportedly, agriculture in Turkmenistan is developing rapidly. It is one of the most important sectors of the country's economy. The main types of agricultural crops grown on the territory of Turkmenistan are wheat, cotton, rice, sugar beet, fodder, vegetable, and fruits.

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## **Oceania**

### **AUSTRALIA: 2050 Target May Exclude Agriculture**

Australia may follow New Zealand in excluding the agriculture sector in its efforts to achieve a net zero emissions target by 2050. Prime Minister Scott Morrison appears to be leaning towards committing to the 2050 target through technology rather than taxation. But his coalition deputy and Nationals leader Michael McCormack says

while the country must do its "international bit", regional Australia must not be disproportionately effected by such a target. Asked on Sky News' Sunday Agenda program whether that would mean excluding agriculture from the target, Mr McCormack said: "That could well be one of the options." But he said 2050 is a long way off and the country faces huge challenges in 2021. "We are not worried, or I'm certainly not worried, about what might happen in 30 years' time," he said. "The concentration at the moment, indeed for me, for the National party and indeed for regional Australia is getting back on our feet after what's been a very challenging year." He said regional Australia has encountered drought, bushfires, flood and the COVID-19 pandemic. "There is no way we are going to whack regional Australia, hurt regional Australia in any way shape or form just to get a target for climate in 2050," Mr McCormack said. "We are not going to hurt those wonderful people that put food on our table."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/07/2021

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## **Govt Deception Led to 'Unequal' NBN: Labor**

Secret documents from 2013 show the coalition government deceived Australians about the cost of the National Broadband Network designed by Labor, deputy chair of parliament's NBN committee Susan Templeman said. Ms Templeman said the government knew "all along" that rolling out fibre to the premises, as Labor had planned, was going to cost up to \$15 billion less than they were saying publicly. "This was a deliberate deception by Tony Abbott, by Malcolm Turnbull, and the assistant minister at the time Paul Fletcher," the Labor MP told reporters in Canberra. "They did not disclose these figures and that's left people in my electorate and across the country with a legacy of substandard NBN." Within a couple of kilometres radius in the Hawkesbury and Blue Mountains, she said some people are on fibre to the premises while others have fibre to the curb or fibre to the node, some are on satellite and others are on wireless.

"A lot of people say forget the NBN, I'm sticking to 4G, if they have access to that. A lot of people say to me forget satellite, I'm going to stick with ADSL. Now that's an appalling state for Australia to be in after so much investment," she said. "This is a system that has let down people." Ms Templeman said the headline figure in the secret document was \$10 billion, but the report says when you look at the cumulative debt, that's another \$5 to \$6 billion to build a network for "an unequal service". A spokesman for the Communications Minister Paul Fletcher backed in the "multi-technology model", telling AAP it had been used to deliver the project efficiently and economically. "Labor's ill-conceived plan would have cost billions more and taken years longer to deliver - leaving millions of Australian households and businesses stranded and unable to connect when COVID-19 hit," he said. But Ms Templeman said the difference between having fibre to the premises and being



allowed to connect to a satellite was the difference between being able to effectively run a business from home.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/22/2021

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## **Disability Court Program 'Needs Expansion'**

A service helping people with disability deal with complex and stressful court proceedings should be expanded instead of having its funding cut, an inquiry has heard. The cognitive impairment diversion program ran between 2017 and 2020 in NSW before funding was cut due to budget constraints caused by COVID-19, the disability royal commission was told on Wednesday. Taylor Budin, a 24-year-old woman with autism, told the hearing of her experience navigating court and prison with and without the program. After receiving a good behaviour bond for an assault at a pub, she lost her job working in the disability sector and said it "would have been a whole different story" had the program been around at the time. As well as managing the court process, she said the service helped her deal with the National Disability Insurance Scheme and organise healthcare.

"What I can't comprehend is why you get rid of something that was going so well," she said. "How many other people are in there (jail) that could be on the program, that could be out, not in?" Geoffrey Thomas, a 57-year-old Aboriginal man with a cognitive brain impairment, was also a beneficiary of the program. "It was an absolutely totally different perspective ... because people were communicating from the minute we walked in the door, from my support worker to the solicitor, from the solicitor to the prosecution, from the prosecution to the magistrate," he said. Prior experiences in court could be hard to follow and Mr Thomas sometimes would not understand what had happened at the end of a matter, the hearing was told. Instead of situations escalating, Mr Thomas said the program helped intervene before points of conflict and ultimately saved money.

"The taxpayers are paying less money because we can identify issues that can be solved amicably without having confrontation with police, involving ambulance officers, dragging it through the courts," he said. Mr Thomas suffers anxiety and said he sometimes had trouble sitting still when there could be a bad outcome. "Someone is sitting there going, 'Geoff, it's alright'," he said of his support worker. "He's saving meltdowns, he's saving confrontations with police, he's saving people walking out of court and having first instance warrants served on them, he's saving people's lives by having a neuropsychologist's report done." Neuropsychological reports helped both with court matters and dealing with the NDIS, commissioners were told. The royal commission is hearing from 33 witnesses over eight days as it explores indefinite detention and the "cycling in and out" of jail by people with disability.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/24/2021

## **New Rules to Come for Solar Households**

Australians who install solar energy systems at their homes and businesses from December will have to comply with new rules designed to stop energy systems from tripping. The Australian Energy Market Commission has announced new standards for household energy technologies that connect to the power system, like solar panels. The standards will apply to inverters, the equipment that converts direct current to alternating current, so that electrical devices can function. The rules are designed to ensure household energy systems don't trip when the network has voltage disturbances. The AEMC, which makes rules and gives advice to governments on energy, says the new standards will help Australia welcome more new technologies into the power system and improve grid stability. "The more we keep the system stable, the more solar we can connect up and the faster we can decarbonise," chief executive Benn Barr said in a statement. It is looking into other changes to make sure the power system can handle more solar. Possible changes include pricing incentives for owners of distributed energy resources like solar to export power when it's most valuable to the system. "The rapid uptake of solar means we must act now to make sure this technology and the system it uses work hand in hand," Mr Barr said. Almost three million households and small businesses have embraced solar power. The new standards will only apply to new and upgraded systems, leaving existing systems alone.

*From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/24/2021*

## **Media Code Laws Clear Federal Parliament**

Australia's world-first news media bargaining code will soon be in force after legislation cleared federal parliament. Google and Facebook signed deals with major news companies before the negotiating rules were enshrined in law. The landmark bill received the final tick of approval on Thursday when parliament's lower house agreed to the government's changes, which were made after negotiations with tech giants. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said the code would ensure media companies were fairly paid for content. "The code provides a framework for good faith negotiations between the parties and a fair and balanced arbitration process to resolve outstanding disputes," he said. Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese was quick to claim some of the credit. "The government and the opposition and this parliament have been prepared to take tough decisions," he told reporters.

"We have been prepared to stand ground, to legislate for a code and to do that in order to defend Australia's national interests and defend the jobs of journalists."

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission chairman Rod Sims is confident the heavily amended code will still curtail the immense market power of digital platforms. "Google and Facebook need media but they don't need any particular company and that (previously) meant media companies couldn't do commercial deals with Facebook or Google," he told ABC radio on Thursday. "The purpose of the code is to give them the potential for arbitration, which helps their bargaining position, and therefore helps them reach fair commercial deals." So far, large media organisations including News Corp and Nine have been the main beneficiaries of deals struck with the online behemoths. Mr Sims is not surprised.

"In any situation like this you would expect deals to be done with the bigger players first and then work down the list," he said. "Given this is supporting journalism, it's naturally going to see more money going to those who've got the most journalists but I don't see any reason why anybody should doubt that all journalism will benefit." Mr Sims expects the online giants to seal deals with smaller players in time. "I just don't see why Google and Facebook would leave them out," he said. "I couldn't see why you wouldn't do deals with them, given it's not going to cost you that much compared to what it's going to cost for those that employ the vast bulk of journalists."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/25/2021

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## **Labor Warms to Gas in New Policy Platform**

Federal Labor has backed gas as a key part of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050 in a new policy platform set for debate later this month. The ALP's draft platform notes gas has an important role to play in achieving the long-term climate target. It says the party's policies will support gas extraction workers and build on supporting sufficient and affordable supply of the energy source. "This includes support for new gas projects and associated infrastructure, subject to independent approval processes to ensure legitimate community concerns are heard and addressed," the platform says. The draft also expresses support for carbon capture and storage, describing it as having a crucial role in abating pollution and ensuring heavy industry can reduce emissions. The Morrison government has not yet committed to net zero emissions by 2050 despite growing international pressure to back the target. There remains a rump of Nationals and Liberal MPs opposed to the goal, rekindling tensions that have dogged energy and climate policy for more than a decade. Labor will hold a special platform conference to debate the document with 400 delegates set to meet online at the end of March. The embrace of gas shifts the party's position closer to the coalition, which has championed the energy source. Changes to negative gearing and capital gains tax have been dumped from the platform as Labor tries to distance itself from proposals it took to the last federal election.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/28/2021

## Plastics Ban in Force in South Australia

South Australia's nation-leading ban on single-use plastics, such as straws and cutlery, has come into force, with the government targeting other items to add to the prohibited list. State parliament passed the legislation in September but the government delayed implementing the measures until Monday because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Environment Minister David Speirs says the new laws ban the sale, supply and distribution of a range of single-use items. He says more will be added to the list in early 2022 including polystyrene cups, bowls and plates. Fines can be issued for any businesses that don't comply but, with strong consumer support for the new laws, the government believes companies will be happy to embrace the change. "By being a first-mover nationally we've already seen businesses who manufacture re-useable and compostable alternatives start to set up in South Australia," Mr Speirs said. "Our ban will have significant economic benefits and create local jobs, as well as being good for the environment."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/28/2021

## PM Reveals 'Next Step' in Vaccine Rollout

Scott Morrison says a new milestone has been achieved in the Covid-19 vaccine rollout with 300,000 doses of the AstraZeneca version having landed in Sydney on Sunday. The first doses of this vaccine have arrived from overseas ahead of 50 million doses being manufactured by CSL in Australia. The Therapeutic Goods Administration will now batch-test the vaccines to ensure they meet Australia's strict quality standards. "This is the next step as we ramp up the vaccine rollout," the Prime Minister, who was vaccinated on February 21, said in a statement. Most Australians will receive the AstraZeneca vaccine with the rollout due to commence from March 8, subject to the TGA's testing process. "Australia is in a unique position because importantly this vaccine gives us the ability to manufacture onshore," Mr Morrison said.

"Every Australian who wishes to be vaccinated will be able to receive a vaccine this year." Australia started its vaccine program last week with the first injections of the Pfizer vaccine. Almost 30,000 Australians had been vaccinated since last Monday, including 8110 aged care and disability residents throughout 117 care facilities. The government is rolling out a second \$31 million public information campaign with the Covid-19 vaccination program now fully underway. "Both the state and territory teams alongside the aged care in-reach teams are ramping up their operations, with more vaccines being distributed across the country in the next week," Health Minister

Greg Hunt said. The government's initial advertising campaign launched in January focused on informing the Australian community about the Therapeutic Goods Administration's world-leading independent approval process. "The second round builds on these safety messages and informs the community about Phase 1a of the vaccination program rollout, which prioritises those who are the most at risk of serious illness from the virus," Mr Hunt said. "The advertising is important, so people understand how the vaccination program is operating, how they can find out when it will be their turn and answer any questions they have about the vaccines."

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## 2、 Government System and Civil Services

### Asia-Pacific

#### **Makhtar Diop Appointed IFC Managing Director and Executive Vice President**

World Bank Group President David Malpass today announced the appointment of Makhtar Diop as Managing Director and Executive Vice President to head the International Finance Corporation (IFC), an arm of the World Bank Group that advances economic development and improves the lives of people by encouraging growth of the private sector in developing countries. "Makhtar Diop has deep development and finance experience and a career of energetic leadership and service to developing countries in both public and private sectors," said Malpass. "Makhtar's skills at IFC will help the World Bank Group continue our rapid response to the global crisis and help build a green, resilient, inclusive recovery. We need business climates and thriving businesses that attract investment, create jobs and foster the scaling up of low carbon electricity and transportation, clean water, infrastructure, digital services, and the wide range of development success that are key to our mission of poverty reduction and shared prosperity."

Mr. Diop's key responsibilities will be to deepen and energize IFC's 3.0 strategy of proactively creating markets and mobilizing private capital at significant scale; deliver on the IFC capital package policy commitments including increased climate and gender investments and support for FCV countries facing fragility, conflict and violence. He will also strengthen the linkages between IFC, the World Bank, and MIGA, as the World Bank Group accelerates efforts aimed at boosting good development outcomes in client countries. The IFC 3.0 strategy seeks to help countries create markets and mobilize private capital, including through broadening upstream engagement by getting involved earlier in the project development cycle to

create the conditions needed for private sector solutions and investment opportunities. It also aims to expand IFC's impact in the poorest and most fragile countries, with a goal to more than triple IFC's annual own-account investments.

Diop, a Senegalese national and former Minister of Economy and Finance, is currently serving as the World Bank's Vice President for Infrastructure, where he leads the Bank's global efforts to build effective infrastructure in developing and emerging markets that supports inclusive and sustainable growth. In this role Diop oversees the Bank's critical work across energy and transport sectors, digital development, and our efforts to bring more quality infrastructure services to communities through public-private partnerships. Prior to his current appointment, Diop served for six years as the World Bank's Vice President for the Africa Region, where he oversaw a major expansion of our work in Africa and the delivery of a record-breaking \$70 billion in commitments. A passionate advocate for Africa and sustainable development globally, Diop led efforts aimed at increasing access to affordable and sustainable energy and promoting an enabling environment for innovation and technology adoption.

Diop served twice as a World Bank Country Director -- for Brazil and for Kenya, Eritrea, and Somalia. He has a strong grasp of the public/private sector interface, started his career in the banking sector, and has first-hand experience in leading structural reforms in support of the private sector, including in his position as the Minister of Economy and Finance of Senegal. Diop worked as an economist in the International Monetary Fund. And he served as the World Bank Director for Finance, Private Sector & Infrastructure in the Latin America and Caribbean region. A recognized opinion leader in development, Makhtar has been named one of the 100 most influential Africans in the world. In 2015, he received the prestigious Regents' Lectureship Award from the University of California, Berkeley. He holds advanced degrees in economics and finance. This appointment is effective March 1, 2021.

*From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 02/18/2021*

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## **ADB Appoints Woonchong Um as Managing Director General**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has appointed Woonchong Um as Managing Director General. Mr. Um will assume office immediately. Mr. Um will report to ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa and support the President to institute bank-wide coherence on key initiatives and issues. He will play a key role in enhancing ADB's internal and external communications across all activities that involve operations, knowledge, fundraising, and institutional reforms. He will support the President in providing oversight to ADB's Department of Communications, Office of Professional Conduct, and Office of the Ombudsperson. "I am deeply honored to join President Asakawa's Management team and to support implementation of ADB's Strategy

2030 beyond the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Mr. Um. “I look forward to using the knowledge and experience I have gained in the past 27 years at ADB to contribute to our organizational transformation and ensure we continue delivering high-quality development solutions to our members across the region.”

Mr. Um joined ADB in 1993. Since June 2018, he served as Director General and concurrently Chief Compliance Officer of ADB’s Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department. In this role he led ADB-wide knowledge management and innovation work in all thematic and sector operation areas; established ADB-wide sector and thematic policies and strategies; and ensured compliance with ADB’s environment and social safeguards policies. Mr. Um also oversaw the administration of trust funds and global funding initiatives and served as ADB’s focal point for COVID-19 response. Mr. Um served as ADB Secretary from 2014 to 2018, Deputy Director General of the Regional and Sustainable Development Department from 2009 to 2014, and in various other senior positions in ADB. Prior to joining ADB, he worked for Pfizer Inc. in New York and Pitney Bowes Inc. in Stamford, Connecticut, United States. Mr. Um, a national of the Republic of Korea, holds a Master of Business Administration degree from New York University Stern School of Business and a Bachelor of Computer Science degree from Boston College.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 02/22/2021

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## **ADB Appoints Bruno Carrasco Director General for Sustainable Development and Climate Change**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has appointed Bruno Carrasco as Director General and concurrently Chief Compliance Officer of its Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department, effective immediately. Mr. Carrasco will lead ADB-wide knowledge and innovation work in all thematic and sector operation areas, establish sector and thematic policies and strategies, and ensure compliance with environment and social safeguards policies. He will also oversee the administration of trust funds and global funding initiatives. “ADB’s knowledge contributions and advisory support to our members are more important than ever as the region maps a sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Mr. Carrasco. “ADB has a crucial role in providing leadership and innovation to ensure the recovery is green and inclusive and sets a platform for resilient growth and development.”

Mr. Carrasco has worked at ADB for more than 23 years and has served in countries across all of its regional departments. An expert in governance, public sector management, and economics, he was most recently Chief of ADB’s Governance Thematic Group, where he defined and sharpened ADB’s work on domestic resource mobilization, infrastructure governance, state-owned enterprise reforms, and fiscal decentralization. Mr. Carrasco has also worked at the United Nations Office for



Project Services, the United Nations Development Program, and the European Central Bank. Mr. Carrasco, a national of Spain, holds a doctorate degree in economics from the University of Essex, a master's degree in economics from the University of British Columbia, and a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Montreal.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 02/24/2021

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## East Asia

### CHINA: To Deepen Reforms in Pilot FTZs

China will promote deep-level reforms in pilot free trade zones (FTZs) and facilitate innovations on liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment, according to the Ministry of Commerce (MOC). The ministry is working on a negative list for cross-border services trade for Hainan free trade port, a MOC official said Wednesday. According to the draft 14th Five-Year Plan and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035, pilot FTZs will be granted greater decision-making power in reform while the construction of the Hainan free trade port will be advanced steadily. During the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), 17 pilot FTZs were newly built, bringing the total number to 21 in the country, the MOC added, noting that the items on the negative list for foreign investment access for pilot FTZs were cut from 122 to 30 in the past five years. A total of 393,000 new enterprises were set up in 18 pilot FTZs in 2020, which generated 176.38 billion yuan (about 27.27 billion U.S. dollars) of foreign direct investment in actual use last year, accounting for 17.6 percent of the foreign investment in China, MOC data showed. The value of foreign trade of these companies stood at 4.7 trillion yuan in 2020, representing 14.7 percent of the country's total, according to the data.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/03/2021

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### China Says to Retain Benchmark Deposit Rate System for Long Term

China's central bank said Thursday that the benchmark deposit interest rates, the "ballast stone" of the entire interest rates system, will be retained for the long term. In a statement released after a teleconference on deposit management, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) stressed the externalities of deposit rate pricing, noting that the competition order in the deposit market is closely related to the vital interests of the people. Positive results have been yielded after the PBOC enhanced deposit management in recent years by pushing the self-discipline mechanism for market interest rate pricing, as well as regulating the innovative deposit products, the PBOC



said. The PBOC urged further efforts to improve deposit management, strengthen the regulation of non-standard innovative deposit products and maintain the competition order in the deposit market.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/04/2021

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## **Chinese Province to Appoint "Industrial Chain Chiefs" to Promote High-Quality Development**

Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province will introduce an "industrial chain chief" scheme to promote the high-quality development of industrial chains. The governor will serve as chief-general of the industrial chain, and vice governors will be chiefs, according to the provincial government work report delivered at the ongoing annual session of the provincial legislature. The scheme aims to connect the key links of the upstream and downstream of industrial chains, and forge a long-term mechanism by participating in the communication and coordination of the upstream and downstream enterprises. The move will help make precise efforts in multiple areas including factor guarantee, market demand and policy support, according to the report.

A breadbasket and petroleum base of China, Heilongjiang has seven key industrial chains including the petrochemical sector and corn processing. Cities, prefectures and economic zones of the province will have their own key industrial chains and implement the scheme together, the report noted. Heilongjiang also plans to promote the expansion and upgrade of the 15 key industries this year, covering sectors each with a total annual turnover of at least 100 billion yuan (15.49 billion U.S. dollars). Besides, the intensive processing of agricultural products and by-products will be developed into a pillar industry, while the industrial cluster of high-end manufacturing, such as automaking, will be cultivated, the report added.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/20/2021

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## **China Capable of Securing Old-age Pension Payments: Minister**

China is able to secure the payment of old-age pensions on time and in full despite reductions in social-insurance premiums last year, the country's human resources minister said Friday. The balance of China's old-age pension fund currently stands at 4.7 trillion yuan (about 726 billion U.S. dollars), Zhang Jinan, Minister of Human Resources and Social Security, told a press conference. To alleviate the corporate burden and protect the job market against the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Chinese government slashed 1.54 trillion yuan of social-insurance contributions from

employers in 2020, of which 1.33 trillion yuan was old-age pension premiums, according to Zhang. Despite the revenue loss, the government managed to pay the old-age pensions on time and in full last year, even increasing pension payments to benefit some 120 million retirees. Zhang was confident in future old-age pension payments, as he expects an annual operating surplus from the old-age pension fund this year. Increasing central fiscal support, available investment channels and expanding social-security strategic reserves would also back the timely and full payments of old-age pensions, he said.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/26/2021

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### **JAPAN: Municipal Data to Move to Govt Cloud Starting in 2023**

The government has decided to move the administrative data of all local governments to a central government cloud by fiscal 2025 in principle, as part of the administrative digitization being promoted by the Cabinet of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. An experiment to verify the feasibility of this digitization measure is planned to start by the end of this year, followed by a gradual transition starting in 2023. Under the leadership of a digital agency to be created in September, the government plans to develop its own cloud by the end of fiscal 2021 and start operating the system for central government ministries and agencies. The government aims to reduce expenditures and strengthen security measures by using this new cloud. A new bill to standardize the information systems at the local government level that will be submitted to the current Diet session will oblige local governments to use the government cloud. Each municipality will be able to manage its own data and share the software necessary for its operation on the government cloud. The scheme will be applied to systems that handle information on taxes, pensions and child allowances, among other functions.

In preparation for full-scale implementation, the feasibility of the system will be studied for two years starting this year at some municipalities to verify cloud computing procedures and the load on lines and servers. Currently, each municipality operates its own server and purchases the software necessary for its operations from a vendor. Using the government cloud will eliminate their need to run and manage their own servers and software, leading to cost savings in the future. Because a common platform will be used, linking data between the national and local governments, or among local governments is expected to be seamless. The government also hopes this move will strengthen security measures at the local government level. For the cloud, the government will use businesses whose safety has been recognized through a government certification system, and will introduce strict access controls. Two data centers will be set up in eastern and western Japan to ensure sufficient backup, chiefly in case of disasters and system failures.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 02/07/2021

## Japan's Prime Minister Aims to Raise Approval Rating by Promoting Digitization

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga hopes to pass six digital transformation bills as quickly as possible and launch a digital agency in September as scheduled, in the hope of increasing his Cabinet's approval rating by swiftly realizing a key policy. The Cabinet approved the bills on Tuesday. The coronavirus pandemic has shed light on the delay in the digitization of Japan's public sector, leading to dissatisfaction among the public, but it is unknown whether these complaints can be resolved. "We need to improve the country's digital services and show results to the people," digital transformation minister Takuya Hirai said at a press conference Tuesday. "There are great expectations for the digital agency, and the days to come will be vital." Suga sees the digital agency as a symbol of reform and has stressed its role as a driving force for growth, along with global warming countermeasures aimed at achieving a decarbonized society. Compared to decarbonization, which is a long-term strategy stretching through the year 2050, Suga has given a number of instructions to Hirai and others since the launch of his Cabinet in September and stuck with plans to establish the digital agency at an early date.

The prime minister's moves are prompted by bitter experiences such as the delay in the one-time special cash payments over the coronavirus outbreak and the turmoil related to online applications. For that reason, Suga plans to give the new agency such authority as the power to advise other ministries and agencies, and make it a powerful organization headed by the prime minister. He will create a new council tasked with promoting a digital society, in which all Cabinet members will participate. The approval rating for the Suga Cabinet has nosedived since its launch. Raising the approval rating is an urgent matter for the prime minister ahead of the dissolution of the House of Representatives and the snap election that will take place sometime by autumn. Suga hopes to contain the spread of the coronavirus to some extent with vaccinations, hold the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics in summer and recover his approval rating by promoting digitization. However, My Number cards are key to promoting digitization and they are still not very widespread. The government aims to issue the cards to almost all residents by the end of fiscal 2022, but only 31.93 million, or about 25 percent of the total, had been issued as of the end of January.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 02/11/2021

## SOUTH KOREA: PM Starts Regular 'Open Briefing' to Enhance Gov't-Public Communication

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun on Thursday started a regular weekly live press briefing to enhance the government's public communication amid criticisms of the country's "exclusive and cartel-like" conventional press corps system. Chung held his first inaugural weekly "open briefing" at the government complex in Seoul, where he shared his perspective on supposed problems of the current press corps system, especially in areas of legal and judicial coverage. The briefing was open to all reporters regardless of their given beats and was streamed live online. Government press conferences traditionally are open only to members of corresponding press corps of respective ministries or agencies. "Communication between the government and the media should evolve more transparently and meet the standard of the public's perspective," Chung said. Chung, however, made clear that the decision to hold regular open briefings was not aimed at abolishing the existing press corps system but to allow more openness of government policies. He also stated that it would be best for the media industry to voluntarily work to improve supposed problems that it faces internally. The culture ministry is reportedly preparing to launch a government task force to come up with a long-term plan to revise the current press corps system.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/25/2021

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## South-East Asia

### **MYANMAR: Major Cabinet Reshuffle Announced**

Myanmar military announced a major cabinet reshuffle hours after a state of emergency was declared on Monday. Under the cabinet reshuffle, new union ministers were appointed for 11 ministries while 24 deputy ministers were removed from their posts, the military's statement said. Union Chief Justice and Judges of the Supreme Court of the Union, Chief Justices and Judges of Regional or State High Courts are allowed to remain in office, according to the military's statement. Members of Anti-Corruption Commission, chairman, vice chairman and members of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission will also remain in office. Chairmen and members of the Nay Pyi Taw Council and the Union Civil Service Board will be removed from their posts while a new chairman is appointed for the Union Civil Service Board, the statement said. The move came after the President's Office declared a state of emergency for one year and the legislative, executive and judicial powers were handed over to the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services earlier Monday. Myanmar leaders including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, regional and state ministers and some central executive committee members of the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) were detained by the military in the early hours of Monday.

The military also announced earlier Monday that the Union Election Commission (UEC) will be reformed and the electoral process in the parliamentary elections held in November last year will be reviewed in accordance with the law during the state of emergency. The military has called on the government and the UEC to review the election results, noting that there were some irregularities in the voting process in the previous months. "When these tasks have been completed in accord with the provisions of the State of Emergency, free and fair multiparty general elections will be held and the assigned duty of the state will be handed over to the winning party meeting norms and standards of democracy," the earlier military statement said. Myanmar held its multiparty general elections on Nov. 8 last year and the ruling NLD won a majority of seats in both Houses of the Union Parliament. At present, access to state-run broadcasting channels and telecommunications have resumed after being cut off for some hours across the country earlier Monday. All local banks will resume their services starting Tuesday, Myanmar Banks Association issued a directive on Monday.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/02/2021

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## **Myanmar's Election Commission Meets Political Parties**

Myanmar's new Union Election Commission (UEC) on Friday met representatives of political parties in capital city of Nay Pyi Taw, state-run media reported. The commission has been reviewing the electoral process of last year's election since Feb. 5. The commission will continue updating the public on its further findings after completing the first task of roadmaps and the voter lists will be collected and will cooperate with political parties to hold free and fair new election successfully under the constitution, according to the commission. A one-year state of emergency was declared in Myanmar after U Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi, along with other officials from the National League for Democracy (NLD), were detained by the military on Feb. 1. Earlier this month, the State Administration Council reformed the Union Election Commission, taking steps to review the process of the general elections.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/27/2021

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## **VIETNAM: Nguyễn Phú Trọng Voted for a Third Term as Party General Secretary**

Nguyễn Phú Trọng, the incumbent General Secretary of the Communist Party of Việt Nam, was voted to hold the position for the next five years on Sunday in the first plenum of the recently elected 13th-tenure Party Central Committee. This will be Trọng's third term as the leader of the Party, following his stints on the 11th and 12th

Party Central Committee. Trọng, born in 1944 in Hà Nội's Đông Anh Commune, has been a Party member since 1967. The 200 members of the committee on the same day also voted for the 18 members of Politburo, five members of the Party Secretariat, and 19 of the Inspection Commission along with the commission head.

Below is the full list of the Politburo members and their current positions:

Nguyễn Phú Trọng, General Secretary, State President

Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, Prime Minister

Phạm Minh Chính, Head of the Party Central Committee's Organisation Commission

Vương Đình Huệ, Secretary of Hà Nội Party Committee

Trần Tuấn Anh, Minister of Industry and Trade

Nguyễn Hoà Bình, Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court

Lương Cường, Director of the Việt Nam People's Army's General Department of Politics

Đình Tiến Dũng, Minister of Finance

Phan Văn Giang, Deputy Minister of National Defence, Chief of the General Staff of the Việt Nam People's Army

Tô Lâm, Minister of Public Security

Trương Thị Mai, Head of the Party Central Committee's Commission for Mass Mobilisation

Trần Thanh Mẫn, Chairman of the Việt Nam Fatherland Front

Phạm Bình Minh, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Nguyễn Văn Nên, Secretary of HCM City Party Committee

Nguyễn Xuân Thắng, President of the Hồ Chí Minh National Academy of Politics and Chairman of the Central Theoretical Council

Võ Văn Thưởng, Head of the Party Central Committee's Commission for Publicity and Education

Phan Đình Trạc, Head of the Party Central Committee's Commission for Internal Affairs

Trần Cẩm Tú, Chairman of the Party Central Committee's Inspection Commission

Trần Cẩm Tú will continue to serve as the head of the Inspection Commission, which was tasked with enforcing the Party's regulations, addressing corruption and deliberating disciplines for offenders among the Party rank. The General Secretary and the Politburo of the 13th tenure will be introduced to the 13th National Party Congress on Monday, the final working day, and Trọng is expected to deliver the closing speech. Later in May, the general election for the 15th-tenure of the National Assembly will be held, and the National Assembly will elect the State President and Prime Minister. The Prime Minister will then propose to the National Assembly new cabinet members.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 01/31/2021

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## **Vietnam: National Database Systems on Population and ID Issuance Launched**

The national database systems on population and citizen identification card issuance and management made its debut on Thursday with Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc in attendance. The two systems, developed and run by the Ministry of Public Security, are part of Government efforts to shift from paper-based to electronic document management. The national database on population is the most important system among the six national databases to help form an e-Government. The project on citizen identification card production, issuance and management was approved by the Government last September. The Ministry of Public Security expects to issue chip-based ID cards to 50 million citizens by July 1 this year. Under the Law on Citizen Identification in 2014, people from 14 years of age can obtain an ID card, which is renewed when they turn 25, 40, and 60 years of age. More than 29,000 citizens have obtained new ID cards to date, including 1,369 delegates to the 13th National Party Congress.

Addressing the event, PM Phúc applauded the Ministry of Public Security's efforts and ministries for completing the two projects, saying they were important for the building of an e-Government towards the digital government, digital economy and digital society. Minister of Public Security Tô Lâm said the two systems will serve as a centre to provide information about citizens and support people, businesses and organisations by simplifying administrative procedures. They would help reduce time and costs for handling paperwork relating to administrative procedures and reduce State budget expenses. "Research and analysis of experts found that total money saved by people and businesses when using eight administrative procedures on the national public services portal is estimated at nearly VNĐ5 trillion (US\$215 million) each year," he said. "Particularly, the operation of the two systems will contribute to renewing State management over social order and people and support the fight against criminals and to ensure social order and security," he added. According to the National Population and Housing Census conducted in 2019, Việt Nam's population had exceeded 96.2 million people, making it the third-most populous country in Southeast Asia after Indonesia and the Philippines, and the 15th most populous country in the world.

*From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 02/26/2021*

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## **South Asia**

### **INDIA: Rajeev Ranjan IAS, New Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu to Assume Office Today**

The Government of Tamil Nadu, on January 31, has released orders for the

appointment of Rajeev Ranjan (IAS 1985-Batch) as the next Chief Secretary of the state. Ranjan will assume the office today on February 1, 2021. Earlier, in the last week, the Centre had nodded to the repatriation of Ranjan to his parent cadre following the request from the state government. On his Central deputation, Ranjan was serving as Secretary, Union Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairy Development in New Delhi. K Shanmugham (IAS 1985-Batch), the outgoing Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu retired on January 31. He has now been appointed as Advisor to the Government of Tamil Nadu from February 1 for a period of one year.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/01/2021

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## **Bihar CM Nitish Kumar Extends Cabinet to 31 Ministers, Allocates Portfolios**

Chief Minister of Bihar Nitish Kumar extended his cabinet to a total of 31 ministers after three months of the formation of a new government in the state on February 9, today. As many as 17 new ministers were sworn in by Governor Fagu Chauhan to be a part of the Bihar cabinet. The CM has also allotted departments to the newly sworn ministers. The list of ministers with their portfolios is as follows:

Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister, has with him General Administration, Home, Cabinet Secretariat, Monitoring, Election and all such departments that are not allotted to other ministers.

Tarkishore Prasad, Deputy Chief Minister, and has the charge of Finance, Commercial Tax, City Development and Housing Department.

Renu Devi, Deputy Chief Minister, will also head Disaster Management and Welfare of Backward Classes.

Vijay Kumar Chaudhary will be the minister for Education and Parliamentary Affairs.

Bijendra Prasad Yadav will be the minister for Energy, Planning and Development.

Ashok Chaudhary will be the minister for Building Construction.

Sheela Kumari will be the minister for Transport.

Santosh Kumar Suman will be the minister for Small Water Resources and Welfare of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes.

Mukesh Sahni will be the minister for Animal Husbandry and Fisheries.

Mangal Pandey will be the minister for Health.

Amarendra Pratap Singh will be the minister for Agriculture.

Dr Rampreet Paswan will be the minister for Public Health Engineering.

Jeevesh Kumar will be the minister for Labor Resources and Information Technology.

Ram Sundar Kumar will be the minister for Revenue and Land Reforms.

Syed Shahnawaz Hussain will be the minister for Industries.

Shravan Kumar will be the minister for Rural Development.

Madan Sahni will be the minister for Social Welfare.

Pramod Kumar will be the minister for Sugarcane Industry and Law.

Sanjay Kumar Jha will be the minister for Water Resources, Information and Public



Relations.

Leshi Singh will be the minister for Food and Consumer Protection.

Samrat Chaudhary will be the minister for Panchayati Raj.

Neeraj Kumar Singh will be the minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

Subhash Singh will be the minister for Cooperatives.

Nitin Naveen will be the minister for Path Building.

Sumit Kumar Singh will be the minister for Science and Technology.

Sunil Kumar will be the minister for Prohibition, Products and Registration.

Jayant Raj will be the minister for Rural Development.

Alok Ranjan will be the minister for Arts, Culture and Youth.

Mohammad Jama Khan will be the minister for Minority Welfare.

Narayan Prasad will be the minister for Tourism.

Janak Ram will be the minister for Mines and Minerals.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/10/2021

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## **Online Application for UPSC Civil Services Prelims Opens**

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) has opened the application forms for Civil Services 2021 Preliminary Examination from today, February 10. Interested candidates are advised to refer to the official website all the latest updates. As per the UPSC calendar, the application process begins on February 10 and the last date to apply for the examination is March 2, 2021. Further, the preliminary examination is scheduled to be conducted on June 27, 2021, Sunday. As far as the eligibility is concerned, candidates who have a bachelor's degree from a recognised university in any discipline are eligible to apply for the UPSC civil services examination. Moreover, to know the eligibility criteria in terms of age limit, qualifications, minimum marks, reserved categories, etc. candidates are advised to visit the official website <https://www.upsc.gov.in>

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/10/2021

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## **Dy. CM of Karnataka Inaugurates Karnataka Digital Economy Mission Office**

With an aim to increase digital economy contribution to Gross State Domestic Product to 30 per cent, Deputy Chief Minister of Karnataka Dr CN Ashwatha Narayana inaugurated the office of the Karnataka Digital Economy Mission (KDEM) on February 9. The Minister also launched the "Beyond Bengaluru" report which facilitates to achieve the target. As reported by a national daily, Deputy CM Dr Narayana, addressing the occasion said, "The government wanted KDEM to be

more industry-friendly and keeping this in mind it has allowed for 51 per cent stakes to industry associations while retaining a minority holding of 49 per cent for itself. The government wants to act rather as a facilitator than an authority.” Improving connectivity in the remote areas, providing electricity connection and establishing the required infrastructure to bridge the rural-urban divide, are among the state government’s key focus areas to empower the digital economy. The newly inaugurated KDEM has the objective to attract investments for the IT/ITeS sector in Karnataka and to generate around 10 lakh employment opportunities by 2025. For this, the KDEM will focus on five verticals – IT products and services, Innovation and Startups, Electronic System Design and Manufacturing (ESDM), ‘Beyond Bengaluru’, and ‘Talent Accelerator’. The Minister expressed confidence in KDEM and said that it will aid Karnataka to reach the goal of 150 billion dollars in IT exports and also to become a 300 billion dollars economy by 2025.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/13/2021

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## **Vertiv Appoints Stephen Liang as Chief Technology Office**

Vertiv Holdings Co, (NYSE: VRT), a global provider of critical digital infrastructure and continuity solutions, on February 08, announced that Stephen Liang has been appointed to the newly created role of Chief Technology Officer (CTO). As CTO, Liang will be focused broadly on innovation across the organization by aligning and prioritizing technology strategies with the market trends and customers’ needs. Liang has been with the organization since 1994, most recently serving as the president for the Asia Pacific region. As part a of Vertiv’s planned increase in research and development (R&D) over the next several years, Liang will play a key coordination role, working with the company’s line of business leaders to fuel long-term growth across products and services. “This is a critical moment for Vertiv and our industry. Innovation, agility and the ability to deliver smart, sustainable solutions around the globe are the keys to our success,” said Vertiv CEO Rob Johnson. “With Stephen’s deep experience in evaluating market trends and driving product innovation as well as his proven leadership across our organization, I can’t imagine anyone being more prepared to help us navigate the opportunities ahead.” “I look forward to working with our leadership team and across the organization to bring greater focus on the customer experience to everything we do,” Liang said.

In addition to Liang’s appointment, Vertiv also announced that Robert Zhu, president for Vertiv North Asia, and Anand Sanghi, president for Vertiv Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia and India (ASI), have been appointed to their respective new positions, reporting directly to Johnson as members of the executive leadership team. In these roles, Sanghi and Zhu will be responsible for driving customer intimacy and accelerating growth in their respective regions. Zhu was most recently president of Vertiv for Greater China and Sanghi was president of Vertiv’s Asia

market. “Both Robert and Anand are experienced leaders and have demonstrated exceptional customer focus and a belief in our culture during their time with Vertiv,” said Johnson. “Both regions possess the ability to grow the top and bottom line, and additional focus on these two areas will allow us to respond to our customers faster – a key tenet in these moves.” Liang, Sanghi and Zhu are the latest in a series of key leadership appointments for Vertiv. In January, Erin Dowd was promoted to Chief Human Resources Officer from her prior role as vice president of global human resources. Stephanie Gill joined Vertiv as Chief Legal Counsel, bringing almost 25 years of legal experience, including positions as General Counsel and Corporate Secretary.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/13/2021

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## Central-West Asia

### **AZERBAIJAN: Appointed to High Position in UN Office of Counter-Terrorism**

Azerbaijani Vugar Allahverdiyev, who worked as an adviser to the envoy on youth of the UN secretary general in New York, was appointed program manager of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, Trend reports on Feb. 16 referring to the UN. Previously, Allahverdiyev held high positions at the UN Office in Azerbaijan, the headquarters of the organization in New York. Allahverdiyev launched his professional career in 2006 at the UNDP Baku office. He is the first Azerbaijani appointed to the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism. Allahverdiyev will lead a program aimed at determining the directions of terrorist routes by plane and ship, creating infrastructure in the UN member-states to suppress such routes and international cooperation in this sphere.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 02/16/2021

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### **Azerbaijan's Innovation Agency Becomes First Full-Fledged Member of IASP in Region**

The Innovation Agency of Azerbaijan has become the first full member of the International Association of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation (IASP) in the region, the agency told Trend. The Innovation Agency took part in the Let's talk summit organized by the IASP. “In the course of the summit, new trends and challenges faced by the IASP and innovation centers were discussed. Chairman of the Board of the Innovation Agency, Tural Karimli, emphasized the importance of international cooperation and spoke about the measures taken in this direction and the work planned for the future,” the Innovation Agency said. Azerbaijan’s Innovation Agency was elected as the first full-fledged member of the International

Association of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation in the region, the structure said. The IASP has 350 members from 77 countries and over 115,000 companies.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 02/24/2021

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## **KAZAKHSTAN: Eyes to Create Interdepartmental Commission on Industrial Policy**

Kazakhstan wants to create an Interdepartmental Commission on Industrial Policy, Vice Minister of Industry and Infrastructure Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan Amaniyaz Yerzhanov said. Yerzhanov made the remark by presenting the bill "On Industrial Policy" in the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Trend reports with reference to Kazinform news agency. "The basic conditions for the development of industry regulate the institutional framework for the implementation of industrial policy and state incentives," the vice minister said. Yerzhanov added that the institutional conditions, first of all, are to ensure effective interdepartmental coordination of the formation and implementation of industrial policy. "Today, the functions related to the industry are distributed among different structures," the vice minister said. "To ensure proper coordination of industrial policy, the draft basic law envisages the creation of an Interdepartmental Commission on Industrial Policy, which will be headed by the deputy prime minister while the deputy heads of state structures, representatives industrial enterprises, public figures, MPs and other interested individuals will be the members." The vice minister explained that the commission will be endowed with the following competencies: - giving recommendations to the government on the introduction of new incentive measures, revision and cancellation of existing incentive measures; - preparation of the position of the government, including negotiation, in international organizations on the issues related to industrial policy; - making decisions on disagreements between state agencies on industrial policy issues; - hearing reports on the implementation of industrial policy, etc.

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## **New Ambassador of Turkmenistan Accredited in Kazakhstan**

A new ambassador of Turkmenistan has been accredited in Kazakhstan, Trend reports, citing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Turkmenistan to the Republic of Kazakhstan Batyr Rejepov presented his credentials to President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The president of Kazakhstan noted that the country is interested in further expanding relations with Turkmenistan. Earlier, a program of cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

Kazakhstan for the period 2021-2023 was signed. 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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## **UZBEKISTAN: Establishing Association of Property Developers**

Ministry of Justice of Uzbekistan has registered the Association of Property Developers that will be engaged in the development of the construction sector, preparation of proposals, Trend reports with reference to the ministry. According to the information, the main goals of the new non-governmental non-profit organization are to assist government agencies in the development of the construction sector, prepare proposals for improving legislation in this industry and protect the rights and interests of its members. In addition, the association will introduce innovative ideas, study and implement foreign experience, as well conduct business events to improve the qualifications of construction professionals. The chairman of the Association of Property Developers of Uzbekistan Mansurjon Niyazmuhamedov said that as a result construction companies will gradually begin to implement international rules and standards in their activities. "We express great hope that this organization will become a strong bridge between the state and developers," he said. It was noted that the organization's budget is formed from membership and voluntary contributions, receipts from members, grants and subsidies, as well as other sources not prohibited by law. At the moment, developers Far Flung Invest, First Developing

Group (FDG), Murad Buildings, Nazarov Rakhimbayev Group (NRG), Perspective Building (Novastroy), Power Construction Planet (Discover Invest) have already joined the Association.

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## **Uzbekistan to Set Up National Center for Knowledge and Innovation in Agriculture**

National Center for Knowledge and Innovation in Agriculture will be created under the Ministry of Agriculture of Uzbekistan, Trend reports referring to Norma information and legal portal. The center will be created in accordance with the presidential decree on the further improvement of the system of knowledge and innovation, as well as the provision of modern services in agriculture. The system of the National Center for Knowledge and Innovation in Agriculture under the Ministry of Agriculture will include the Research Institute of Rainfed Agriculture, the Research Institute of Agriculture in the southern regions, as well as the Research and Production Association of Grain and Rice. Also, an address list has been developed for the location of territorial centers of agricultural services of the National Center created in Karakalpakstan Republic and regions. The sources of financing for the activities of the National Center and the territorial centers of agricultural services are the funds of the state budget, extra-budgetary funds, funds of international financial institutions, and grants from foreign organizations, attracted in accordance with the established procedure, as well as income received from the placement of free extra-budgetary funds on deposits of commercial banks, as well as other sources, not prohibited by law.

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## **Elections in Uzbekistan Can Be Held in October**

The Senate approved the Law "On amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Uzbekistan in connection with the improvement of electoral legislation", Trend reports citing Uzdaily. Thus, the institution of district election commissions for elections to district (city) Kengashes of people's deputies is abolished, and their powers are transferred to district (city) election commissions. A legal framework is being created for the procedure for including citizens of Uzbekistan living abroad in the voter list, regardless of whether they are registered with the consular diplomatic missions, as well as voting by using portable ballot boxes at the place of residence or work of voters living abroad. Also, the following changes are made: - it is prohibited to use state resources during election campaigning; - the procedure for disclosing the interim and final financial statements

of political parties, as well as publishing the results of audits by the Accounting Chamber of the activities of parties is being introduced. According to the amendments, it is proposed to hold elections in October. The approved Law will enter into force after it is signed by the President and published in the prescribed manner.

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## Oceania

### **AUSTRALIA: Labor Demanding Political Donation Reforms**

Labor is renewing calls to overhaul political donation laws after the latest financial disclosures were revealed. Political parties received more than \$168 million in the last financial year, with one particular contribution sparking fresh calls for change. Mining magnate and former federal politician Clive Palmer donated \$75,000 to the Nationals, as well as nearly \$6 million to his own party. While the Nationals disclosed the donation, his company Mineralogy did not. However, Mr Palmer - who also spent more than \$60 million on advertising during the 2019 federal election campaign - said on Tuesday the company's disclosure would be amended to fix the "administrative staff oversight". Labor frontbencher Don Farrell said the contributions showed why the system was broken. "You cannot have a situation where Clive Palmer is funding both his own political party and the coalition. It's just unacceptable," he told ABC radio.

"What we want to see is public disclosure about the donations and to set a limit on how much organisations and individuals can donate." Nationals deputy leader David Littleproud defended the existing arrangements, which allow individuals and organisations to donate as much as they want to as many political parties as they choose. "Individuals, last time I looked in Australia, were free to do what they liked within the confines of the law," Mr Littleproud said. Currently, political parties are only required to disclose donations above \$14,000 and Labor wants the threshold dropped to \$1000. Tasmanian independent senator Jacqui Lambie is concerned about donations from unknown origins. "If this money is not buying influence, what are they so scared about putting those donations down on paper for and doing it in real-time disclosure?" she said.

"Seriously, if they're not buying influence, what is stopping them?" Mr Littleproud is open to a discussion on donation transparency laws. "We shouldn't be afraid to have mature conversations about political funding into the future," he said. "I'm comfortable with having those conversations, we should." Almost half of the \$18 million in political donations over the past year came from just four companies and one industry group. The largest single donor in the Australian Electoral Commission's



figures was Mr Palmer's mining company Mineralogy, which gave \$5.9 million to his own United Australia Party. Other big donors included Pratt Holdings (\$1.55 million), Woodside Energy (\$335,415), Macquarie Group (\$251,230) and the Australian Hotels Association (\$232,301). All of the Pratt Holdings donations went to the National and Liberal parties, while Woodside gave to both the coalition and Labor party organisations. The Greens are hoping to bring to parliament a bill which would ban donations from companies seeking approval or applying for government tenders or contracts while their application is on foot, or six months on either side of it. Greens senator Larissa Waters said the party would rather get support for broader reform of the donations system - including real-time disclosure and a \$1000 cap - but the bill would still be a small step forward.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/02/2021

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## **Payroll Jobs Grow Further in Early 2021**

Payroll jobs grew in the early stages of 2021, but new figures show they are still lagging when compared to a year ago. The Australian Bureau of Statistics said payroll jobs grew by 1.3 per cent nationally over the fortnight to January 16. "All states and territories reported an increase in payroll jobs, ranging from 2.8 per cent in Queensland to 0.5 per cent in the Northern Territory," ABS head of labour statistics Bjorn Jarvis said. The weekly payrolls series was introduced to give a more frequent update on the state of the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a year of data now in place, it shows payrolls were one per cent lower when compared with the same period a year ago. Consumer confidence - a pointer to future household spending - also rose for a second consecutive week and is close to its long-term average for the first time since late 2019.

The ANZ-Roy Morgan consumer confidence index rose 0.8 per cent in the past week, extending the recovery after a jittery start to the year after snap lockdowns in NSW and Queensland. News of the lockdown in Perth at the weekend came too late to impact the latest survey. These latest positive results add to a spread of economic figures in recent weeks suggesting the economic recovery is in full swing. "It is important to recognise the vast extent to which Australia has come back and that comeback has been enormous across our economy," Finance Minister Simon Birmingham told Sky News. However, economists expect the Reserve Bank will sit tight on policy at its first board meeting of the year on Tuesday. The Reserve Bank has repeatedly said - since cutting the cash rate to a record low 0.1 per cent last November - it will not raise interest rates until inflation is sustainably within its two to three per cent target.

It did not expect that to happen until 2023. Economists will be scrutinising governor Philip Lowe's post-meeting statement for the board's view of the state of the



economy and any change in its monetary policy outlook. Senator Birmingham warned there will be lasting changes as a result of the pandemic and the government won't be offering a helping hand to businesses that are no longer viable. "Some businesses won't find their business models from before are as viable in the future as they might wish them to be ... they will have to change and adapt," Senator Birmingham told Sky News. "So we don't want to prop up activities where people may need to adjust their business model. They may need to adjust their circumstances for the future."

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## **Australia One of Few AAA Rated: Frydenberg**

Global credit agency Fitch Ratings has affirmed Australia's top-tier AAA rating, saying the economy has weathered the COVID-19 pandemic well, reflecting a successful virus containment. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg jumped on the announcement, saying Australia remains one of only nine nations to hold a AAA credit rating. "Fitch says we have 'weathered the pandemic well compared with peers' and 'Australia's labour market appears to be on a stable path to recovery, supported by the JobKeeper program'," Mr Frydenberg tweeted. However, Fitch has kept Australia's rating on a negative outlook, reflecting uncertainty around the medium-term debt trajectory following the significant rise in public debt caused by the response to the pandemic. "Policy settings are set to remain accommodative, although we project the bulk of fiscal stimulus has now passed," Fitch said in a statement on Monday.

"Risks remain tilted to the downside, reflecting the possibility of additional and broader lockdown measures to contain any resurgence of the virus." However, the vaccine rollout should gradually ease these risks over the year and support domestic sentiment, it said. Australia's nationwide vaccine rollout started on Monday. Shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers said by sticking with the negative outlook, Fitch is signalling there is still a long way to go in Australia's recovery. "The biggest threat to our recovery is Scott Morrison and Josh Frydenberg prematurely declaring victory," Dr Chalmers told AAP. "(This ignores) the fact that over two million Australians still don't have work or enough work, wages are stagnant, and our economy had become less dynamic and resilient well before the pandemic."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/22/2021

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## **Disability Unit Defends Cultural Practices**

Management at a forensic disability unit says an Aboriginal man's access to community was a priority despite five months passing between visits, an inquiry was

told. Winmartie, the pseudonym given to an Aboriginal man diagnosed with a brain abnormality, lives at the unit after transferring from jail. He killed his sole carer at age 16 and the Northern Territory Supreme Court found he was not fit to plead before a jury returned a qualified verdict of manslaughter, the Disability Royal Commission was told last week. At the end of visits to community, family members typically pretend to pack their cars so Winmartie believed he wasn't the only one leaving and felt more at ease, commissioners heard on Friday. On one occasion in June 2020 when this did not happen, he became angry and damaged one of the cars.

His next visit wasn't until December, but the forensic disability unit's direct services manager Tom Langcake denied Winmartie's return to community was not a priority. He accepted that the change in routine was identified as a trigger for behaviour but said there were other contributing factors. Psychiatrist and psychologist reports, vehicle repair, staffing considerations and organising satellite phones added to the extended timeline, he said in evidence before the hearing on Monday. "There were also a number of medication reductions leading up to that and there were growing concerns about Winmartie's escalations following some of those medication reductions," he said. Asked what the definitions of culture awareness and cultural competency were, Mr Langcake said he could not say "off the top of my head" but the unit tried to be responsive to cultural needs.

"They are pretty important terms in creating an environment for First Nations people to have a strong sense of cultural security and to not have a working knowledge, a practical knowledge of those terms, as a leader, is pretty critical," Commissioner Andrea Mason said. The Disability Royal Commission is hearing from 33 witnesses over eight days as it explores indefinite detention and the "cycling in and out" of jail by people with disability.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/22/2021

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## **Aged Care Report Scheduled to Go Public**

More than two years after it was first told shocking tales of neglect and failure, the aged care royal commission's final report is expected to be publicly released next week. Commissioners will on Friday deliver their long-awaited findings to the governor-general but it won't be made public until the federal government tables it in parliament. "We'll review it carefully over the weekend. We will release the report and provide an interim response by the middle of next week," Health Minister Greg Hunt told reporters on Thursday. "We are anticipating it could be well over a thousand pages and there could be more than a hundred recommendations." An interim report, released in October 2019, found the sector was failing to meet the needs of elderly people, many vulnerable, was woefully inadequate and needed a complete overhaul.

Labor raised several disturbing allegations of abuse in homes during Question Time on Thursday, grilling the aged care minister on what he had done to improve the sector. Aged care, which is predominantly funded by the Commonwealth, has come under increased scrutiny during the pandemic. Across the country 685 aged residents died from COVID-19, including 655 in Victoria. The federal government has poured extra money into the sector in recent years, and announced in December a \$1 billion boost aimed largely at creating 10,000 more home care packages. The United Workers Union, which represents thousands of aged care workers, is calling for understaffing to be further addressed. A recent survey of 3000 staff found four-in-five workers believe older Australians aren't getting the quality of aged care they deserve.

"Workers want aged care residents to be guaranteed a certain amount of care time so workers can meet the quality care needs of older Australians," United Workers Union aged care director Carolyn Smith said. "Aged care workers know it's time to change aged care. Older Australians, their families and aged care workers deserve dignity and respect." The commission's interim report found pay and conditions for staff were poor, workloads heavy and there were severe difficulties in recruitment and retention. It also found there was an overuse of drugs to 'restrain' aged care residents and younger people with disabilities were stuck in aged care. Lawyers assisting the commission have made 124 reform recommendations, including for mandated staffing ratios, increased regulator powers and new laws to protect the rights of elderly people.

Peter Rozen QC said there has been an absence of leadership by successive governments but this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make change. Some 240,000 Australians currently live in residential aged care, including more than 6000 younger people with a disability. The commission received more than 10,000 submissions and heard from 641 witnesses.

*From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 02/25/2021*

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## **Private Health Changes Reach Parliament**

Young people could soon be allowed to stay on their family's private health insurance plan for much longer. The federal government has introduced legislation to change the dependence criteria for private health, with amendments to raise the age at which people can be considered dependents from 24 to 31. They also remove any age barrier for people with a disability to be considered dependents. "It means they have better capacity to be part of a family package, which increases the potential take-up of private health insurance," Health Minister Greg Hunt told reporters in Canberra on Thursday. Another 56,000 people have recently taken up private health cover, an increase of 0.1 per cent. Mr Hunt said the surge was "interesting" and contrary to the

government's expectations during the coronavirus pandemic.

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### 3、 Management, Capacity Building and Innovation

#### Asia-Pacific

##### **World Bank Group Announces Settlement with Golden Maritime Technology**

The World Bank Group today announced the six-month conditional non-debarment of Bangladesh-based Golden Maritime Technology (GMT) in connection with a fraudulent practice under the World Bank-financed Urban Resilience Project in Bangladesh. The sanction of conditional non-debarment means that GMT will remain eligible to participate in projects and operations financed by institutions of the World Bank Group provided that it complies with its obligations under the settlement agreement. If these obligations are not satisfied within a six-month period, the conditional non-debarment will convert to a sanction of debarment with conditional release, and the company will then become ineligible to participate in World Bank Group-financed activities until the conditions for release set out in the settlement agreement are met.

The Urban Resilience Project is designed to strengthen the capacity of government agencies to respond to emergency events and reduce the vulnerability of new building construction to natural disasters in Dhaka and Sylhet. According to the facts of the case, GMT entered into an agreement to prepare a bid on behalf of another company and submitted unauthorized documents with falsified signatures as part of the bidding process. These actions constitute a fraudulent practice under the World Bank Group procurement guidelines. The settlement agreement provides for a reduced period of sanction in light of GMT's cooperation and voluntary remedial actions. As a condition for release from sanction under the terms of the settlement agreement, GMT commits to strengthening its integrity compliance program in line with the principles set out in the World Bank Group Integrity Compliance Guidelines. The company also commits to continue to fully cooperate with the World Bank Group Integrity Vice Presidency.

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 02/17/2021

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##### **Are Smart Cities the Key to Resilience?**

The word 'rebuild' has been the focal point of a lot of discussions around recovery. How can we rebuild our place economies back to pre-pandemic levels? How can we rebuild the footfall to our city centres? And how can we do this so that our places are more resilient against future shocks? The smartest response isn't to just recreate the same processes as we were used to pre-pandemic, but to understand how we can refine and improve our everyday 'normal'. The pandemic has exposed our weaknesses and now we need to ensure that we address these in order to be more resilient against future shocks.

#### Smart operating models for more sustainable cities

Finding smarter ways of working is at the core of building resilience into our cities and our countries. But what does "smart" mean in practice? Technology is clearly part of the answer - but it is not necessarily the only answer. In this article we'll explore what place brand and marketing teams can learn about the use of tech, data, and smarter ways of working from Smart City initiatives. Published in 2018, the ISO standard for smart city operation (ISO 37106) evolved from a five year process of research and engagement with city leaders, and draws on an earlier British standard in use in over 100 countries. ISO 37106 provides a practical framework for delivering city-wide change at scale: shifting from being a siloed city to one that drives innovation and collaboration across its vertical silos. The focus is on four key areas: focussing on end outcomes; cross-silo governance; citizen-centric service transformation; and data-management.

There are a variety of ways that this smarter approach to place governance can be achieved, not a one-size-fits-all model. But there is one core tenet that underlies the ISO approach to smart operating models – the ability to apply collaborative governance to cross-vertical challenges, and citizen needs. We know from our 2021 place branding survey that just under half of place branders feel the collaboration between their tourism and economic development bodies could be more effective; this model could be at the core of effectively realising these collaborative ambitions. After all, as the standard states: "The traditional operating model for a city has been based around functionally-oriented service providers that operate as unconnected, vertical silos which are often not built around user needs. Smart city leaders need to.... develop an integrated city operating model, which is focused around citizen and business needs, not just the city's organisational structure."

#### Collaborative governance in practice

Let's put it into context.

A tourist visiting a city has hundreds if not thousands of touch points throughout their customer journey. From visa acquisition, to transport to and within the country, to the hospitality and leisure industry. In some cases, it could even involve medical services or the police. The delivery of these functions rests in hundreds of different departments – and it absolutely should. The expertise held by different teams is what

makes them great at their jobs. However, the ISO standard suggests imposing a virtual 'customer responsibility' framework over the top of this existing framework of disconnected verticals. By identifying the areas which are relevant to 'a tourist' you can create more channels for collaboration and cross-governance within tourism without having to rebuild the organisation from the ground-up. And by assigning the ultimate accountability to a single key stakeholder, you ensure that there is a team of people with the responsibility for making sure that all the individual parts stay on track. Done right, it can be a powerful driver of change. ISO has also developed a maturity framework – ISO 37107 – to help cities measure their performance against the ISO 37106 framework. Piloted by cities including London and Glasgow in the UK, Dubai, Moscow, Sydney and Tianjin, this provides a self-assessment framework that can help you see how smart your city is. Try it - and let us know here at City Nation Place what you think!

What learnings are there for place brand and marketing organisations? While the focus of ISO 37106 is very much on city governance, there's a lot that can be applied within a destination marketing or economic development organisation – particularly around collaboration and more effective data/resource management. By establishing smarter processes in your organisation, you can work more efficiently, more effectively, and free up the time of your team to explore new endeavours. And what's more, you can establish communication channels between teams or with other key stakeholders and partners that will allow you to be more responsive and agile in the face of a sudden change or an unexpected crisis. If everyone has a clearer understanding of what their roles and responsibilities are, then you'll have less chance of people duplicating work during a scramble to respond to a crisis. "This is why governments opt for empowering citizenship by opening data and highlight the importance of the individual commitment," explained David Groisman, Director General of Management Exchange and Chief Resilience Officer at Buenos Aires. "When the information is freely available, the creativity of an entire community can help to co-create innovative solutions."

#### Smarter tech and the future of cities and nations

Of course, we have to acknowledge the impact that tech has on the management and governance of a smart city or organisation. A few years back, the CTO of Industry Solutions for Huawei shared that "All the systems of government use are silos. They are not connected together. For a smart city to work, you need an integrated, independent system. It has to be an open IT infrastructure and there must be great connections – you can't have a smart city without connections." While technology shouldn't be the core driver of a smart initiative, it can be a great enabler of the intra-connectivity and data management that can drive smarter decision making. But how are places using smart city technology effectively to address our most pressing challenges?

- COVID-management in China: The Chinese track and trace app encouraged people

to sign in whenever they arrived in a location so that the local CDC were aware of your movement. “There’s an application infrastructure that stretches across cities and across the nation, but the actual delivery is very local. That’s important,” shared Jonathan Woetzel, Managing Director at McKinsey Global Institute. “[Cities] have to take charge of their responsibility to help their residents and their visitors feel safe.”

- Crisis simulations in Newcastle, UK: Newcastle has created a digital twin of the city that allows them to accurately simulate different crises and understand where the greatest stress points are going to be. As well as helping the city to address problematic areas before a crisis hits, in the event of a flood or other major catastrophe, it can be used to help the city direct emergency services to the areas that are going to face the greatest challenges.

- The Sharing Cities project: London, Lisbon, Milan, Bordeaux, Burgas and Warsaw have been working collaboratively to understand how investment in smart technologies can address our most pressing urban challenges and prove that these solutions can be scaled and replicated across other European cities.

- Building a digital society in Estonia: Estonia have taken the one-stop shop to the next level by building an efficient, secure, and transparent ecosystem where 99% of governmental services are online. As well as allowing a far easier end-user experience, it’s supported Estonia through the creation of several digital solutions that have helped the nation to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### The challenges of smart city technology

There are challenges inherent in focussing on tech as the solution to your problems however, which is why smarter ways of working and wide-spread engagement have to be part of that solution as well. For one, integrating technology into your organisation and your place is a costly and time-consuming process. Cisco have recently announced that they’re shuttering many of their existing smart city programmes, for example – simply because the challenges they were addressing aren’t as pressing anymore. After all, you don’t need to focus on smart traffic management if your workforce isn’t commuting due to the surge in working from home. It will also be key to close the digital divide. For more digitally enabled countries, that will involve ensuring that you don’t leave certain communities behind – building 5G infrastructure will allow much more rapid advancements in smart city management, but if much of your population still don’t have a reliable internet connection, then it may not be most pressing solution. And for countries that are further behind in implementing digital solutions, closing the digital divide will be essential in delivering competitive value for investors and residents alike.

In Singapore, for example, a new national movement embraces digital technologies as a lifelong pursuit that will enrich lives. The Digital for Life Fund that the government has launched has the dual focus of building digital resilience and promoting digital literacy and wellness which will encourage healthier and more sustainable habits within their population. Lastly, as long as there have been smart city solutions available, there have been concerns of over-surveillance, of new and

oppressive ways for the state to police their communities. Google's proposed Sidewalk Labs in Toronto is a particularly high-profile example of how a lack of citizen engagement led to fierce opposition from residents and concerns around privacy and data management. Transparency and a comprehensive citizen engagement strategy could be the key towards assuaging many of these concerns. These challenges need addressing if we are to build effective and resilient smart cities and organisations, but they aren't the be all and end all. And if you can create a cross-silo collaborative approach, it will create a far more resilient foundation for all your future smart initiatives.

From <https://www.citynationplace.com/> 02/25/2021

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## **How “Smart Ports” Can Be a Game Changer in the Pacific**

Maritime trade is a vital industry for countries in the Pacific, which rely almost entirely on imports for their essential goods. However, small Pacific island nations have had to deal for some time with old, degrading port infrastructure that seriously hampers the potential of these economies to benefit more from maritime trade. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) study Smart Ports in the Pacific explores how adapting international best practices for ports in the Pacific is important for achieving smarter, more robust port ecosystems. In the same way smartphones changed the communications landscape, smart ports show much promise in being a game-changer in the Pacific region.

What is a Smart Port?

According to Port Technology International, a smart port is one that ensures “no waste of space, time, money, and natural resources.” The concept of smart ports involves harnessing advanced technologies to enhance port operational efficiency, energy efficiency, and environmental sustainability. The port of the future is expected to be 100% electric, local emissions-free, and able to process more goods in less time. Smart Ports in the Pacific was commissioned to assess and develop the potential of smart ports in the region, taking into account the region's unique features in terms of geographical remoteness, smaller trade volumes that heavily favor imports, and challenging weather conditions. The Pacific has unique challenges when it comes to climate change and natural hazards. Typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other weather disturbances can disrupt marine vessel traffic and significantly impact maritime trade.

The following ports in the Pacific were assessed in the study for potential to have smart ports:

Queen Salote International Wharf in Tonga

Honiara Port in Solomon Islands

Suva Port in Fiji (pictured below)



## Suva Port in Fiji

Taking into account the geographical features of the Pacific, the study highlighted crucial points for successfully establishing smart ports in the Pacific.

### The Smart Ports Mission Statement for the Pacific

There is no one-size-fits-all solution in implementing smart ports in the Pacific. The specific characteristics of each port should be considered in planning, designing, and constructing a smart port. Gathering data on ports, such as accurate weather data and prediction models, is highly important. Staff skills and safety should be prioritized. As smart ports feature new technologies, people need to develop the skills needed to operate, maintain, and improve these tools and systems and ensure their sustainability. Partnerships play an important role in ensuring that digitalization will be maximized for all port users. An Internet of Things (IoT) is among the primary features of a smart port. An IoT facilitates seamless data sharing, digitization, and automation within a smart port—from inputs to feedback. In December 2020, ADB approved a \$45 million grant to help rehabilitate and upgrade the Queen Salote Wharf in the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa. The Nuku'alofa Port Project is designed with green and smart components. In the Pacific, the advanced technologies and international best practices required for smart ports need to be weighed with the local realities of small trade volumes, geographical isolation, and extreme weather events to enhance operational and energy efficiency and improve environmental sustainability. With this approach, smart ports can be the game changer they promise to be for the Pacific.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 02/01/2021

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## **Leveraging Digital Technologies Key to Asia's COVID-19 Recovery — ADB**

Digital platforms and other technology-based tools are providing new growth opportunities for businesses of all sizes and across all industries in Asia and the Pacific—a trend which could contribute significantly to the region's sustainable recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, according to a new report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). A flagship ADB publication, the Asian Economic Integration Report 2021, looks at Asia and the Pacific's progress in regional cooperation and integration, and examines the initial impact of the pandemic on trade, cross-border investment, financial integration, and the movement of people. The latest edition features a special theme chapter on the role and potential of digital technologies in contributing to inclusive and sustainable development, how digital technology can spur post-pandemic recovery in the region, and ways to accelerate digital transformation while managing the risks effectively.

“Countries in Asia and the Pacific have leveraged rapid technological progress and

digitalization to recover and reconnect to the global economy during the pandemic. Technology is helping to forge new global linkages, which offer enormous economic opportunities, but also present new risks and challenges,” said ADB Chief Economist Yasuyuki Sawada. “It is imperative to implement policies and regulations that manage the disruptions and maximize the gains from the burgeoning digital economy, and to lock in these gains through enhanced regional cooperation.” Business-to-consumer revenues of digital platforms reached \$3.8 trillion in 2019 globally, with Asia and the Pacific accounting for about 48% of the total or \$1.8 trillion, equivalent to 6% of the region’s gross domestic product. These figures are expected to have significantly increased in 2020 as more business transactions—such as ride hailing, food delivery, and e-commerce—migrate to the digital space amid restrictions imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Accelerated digital transformation can potentially boost global output, trade and commerce, and employment. According to the report, a 20% increase in the size of the global digital sector can increase global output by an average of \$4.3 trillion yearly from 2021 to 2025. Similarly, Asia and the Pacific would reap an economic dividend of more than \$1.7 trillion yearly or more than \$8.6 trillion over the 5 years to 2025. There will be about 65 million new jobs created yearly in Asia and the Pacific until 2025 from increased use of digital technologies, with regional trade also expected to increase by \$1 trillion yearly over the next 5 years. Governments in the region can leverage and reap the benefits of the emerging digital economy through policies and reforms to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity, as well as access to them. These steps include promoting fair competition and improving ease-of-doing business processes, as well as enhancing labor security and social protection measures to align with digital jobs. The report also emphasized the need to focus on data privacy and security, taxation, partnership between public and private institutions, and regional cooperation.

The report notes that the region’s trade performance, while hit hard during the first half of 2020, is expected to recover faster than anticipated. Asia’s merchandise trade volume growth hit the bottom at -10.1% year-on-year in May, and has recovered gradually, turning into positive territory since September 2020. Investment flows globally and to the region are estimated to have fallen further in 2020, following a 7.7% slide in foreign direct investment to Asia in 2019 at \$510.5 billion. Nevertheless, recent firm-level activity in mergers and acquisitions in the region shows signs of recovery, as countries start to reopen and ease some pandemic-related restrictions.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 02/10/2021

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**New ADB Tool Offers Roadmap to Unblock Supplies of Life-Saving Products**

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed deep and dangerous fault lines in global supply chains. A telling impact is the shortage in many countries of life-saving medical equipment such as ventilators. As countries entered lockdowns to contain the virus, healthcare authorities and governments were left scrambling to find the products they needed. Those efforts have been hampered by a lack of readily accessible information on supply chains for these crucial products. ADB's Trade Finance Program and Supply Chain Finance Program is helping resolve this through a new online tool which maps these supply chains, allowing governments, banks, investors, and healthcare professionals to pinpoint companies making these products and intervene to clear any blockages. "This way, a fault somewhere along the supply chain can be fixed," said ADB's Head of Trade and Supply Chain Finance Steven Beck. "Banks or investors can fund a company struggling to meet increased demand."

#### Shining a spotlight on blocked supply chains

In the early days of the virus as health systems, governments, and international organizations realized they needed to start ramping up their stocks of goods like portable ventilators, it soon became clear that a key obstacle was a lack of clear understanding of who made what in the supply chains for those products. Even the banks didn't have a full picture of whether the companies they worked with were involved in the supply lines. "That kind of information wasn't available in a way that would make it easy for someone to address problems that might arise," said Beck. "We decided to see if that was something we could do." The solution was an interactive mapping tool for the supply chains of products vital to healthcare workers and others on the frontlines of the battle. The tool, launched in May, enables governments, banks, investors, and healthcare professionals to trace the companies that make every component in products such as portable ventilators, down to the metal and rubber that goes into each part. As well as ventilators, the mapping tool includes the entire supply chains for N95 respirators, face shields, goggles, aprons, surgical masks, and gowns. Previously, the information on who makes which part for which product was available in piecemeal fashion. But this information had never been brought together in one database that would allow a quick search. "When we heard about the issues with the supply chains, we started asking our bank partners which companies in their portfolios were involved in the supply chains for these products," said Beck. "The idea was that we could help shine a spotlight on these supply chains and get help to where it was needed."

#### New tool maps supply chains for PPE, medical equipment, treatments, tests and vaccines

ADB's trade and supply chain finance businesses are uniquely placed to address the economic and financial impacts of the pandemic, as they are in constant contact with banks and other stakeholders involved in global trade. ADB's COVID-19 response includes direct support for trade through an \$800 million increase in the trade finance lending limit to \$2.15 billion. By mobilizing private sector cofinancing and turning

short-dated trade transactions over quickly—the average trade finance transaction is only 142 days—the \$2.15 billion limit is expected to support over \$5 billion in trade during 2020. A further \$200 million of supply chain assistance has been made available for transactions supporting the fight against the pandemic. Over a period of seven weeks from April 1, the trade finance program supported over 1,087 transactions valued at approximately \$688 million, and supply chain support was extended for 19 medical or pharmaceutical transactions worth over \$5.5 million. The supply chain mapping initiative represents a new type of support from ADB's trade and supply chain finance programs. It leverages the reach and agility of ADB's financing operations to give unprecedented insights into problems along the supply line and speed their resolution.

For example, if a shortage of rubber gaskets is holding up production of ventilators, someone using the ADB tool could quickly look up the companies making those gaskets. With a few clicks, they could see information detailing the size and turnover of those companies, their location, and how many people they employ. They could tell whether those companies only make one particular gasket or whether gaskets are just a small part of their production. They could also see which banks the companies use, providing further information on how to dismantle barriers to financing. "This mapping tool helps fill in the information deficit around supply chains and provides a template to ensure supply chain blockages don't hold up responses to future outbreaks," said Beck. COVID-19 has exposed the shortcomings of global supply chains. The mapping tool is one way for countries to bridge these fault lines with information that can save lives.

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## **Six Ways to Boost Gender Equality in the CAREC Region**

Despite remarkable progress in socioeconomic development in Central and West Asia, women in the region continue to suffer from significant gender disparities: They are likely to receive lower pay, work in informal sectors, and encounter poor workplace equality standards. In Central Asia, women spend up to four times as much time as men on unpaid work. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has exacerbated these disparities with school closures adding to the amount of unpaid care work that disproportionately falls to women, and lockdowns impacting the informal economy. As the pandemic threatens the region's progress, there has never been a more urgent case for empowering women. To address this, the 11 nations in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program—a partnership to promote economic growth and development through regional cooperation—have endorsed a strategy to promote gender equality. It is a key complement to the CAREC Program's overall long-term plan: CAREC 2030. Here are six ways CAREC aims to improve gender equality in the region.

### 1. Promote women's economic empowerment through employment and financial inclusion

Macroeconomic policy is often considered gender neutral, but evidence shows that women in all CAREC countries are more likely to be unemployed and are often concentrated in the lowest-paid sectors and roles. Women often have problems accessing small loans to start businesses due to a lack of assets and few appropriate financial products. To address this, CAREC will promote policies and strategies that build women's capacity, especially in emerging areas of employment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and information communications technology (ICT). Interventions also include creating standards for decent work and inclusive employment. CAREC will also promote better coordinated regulations in the banking sector to improve financial inclusion of women and engage the private sector to promote more cross-border investments in agribusiness and tourism.

### 2. Place women at the center of trade and tourism

Cross-border trading activities for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises and small and informal businesses account for a significant portion of CAREC's regional trade and provide a vital source of income for many women. To boost gender inclusiveness across all aspects of trade, policies could introduce time-bound subsidies to help women-led export businesses increase their production capacity and market their products in other countries. Government procurement could tap goods and services produced by female-led enterprises, while trade policies must also ensure that goods have been produced under safe working conditions. In line with the CAREC Tourism Strategy 2030, CAREC will pursue measures to enhance women's access to information about tourism-related jobs. It will support the development of regional guidelines to ensure that recruitment is based on skills and experience, and that women receive equal pay and access to training.

### 3. Build infrastructure that responds to women's needs

Despite the widespread assumption that women and men benefit equally from transport and other infrastructure, there are significant gender differences. Women in CAREC countries are less likely to drive, and more likely to use public transport for tasks related to their roles as primary caregivers such as food shopping and taking children to school. Public transport services in the CAREC region are often expensive, hard to access, or unsafe. It is vital to improve transport services to ensure they are convenient, accessible, and safe for women and children. CAREC transport planning and projects will ensure the provision of affordable services to accommodate women's specific travel patterns, including building in space for baby carriages and separate carriages for women, and adequate lighting along routes to bus stops or local villages. As women and girls often spend time collecting fuel or preparing stoves for domestic use, it is crucial to provide clean and efficient energy. CAREC will seek to strengthen and inform energy policies towards reducing domestic energy costs and providing low-cost, carbon-neutral energy options. The

program will also support regional information exchanges including between government ministries, female energy professionals, and NGOs to help inform transport and energy planning.

#### 4. Empower women in agriculture

Many women in CAREC countries work in agriculture including more than 80% of all economically active women in Afghanistan. Yet, this work is often poorly paid or unpaid, and female farmers face challenges accessing productive resources such as land, water, and seeds. If women had the same access to productive resources as men, farm yields across the region could increase by 20%–30%. To maximize this potential, CAREC will promote better access to credit, agricultural extension services, and digital technology that connects farmers to market pricing information and potential buyers. In the CAREC countries, women often have the primary responsibility for the household's water management and are disproportionately burdened by water supply and quality issues. CAREC aims to increase their representation in water management associations and cross-country and regional dialogues. It will also assist in strengthening regional disaster risk management and reducing climate change-related risks, which will likewise improve women's security and resilience.

#### 5. Improve women's human capital development

The number of women with secondary and tertiary education has been growing in many CAREC countries. But further efforts to improve human capital development are critical, including expanding access to higher education and technical training to boost women's education status and income-earning capacities. To encourage women and girls in STEM and other technical subjects, CAREC will examine ways to increase their access to national and regional centers of learning and the provision of scholarships and other incentives to offset the risk of early dropout. CAREC will also support partnerships with regional technical and vocational education and training providers to offer women training in nontraditional skills such as electrical work and machine operation. While there has been a steady improvement across health indicators in CAREC countries, these are likely to be undermined by COVID-19. CAREC will seek to strengthen surveillance and monitoring capabilities for cross-border health threats to women and men, promote digital health solutions, and connect remote and underserved areas to health services.

#### 6. Enhance women's access to information and technology

Around the world, pandemic-induced lockdowns have accelerated the adoption of digital technology into daily life. ICT has been an invaluable tool for connecting people more efficiently to information, e-commerce, education, and health services, among others. Women lag behind men in access to digital technology in the CAREC region, including in phone ownership and mobile internet usage. Addressing the digital divide is now urgent. CAREC aims to ensure that women are not left behind by conducting regional trainings and workshops to build the ICT capacity of women and

girls. It will also support intercountry partnerships with private sector digital providers to improve internet access in remote and rural communities.

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## East Asia

### **CHINA: Foreign Investment Gravitates Toward China amid Easing Market Access**

China's January foreign direct investment (FDI) data has shown that the country remained an attractive destination for foreign investors following a record-breaking inflow in 2020. FDI into the Chinese mainland expanded 4.6 percent year on year in actual use to 91.61 billion yuan last month, the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) said on Wednesday. In U.S. dollar terms, the inflow rose 6.2 percent year on year to 13.47 billion dollars. Foreign investment in the services industry came in at 68.46 billion yuan in January, up 11 percent year on year and accounting for 74.7 percent of the country's total FDI, according to the MOC. Wholesale and retail trade sectors saw FDI climb 27.2 percent year on year during the period, and the accommodation and catering industries saw a 71.5 percent surge. Last year, the country recorded a 4-percent growth in inflows, making it the largest recipient of FDI in the world, according to a report from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

MOC official Zong Changqing attributed the growth in FDI to the country's choice of expanding opening-up amid the epidemic. In contrast to some countries that raise barriers to foreign investment, Zong said that China is more determined to carry out reform and opening-up for stabilizing foreign investment in face of the hardships. The country has kept shortening its negative list and opening more fields to create opportunities for foreign investors, Zong added. The MOC has pledged to continue widening market access for foreign investment, which continues to face a complex and severe situation this year. China will fully implement a new negative list for foreign investment and further lift restrictive measures, according to the MOC. Xiao Benhua, an expert with the Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance, said China is expected to further expand opening up in key areas such as finance, education and medical care.

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### **China Vows to Further Ensure Grain Security**

Chinese authorities on Monday reaffirmed the country's focus on ensuring grain security and protecting germplasm resources after unveiling an annual rural policy plan to facilitate agricultural modernization and advance rural vitalization. "China's grain security is fully guaranteed," Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Tang Renjian told a press conference, citing sufficient grain inventories and sound production and sales. Acknowledging the country's agricultural achievements in withstanding a significant test last year amid the COVID-19 epidemic, Tang called for continuing to enhance grain output and ensure grain security. The minister's remarks came after the release of China's "No. 1 central document" on Sunday. It lists the targets and tasks concerning agriculture and rural areas for 2021 and a broader vision until 2025. As a rural blueprint unveiled annually, this year's document urged retaining a "red line" of 1.8 billion mu (120 million hectares) of arable land and preventing the use of arable land for non-farming purposes.

The country also planned to add 100 million mu of high-standard farmland with high and stable yields this year. It would be despite droughts and floods, according to the document. China has made massive achievements in the agricultural sector in recent years. Official data showed China had 17 consecutive years of bumper harvests in grain production, with grain output exceeding 650 billion kg for six years in a row. The mechanization rate of farming and harvesting reached 71 percent while the amount of chemical fertilizers and pesticides applied to crops dropped for four consecutive years, Tang said. Yet, China's grain supply and demand remained in a "tight balance," Tang noted, calling for more efforts to enhance grain production to cope with external uncertainties and rising crop demand in the long run. The country in the next stage should not only ensure quantity but also improve the diversity and quality of agricultural products, Tang said.

He urged promoting supply-side structural reform in the agricultural sector by improving breeding, branding, and standardized agricultural production to offer a broader range of high-quality products to Chinese consumers. Admittedly, China still faces many weak links in germplasm resource protection, and breeding theories and technologies, according to Zhang Taolin, vice agricultural minister. Zhang urged investigations and germplasm resource collection of crops, poultry, and aquatic products. Efforts should also support leading enterprises specializing in germplasm and breeding, facilitate core-breeding technology breakthroughs, and promote agricultural biological breeding projects, Zhang said.

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## **China Takes Historic Step by Eliminating Absolute Poverty**

China, the world's most populous country, on Thursday declared that it has eliminated absolute poverty. The feat means China has solved absolute poverty,



which has existed for thousands of years. The nation's people have now realized their long-cherished wish for ample food and clothing as well as comfortable housing. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that China has scored a "complete victory" in its fight against poverty and accomplished the arduous task of eliminating absolute poverty, hailing the achievement as another miracle of mankind that will "go down in history." Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the announcement while addressing a grand gathering held in Beijing to mark the country's poverty alleviation accomplishments and award model poverty fighters.

Since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, China has organized and launched a tough anti-poverty drive that is the largest in scale and strongest in intensity, and benefits the biggest number of people in human history. Under the current standard, the country has lifted all 98.99 million of its rural poor out of poverty, or an average of over 10 million each year, which is equivalent to the population of a medium-sized country. Wang Jincai is a farmer from the Miao ethnic group in Pangru Village of the Ziyun Miao-Bouyei Autonomous County, southwest China's Guizhou Province. "We didn't have enough to eat and lived in an old wooden house with holes everywhere. You could see the stars when you sat inside," he recalled. His family bid farewell to poverty in 2020 and now lives in a new house equipped with running water. Over the past eight years, Xi has presided over seven central poverty alleviation work symposiums, conducted more than 50 investigations into poverty alleviation work, and visited all of China's 14 contiguous impoverished areas.

The country has sent over 3 million people to villages as special commissioners for poverty relief and invested fiscal funds totaling nearly 1.6 trillion yuan (248 billion U.S. dollars) into poverty alleviation. More than 1,800 people have lost their lives in the country's fight against poverty. Yang Yalin, Party chief of Zhaotong City, Yunnan Province, said that the key to success in poverty alleviation is to firmly rely on the leadership of the CPC. "No matter how hard a nut is, we are resolved to crack it with the concerted efforts of cadres and the masses," he said. When calculated in accordance with China's current poverty line, the country has lifted 770 million rural residents out of poverty since the beginning of reform and opening-up over 40 years ago, accounting for more than 70 percent of the global total based on the World Bank's international poverty line.

China has met the goal of ending poverty established in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years ahead of schedule. The elimination of absolute poverty in China is thanks to the CPC's strong leadership and determination, the people-centered philosophy of development, the institutional strength which can bring together the resources necessary to accomplish great tasks, as well as a series of creative and significant ideas and measures such as targeted poverty reduction, domestic and overseas observers have said. Eliminating absolute poverty is a key contribution to accomplishing the CPC's first centenary goal of building a moderately

prosperous society in all respects, has set a solid foundation for its new journey of fully building a modern socialist country, and has created a "China example" for poverty reduction.

Senegalese scholar Ibrahima Niang said China's achievement in alleviating extreme poverty is exemplary, and its experience will contribute to the development of African countries. Despite the accomplishment, the income levels of people who have recently shaken off poverty are relatively low. As Xi said at the gathering, shaking off poverty is not the finish line, but the starting point of a new life and a new endeavor, and further efforts will be made to integrate the work of consolidating poverty alleviation achievements with rural vitalization.

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## **JAPAN: Remote Medical Technology Useful Tool in Battling Pandemic**

Local authorities and hospitals in Japan have been using a range of remote monitoring devices to keep tabs on coronavirus patients recovering at home or in designated hotels during the pandemic. The equipment includes innovative technology such as a shirt that gauges a patient's heart rate and a bed that tracks respiratory function. And according to a team at St Luke's International University in Tokyo that has developed its own telenursing system, such devices could even play a role in lowering the infection risk for overburdened health care providers. "If used effectively, they could lessen the risk of (COVID-19) infections that come from in-person medical care and outpatient visits," said Tomoko Kamei, a geriatric nursing professor who heads the telenursing system development team at SLIU. "The systems can be applied in treatment of coronavirus cases in the home when a condition becomes severe."

The shirt, developed by Mitsufuji Corp, a textile manufacturer based in Kyoto, uses special threads that conduct electricity with a small sensor attached to measure heart rate and perform an electrocardiogram in real-time. Data can be sent to the patient, a caregiver such as a family member or medical workers using a special app or by email. An alarm sounds if an abnormality, such as the person falling down, is detected, and a distress signal sent. Kyoto Prefecture in western Japan has acquired Mitsufuji's shirts to use for telenursing of COVID-19 patients recuperating in hotels, making it easy for health care providers to immediately respond when there is a drastic change in a patient's condition. Paramount Bed Co, based in Tokyo, sells a "smart bed system" that uses a sensor attached to the bottom of a bed to monitor a patient's respiratory function, heart rate and sleeping state.

The sensor is sensitive to subtle movements made by the body with each breath.

The data appear on a bedside monitor that patients can view and are regularly sent to hospital nurse stations. An alarm is triggered in the event of an emergency. Aside from using the beds for remote monitoring of patients in the home, several hospitals have also acquired them to allow nurses to observe coronavirus patients at their station without making frequent visits to check on them in person. In Saitama Prefecture, near Tokyo, the beds were used last year for patients staying at hotels. Watches that track blood oxygen levels 24/7, such as Apple Inc's Apple Watch and Blood Oxygen app, have also become popular, although they are technically not medical devices. A sudden drop in oxygen saturation is a possible indication of a worsening condition for the respiratory illness, making oxygen levels essential to track.

Fitbit Inc. of the United States has a watch with sensors that shine red and infrared light on the wrist's skin and blood vessels and uses the reflected light to estimate how much oxygen is in the blood -- with poorly oxygenated blood reflecting more infrared light than red light, and richly oxygenated blood doing the opposite. However, both watches were developed to monitor a wearer's general health and condition during workouts and are not suitable for making medical decisions, experts say. Kamei's team at SLIU has developed a remote wireless system that uses a tablet controlled by the patient to record medical history, including blood oxygen saturation levels using a pulse oximeter. Data are automatically sent to a nurse monitoring station at the university. Nurses check the data and confirm any points of concern with patients via video chat. The information is then shared with doctors who assess courses of treatment. Some local authorities have been distributing medical pulse oximeters to COVID-19 patients while they recover at home or in hotels, but supplies have run low. "It has been popular with users," Kamei said. "They say it gives them peace of mind to be watched over, even at a distance."

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## **Pandemic Sparks 'Robotic Age' in Japan**

The face of an employee working remotely is displayed on the screen of a robot moving through the halls of a company, cheerfully greeting colleagues with "thank you for your hard work." These robots move around the offices of Janssen Pharmaceutical K.K. in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, a pharmaceutical company that has reduced physical employee attendance by 70% through telework. They are particularly popular during meetings because unlike videophones, the user can change camera directions, making it easier to take in more of their surroundings. Indirect social interaction has become essential amid the pandemic, and many companies are turning to robots for help. In the tea room at Yukioka Hospital in Kita Ward, Osaka, a robot serves customers after a staff member indicates the table number, reducing contact between employees and customers.

In many cases, robots developed for other purposes have been adapted to the cause of social distancing. Mediaroid Corp. in Kobe — a joint venture between Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Ltd. and Sysmex Corp., a major medical equipment maker — is developing a system with the support of Kobe City and in cooperation with its parent companies, in which a robot automatically carries out a series of tasks ranging from the collection of a PCR sample to determining test results. The participants in this venture are aiming for practical application of the system within fiscal 2020. An industrial robot once in charge of assembly and painting in an automobile factory has been adapted for the task. Various demonstrations are being conducted in many locations. "It's the age of robots," said an official at the development company. Even more new ways of living, spurred by the pandemic, are expected to be developed this year.

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## **SOUTH KOREA: AI Takes Center Stage in Telcos' Tech Drive**

South Korean mobile carriers are expanding services integrated with artificial intelligence (AI) technology as they shift focus from telecommunications to find new growth drivers. Last week telecom giant KT Corp. joined hands with Hyundai Home Shopping Network Corp. to establish an AI call center at the retail company's headquarters in Seoul. The service incorporates voice recognition and text analysis technology so that AI can help customers with simple questions and can carry out tedious tasks, such as customer authentication. KT said it decided to develop the AI service to help tackle increased call center use amid the pandemic. SK Telecom Co., the country's largest mobile carrier, also commercialized a cloud-based customer contact center service last October that incorporates an AI chatbot by joining hands with Amazon Web Services Inc.

The telecom operator also plans to integrate AI in more of its services to personalize user experience, announcing Wednesday that it aims to release AI-based subscription services by partnering with companies in the food and beverage, education, rental and travel sectors. "We are aiming for 20 million subscription users and 600 billion won (US\$533.5 million) in sales by 2023," SK Telecom Chief Financial Officer Yoon Poong-young said in a conference call on the company's fourth-quarter earnings. The announcement came as its tech businesses, ranging from internet protocol TVs to online commerce, have undergone accelerated growth. Operating profit last year from the telecom operator's tech subsidiaries accounted for 24 percent of the total, compared with 14 percent in 2019. "SK Telecom is experiencing improved profitability based on growth from its non-telecom units," Kiwoom Securities analyst Jang Min-jun said. "The company will likely be revalued once its subsidiaries go public." Smaller rival LG Uplus Corp. has also focused on AI,

committing 1.3 billion won to establish an AI research center with its affiliates from the broader LG conglomerate.

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## **S. Korea Guards Against Market Volatility: Official**

South Korea will focus on strengthening financial stability as stock market volatility has increased amid rising bond yields and concerns about inflation, the vice finance minister said Tuesday. First Vice Finance Minister Kim Yong-beom said authorities will work to prevent ample liquidity that was created in the process of tackling the pandemic from hurting financial stability. "Volatility in the local stock market has somewhat increased due to economic uncertainty at home and abroad, including inflation concerns and China's move to retrieve liquidity," Kim said at a government meeting on the economy. Following a bull run, the country's key stock index has been in a tight range in recent weeks amid concerns that rising bond yields may sap demand for risky assets. Yields on 10-year government bonds continued to break yearly highs amid rises in global bond rates and concerns about the country's planned massive debt sale.

The return on 10-year Treasuries came to 1.92 percent Monday, up from 1.71 percent at the end of last year. A hike in yields on longer-dated bonds indicates higher inflation expectations. The country's inflation remains subdued amid the fallout of the pandemic, but prices of agricultural and oil products shot up in recent weeks. Experts said upward inflation pressure is not high yet, but there is a possibility that market rates could trend higher amid an economic recovery. The vice finance minister said the government will make efforts to prevent increased idle money from making its way to the property market. "The government will focus on managing risk factors and stabilizing financial markets with extra caution," Kim said.

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## **S. Korea's 2020 Growth Ranks 3rd Among Major Nations**

South Korea's economic growth rate ranked third among major economies across the globe in 2020 despite an on-year contraction due to the coronavirus pandemic, data showed Tuesday. Asia's fourth-largest economy contracted 1 percent last year from a year earlier, but it posted the third-best performance among 15 major nations, according to the data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). China, the world's No. 2 economy, was the top performer with a 2.3 percent on-year expansion, followed by Norway with a 0.8 percent contraction.

South Korea was trailed by Indonesia with minus 2.1 percent, Sweden with minus 2.8 percent, the United States with minus 3.5 percent, Japan with minus 4.8 percent, Germany with minus 5 percent and France with 8.2 percent. The British economy shrank 9.9 percent on-year in 2020, with the Spanish economy nose-diving 11 percent.

South Korea's solid performance was bolstered by a rebound in exports, its main growth engine, and more government spending to tackle the fallout from the coronavirus outbreak. Stung by the pandemic, South Korea's exports tumbled more than 20 percent in April and May before growing 4.1 percent and 12.6 percent in November and December, respectively, thanks to rising overseas demand for chip and other key products. As part of efforts to cushion the economy from the COVID-19 impact, the government came up with a series of extra budgets. The government's contribution to the country's economic growth was 1 percentage point, compared with minus 2 percentage points for the private sector. In December last year, the OECD predicted the South Korean economy to grow 2.8 percent in 2021 from a year earlier, the 29th highest among 50 major nations in the world. China is projected to register the highest growth rate of 8 percent, with France and Spain forecast to expand 6 percent and 5 percent, respectively, thanks to the so-called base effect.

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## **Moon Pledges Support for Southeastern Region's Megacity Project**

President Moon Jae-in on Thursday promised to offer support for a joint initiative between local governments in the southeastern region to form a communal socio-economic "megacity" sphere for long-term regional prosperity. Moon made the pledge as he attended a briefing on the so-called megacity project in the southeastern port city of Busan that was co-hosted by the city's municipal government and those of the nearby city of Ulsan and South Gyeongsang province. The project is aimed at establishing a broad, region-focused communal sphere of living that ties together various societal aspects -- such as the economy, living environment, culture and administration -- of some 8 million people living in the region. "Busan, Ulsan and South Gyeongsang Province have reached a common understanding to soar powerfully. The goal of achieving a population of 10 million and establishing a pan-regional city region is not an impossible challenge," Moon said at the event.

The president stated that the project could also play a role in reversing the trend of Seoul-concentrated population crowding and offer a new vision of balanced regional development. "The government will fully support the southeastern megacity formation strategy," Moon added. The project is considered a central component of

the Moon administration's broader Green New Deal initiative, a signature policy project of the president intended to foster environment-friendly industries in tandem with a push for balanced national development in the long term. From the project, Cheong Wa Dae and the central government expect to see a drastic increase in the population of the southeastern region and a substantial boost in its economic activity.

Moon's visit to Busan was made ahead of an upcoming April mayoral by-election following the expulsion of former mayor Oh Keo-don over sexual harassment allegations last year. Hence many political observers perceived the president's latest public itinerary not just as a routine policy-administration inspection event but also as a campaign trip possibly aimed at providing support to the ruling Democratic Party (DP) in the upcoming mayoral race, especially with top DP leaders, Chairman Rep. Lee Nak-yeon and floor leader Rep. Kim Tae-nyeon having accompanied Moon to Busan. The main opposition People Power Party blasted Moon, arguing that the president was meddling in elections and that it was grounds for impeachment. "We will begin a review of whether (the trip) is in violation of election laws," PPP floor leader Rep. Joo Ho-young said.

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## South-East Asia

### **CAMBODIA: Imposing Hefty Fines on COVID-19 Quarantine Violators**

Cambodia's government on Thursday issued a sub-decree imposing stiffer fines on people caught defying the COVID-19 quarantine rules. The sub-decree signed by Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen said quarantine violators will face a maximum fine of 1,250 U.S. dollars, up from the current 250 U.S. dollars. It said people who flee from the quarantine facility or refuse to give their samples for COVID-19 tests are subject to the fines. It added that anyone who "intentionally initiates, leads, advises, incites, persuades or helps" people to escape from the quarantine facility will be given a fine of between 2,500 U.S. dollars and 12,500 U.S. dollars. The sub-decree said the offenders must pay the fines within 30 days or their cases will be sent to the court for prosecution. The move came after reports of quarantine breach by Cambodian citizens in recent days. Under the kingdom's health rules, people entering the country must undergo a mandatory 14-day quarantine at designated quarantine centers. The Southeast Asian country has seen a remarkable success in containing the spread of COVID-19. The kingdom has so far recorded a total of 483 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with zero deaths and 470 recoveries, according to data issued by its health ministry.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/18/2021

## **MYANMAR: Commander-In-Chief of Defense Services Urges Nationals to Safeguard Constitution**

Myanmar Commander-in-Chief of Defense Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on Friday urged nationals to safeguard the constitution as it is the mother of all laws. Min Aung Hlaing in his capacity of chairman of the State Administration Council, in his message on the 74th Union Day, noted that non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty are the three Main National Causes and also the most important task of the democratization process. Min Aung Hlaing stressed that the main duty of the military is the task of safeguarding the three Main National Causes as all the sectors of the state duty have already been transferred to the military. He also urged the entire nation to join forces with the military for the successful realization of democracy while adhering to the three Main National Causes. The historical Panglong Conference was held in Panglong in Shan state, with the Panglong Agreement signed on Feb. 12, 1947, which was designated as Union Day, and Myanmar regained independence on Jan. 4, 1948. Min Aung Hlaing pledged to alleviate the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on society and the economy and to ensure a quick socio-economic recovery during the post-COVID-19 period with the well-organized and united strength of the entire nation. Myanmar declared a one-year state of emergency after President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained by the military on Feb. 1.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/12/2021

## **Myanmar Police Issue Arrest Warrants for Celebrities for Endorsing Strike Movement**

The Myanmar police have issued arrest warrants for six celebrity artists for their endorsing a national strike movement, according to a Myanmar Police Force's statement on Wednesday. The statement said that files have been issued against three directors, two actors and a vocalist for endorsing the civil disobedience movement and encouraging government employees to join the strike under Section 505 (a) of the Penal Code. The punishment may be imprisonment of up to three years or with fine or with both. The police also issued arrest warrants for seven artists, public figures and social activists last week, for writing articles and speeches on social media that could endanger the peace and order of the country. Some government employees have been joining the nationwide civil disobedience movement after a one-year state of emergency was declared in the country on Feb. 1. The State Administration Council, led by Commander-in-Chief of Defence



Services Sen-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, issued a notice to the public on Wednesday, denying the allegations that government employees and retired staff will not be paid. The council assured that salaries and pensions will be given to the employees and urged them to continue performing their duties without worries. Meanwhile, three official websites run by the Central Bank of Myanmar, the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services and the Military True News Information Team were attacked by hackers and suspended on Wednesday afternoon, according to the military's announcement. The council said that efforts are underway to recover the website of the Central Bank of Myanmar, while the two military websites were back online hours after the cyberattacks. The declaration of state of emergency came after President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained by the military on Feb. 1. Protests have been held in the country since early this month, calling for release of the detained leaders.

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## **VIETNAM: Ministries and Localities Urgently Tackle Pressing Problems for Businesses**

Amid the complex developments of the COVID-19 pandemic in Việt Nam, ministries and localities are urgently implementing action programmes to sustain economic growth while keeping the disease at bay. The solutions being used, focusing on investment, exports and consumption, are in line with Government two policies – Resolution 01/NQ-CP and Resolution 02/NQ-CP issued early this year – which outlined the main tasks to implement the socio-economic development plan and the State budget estimate in 2021, as well as improve the business environment to ensure the “dual goals” of fighting the pandemic and promoting economic growth. In its action plan, the Ministry of Finance defined a group of tasks for allocating resources and implementing solutions including financial measures, State funding, prices, taxes, fees and charges to tackle difficulties for businesses and workers whose jobs have been affected and help restore production and businesses for areas hit hard by the pandemic such as services, travel, aviation and industries.

The Ministry of Planning and Investment is monitoring the domestic and international situation to analyse, forecast and build growth scenarios and measures to respond to fluctuations. The Ministry of Industry and Trade has managed market development, stimulating consumption demand and supporting export enterprises to expand markets through e-commerce, cross-border trade and promoting 4.0 technology. Meanwhile, fiscal and monetary policies are being used flexibly to stabilise the macro-economy and stimulate growth. The State Bank in January issued Directive No. 01/CT-NHNN setting key tasks for the banking industry in 2021, focusing on expanding credit growth reasonably associated with managing credit quality on production and priority areas, while tightly controlling credit in potentially risky areas.

From a local perspective, many provinces and cities have also issued action plans to implement the Government's solutions. According to vice-chairman of the Hà Nội People's Committee Hà Minh Hải, after the Government issued Resolution 01, Hà Nội authorities built the action programme, identifying 25 key targets and six priority areas such as controlling the pandemic, restoring and promoting economic sectors and perfecting mechanism and policies for the capital's development which handle hot issues such as disbursement for public investment, tightening administrative discipline and tackling pressing livelihood problems.

To focus on recovering growth momentum and speed up the restructuring of economic sectors, Hà Nội will improve the investment and business environment and enhance competitiveness through advancing the Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) in weak areas such as fair competition, legal institutions, informal charges and access to land. Developing a strong start-up ecosystem, promoting innovation and developing private enterprises are also issues the city has paid greater attention to along with providing support for businesses through preferential interest rate programmes, tax incentives, land, human resources and digital transformation. In HCM City, local authorities are expected to provide credit support with zero interest rates for businesses struggling in service sectors such as accommodation, dining, tourism, and transportation and industries such as textiles, footwear, clothing, wood processing, food processing and businesses which have suffered steep declines in revenue with an expected budget of more than VNĐ4 trillion (US\$172.4 million).

The Government and Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc have assigned the Việt Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) to continue to conduct an independent assessment and publish a report on the results of implementing Resolution 02, promptly proposing tasks and solutions to improve the business environment and improve national competitiveness. According to Nguyễn Đình Cung, former director of the Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM), improving the business environment was an impressive bright spot of Việt Nam's reforms in the past five years. However, that is not enough in current circumstances. The focus of 2021 should be on recovery programmes with economic stimulus packages rather than previous support packages. In other words, Cung said Việt Nam will need to promote new areas and mobilise more resources to create a more dynamic business environment. Cung also pointed to inherent weakness like a lack of information sharing and policy implementation co-ordination among State authorities that needs changing for better results.

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## **Fight with E-Commerce Fraud to Be Increasingly Fierce**

The General Department for Market Surveillance has shown determination in the war

against counterfeit goods and trade fraud products in e-commerce channels. Last year saw e-commerce flourish and it is forecast that this will continue in the coming years. Therefore, the fight will be increasingly fierce this year, especially as "the border gate is at the door of each citizen", according to one official. Trần Hữu Linh, director-general of the General Department for Market Surveillance, said that in the past, large warehouses were often located in big cities such as Hà Nội and HCM City, but now, the largest warehouse is located in the northern mountainous province, just a few kilometres from the border. Along with that, modern logistics, delivery and payment services help bring the "border gate" to the front of houses, he added. By just packing the goods and delivering them to shipping companies, the goods could be taken anywhere domestically without any difficulty, said Linh. This created more challenges for authorities as transactions through e-commerce become more and more popular with all people, he noted. "We have determined that there must be a more professional and methodical plan in this fight. In the immediate future, it is necessary to propose units in the Ministry of Industry and Trade to soon submit to the Government a decree replacing Decree 52/2013 on e-commerce," Linh told online newspaper phapluatplus.vn.

One reason the decree is needed is the speed of e-commerce development, meaning it's time to consider and treat goods in the e-commerce environment as in the traditional environment, he noted. Linh said that the decree was issued to promote the development of e-commerce, so it has not strictly regulated goods traded via e-commerce. Besides, the decree has not specified the responsibilities of e-commerce trading floor managers. This loophole has caused the floors not to strictly control the origin of the goods displayed for sale. Therefore, it was necessary to hold e-commerce floor owners responsible so that when having trade fraud problems, they are also subject to inspection and post-inspection sanctions. Important services including payment and transportation would also be included in the new decree, he said. In addition, the General Department for Market Surveillance will focus on e-commerce for two to three years because as it was forecasted that the ratio of trade fraud in e-commerce would be about 50-60 per cent in that period compared to overall types of fraud in general, said Linh. That is why the General Department for Market Surveillance has built a relatively comprehensive plan to mobilise strength for this tough war. It is proposed to set up an official division of the market surveillance force specialised in preventing fraud in e-commerce, at the same time, improving the post-inspection capacity of the market surveillance force and regularly reviewing and inspecting e-commerce trading floor owners and social networking platforms.

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## **Trade Ministry Helping Hải Dương Farmers Sell Produce**

The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) is working to connect enterprises and localities facing COVID-19 outbreaks to ensure goods are consumed, especially agricultural produce in virus-hit areas. After Hải Dương applied social distancing across the province from February 16, the ministry worked with major distribution systems in the north such as Central Group (Big C and Go! supermarket chains), Vincommerce (Vinmart and Vinmart + chains), BRG Retail (BRG Mart supermarket chain), and MM Mega Market chain to purchase agricultural products from farmers, co-operatives and enterprises of Hải Dương, the ministry said on Monday. So far, Central Group has purchased 100 tonnes of vegetables and fruits per week from the province for consumption in its retail system. The volume is expected to increase to 200 tonnes per week soon. This week, its GO! and Big C outlets in the North will consume about 70 tonnes of Hải Dương's agricultural products and will increase the sales until the end of the season, the group said.

MM Mega Market Vietnam has ordered 24.3 tonnes of vegetables per day from Hải Dương, including kohlrabi, cabbage and guava for its distribution systems in the central and southern regions. Vinmart has also ordered some agricultural produce. The ministry has also worked with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, localities and enterprises to discuss solutions to remove difficulties in transportation and consumption of goods, especially agricultural products with a large output and in the harvest season, especially in Hải Dương and neighbouring provinces, it said. According to the Hải Dương Department of Industry and Trade, most COVID-19 control stations in neighbouring provinces and cities have restricted entry from vehicles going from or through Hải Dương, leaving agricultural produce stuck and impacting farmers' livelihoods. Localities and enterprises have complained that the implementation of the requirement for COVID-19 testing in transporting goods has many inconsistencies, leading to difficulties in consuming agricultural produce.

Difficulties transporting commodities has also affected production in the province and also other localities like Hà Nội, Hải Phòng and Quảng Ninh because many commodities in Hải Dương are materials for processing chains at factories in the localities, according to the ministry. That will also affect the socio-economic development of many localities. Trần Thị Phương Lan, acting director of the Hà Nội Department of Industry and Trade, said distribution systems in Hà Nội are making efforts to support Hải Dương to consume agricultural produce, averaging about 100 tonnes per week. Meanwhile, Hải Dương is implementing many measures to facilitate the transportation of agricultural produce in the harvest season. Over the past three days, the province has prioritised the implementation of COVID-19 testing for truck drivers and returned the results within 24 hours to accelerate goods transportation, according to Hải Dương Provincial Party Secretary Phạm Xuân Thắng. On February 21, Hải Dương Provincial People's Committee Chairman Nguyễn Dương Thái sent a letter to Hải Phòng City People's Committee to ask for permission to transport commodities from Hải Dương to Hải Phòng.

To facilitate the fastest transportation of goods, especially agricultural produce and frozen goods, Hải Phòng City People's Committee was asked to allow trucks with drivers with proof of a negative SAR-COV-2 test result issued by the Hải Dương Centre for Disease Control to go to the quarantine areas between Hải Dương and Hải Phòng. After that, the driver in Hải Phòng will drive that truck into this city, reported the Người lao động (The Labourer) newspaper. According to Hải Dương Agriculture and Rural Development Department, about 4,080ha of crops with a productivity of about 90,760 tonnes are going to be harvested including more than 55,000 tonnes of onions, 50,000 tonnes of carrots and 8,000 tonnes of cabbage, kohlrabi, cauliflower and leafy vegetables. Trần Văn Quân, director of the Hải Dương Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, said that farmers in Đức Chính Commune, Cẩm Giàng District had harvested more than 48,000 tonnes of carrots. However, social distancing in Hải Dương had made it tough to transport the carrots from Đức Chính to ports in Hải Phòng. Besides that, the pandemic had caused many localities to stop transporting agricultural products, including carrots, to Đức Chính, for processing and packaging.

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## **Science Ministry Strengthens Research to Tackle COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Ministry of Science and Technology will continue strengthening research to serve COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control this year, especially researching and producing vaccines. The ministry has worked with agencies to provide scientific information relating to the pandemic developments. The ministry said from the very first days when the virus arrived in Việt Nam, the ministry worked with experts and scientists to research the epidemiology, virology and treatment regimen, including biological products for testing. Soon, many sets of biological products were mass manufactured to serve pandemic prevention and control, the ministry said. Next, the real-time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) kit, used to detect the SAR-CoV-2 virus, was made by Việt Nam Military Medical University in March 2020 and then put into mass production. Lieutenant-General Đỗ Quyết, director of the university, said the RT-PCR kit was created thanks to efforts and the innovative spirit of both university's scientists and Việt Á Technology Joint Stock Company.

Following the success, the university linked up with the Pasteur Institute in HCM City to shorten the time spent researching its Nano Covax vaccine. With the support of the institute, the research time was cut from six to three months, he added. The first phase of the vaccination trial was conducted on December 17, 2020. The results of the first-phase trial of the Nano Covax vaccine showed the vaccine was safe and 90 per cent effective. Quyết said the first trial vaccination injection of the second phase

would be conducted on Friday, with the second trial vaccination injection at the end of March. The results of the second-phase trial would be revealed at the end of April. The number of volunteers who registered to be given Nano Covax in the second phase of the trial has reached nearly 1,000 so far. If the results met requirements on safety and immunogenicity, the third phase of the vaccination trial would start in early May, he said. The vaccine's third-phase trial needs 10,000-15,000 volunteers and the selection of participants would be expanded to ensure a broad-spectrum target for vaccination, he said.

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## **Training Teleconference for NA Election Held Amidst Pandemic Scenario**

The Ministry of Home Affairs held a nationwide teleconference on Thursday to discuss training for the election of deputies for the 15th National Assembly and People's Councils at all levels for the 2021-2026 tenure, with more than 27,500 delegates taking part. The participants were updated on the regulations for vote casting and documents used in the election, consultative process and nominations. A number of questions were also answered by leaders of ministries and agencies. According to the Viet Nam Fatherland Front Central Committee, as of February 17, the first consultative conferences were completed at the central level and in 63 localities, with 1,076 nominated for seats at the legislature. Eighteen provinces suggested increasing the number of local deputies while five provinces plan to have self-nomination cases. Concluding the event, Minister of Home Affairs Lê Vĩnh Tân said to ensure the best preparations between now and election day (May 23), central agencies must promptly answer questions by localities and issue detailed guidelines on key tasks before, during and after the election. Representatives from Quảng Ninh Province asked the Government to issue instructive documents regarding voters meeting in areas affected by the pandemic. They also mentioned the need to publish a guidebook on the election in the pandemic period, especially in hotspot areas. A representative of the Viet Nam Fatherland Front Central Committee said the document guiding the organisation of voters meeting will soon be available. Meanwhile, the committee also asked the national election council and Ministry of Home Affairs to issue documents relating to the responsibility of the units making candidate lists, the implementation of voting rights of voters in quarantine areas, and how ballot boxes would be sent to quarantine areas if needed.

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## **High-Tech Farming Needs Investment and Proper Policies**

Việt Nam's agriculture sector is aiming to be among the 15 most developed countries in the world, in which the agricultural processing sector ranks among the top 10 countries by 2030. To realise the goal, the Government issued a resolution in 2019 on measures to encourage businesses to invest in effective, safe and sustainable agriculture as part of efforts to help the sector integrate globally. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) recently submitted to the Government a project of export promotion of agro-fishery products by 2030. The export turnover is expected to reach US\$50-51 billion by 2025 and \$60-62 billion in 2030. To implement the target, the MARD will review and propose policies for investment attraction from private and foreign investors into the agro-fishery product processing industry. For the last five years, there has been a wave of investment into agricultural production with 52,000 businesses, of which the firms directly participating in production hit 13,300, triple the figure of 2015. The businesses' participation not only contributed improve the value of agricultural products but also helped farmers access international standards.

In 2020 alone, 18 new factories for agro-product processing opened, a positive signal in improving Việt Nam's agricultural sector. However, according to experts, although investment in agriculture has flourished in recent years with the participation of many new tycoons, it has not become a strong wave. Notably, the majority of agricultural enterprises are still small, of which 90 per cent are small and super small with capital of less than VNĐ10 billion (US\$430,000) while the number of enterprises investing in high-tech agriculture is even more modest. Trần Văn Tân, chairman of Safe and Organic Businesses' Association of Thanh Hoá Province in central Việt Nam, said: "Agricultural businesses had many difficulties in accessing preferential policies leading to difficulties in seeking assistance." "Capital was also a big problem. To have the capital to buy agricultural land from farmers was a difficult problem," said Tân. "Access to capital from banks was not easy due to many procedures that agricultural enterprises struggled to meet," he said. "The accumulation of land to invest in setting up high-tech agricultural zones was also difficult so it required the help from local governments," he added.

Similarly, Nguyễn Thị Diễm Hằng, director of the Việt Nam Organic Farm Company, said initial expenses for high-tech farming were always higher than traditional farming while high-tech production did not bring immediate economic benefits. Access to capital and land were also tough problems for agricultural enterprises, Hằng said. "It is necessary to increase the number of businesses taking part in the processing industry to become a kernel for 8.6 million farmers nationwide," the director said. "On the other hand, promoting science and technology to produce hi-tech agro-product is an inevitable trend," she said. Meanwhile, Hà Văn Thắng, chairman of the Việt Nam Agriculture Businesses' Association, said the thing most businesses needed was a legal framework for high-tech farming development. There was a need for incentive policies such as simplifying loan procedures and completing

criteria of high-tech agricultural enterprises to easily access bank loans. Policies on land accumulation and granting land use right certificates, houses and properties attached with land ownership must be improved, according to Thắng. According to experts, to attract investment in agriculture it was necessary to cut 40-50 per cent of current administrative procedures, improve the business environment and develop businesses substantially. At the same time, reviews are needed to avoid overlaps in management and inspection and not let one product be subject to the management of too many units. Management methods should change to post-check from pre-check. Besides, there must be clear planning of material zones connecting with businesses as well as support for the training of human resources for high-tech farming.

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## South Asia

### **INDIA: Govt of India, Chhattisgarh & World Bank Inks Pact for CHIRAAG Project to Support Nutrition-rich Agriculture**

In an effort to enable tribals of Chhattisgarh to produce nutritious food year-long, the Government of Chhattisgarh, the Government of India and the World Bank inked a pact for a \$100 million project to develop sustainable production systems in remote and tribal areas of Chhattisgarh. The Chhattisgarh Inclusive Rural and Accelerated Agriculture Growth (CHIRAAG) Project will be implemented in the southern tribal-majority region of the state where a large population is undernourished and poor. The project is expected to benefit over 1,80,000 households from about 1000 villages in eight districts of Chhattisgarh. For the ambitious project, the loan agreement was signed by Dr CS Mohapatra, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, on behalf of the Government of India and Junaid Kamal Ahmad, Country Director (India), World Bank. Whereas, the project agreement was signed by Bhoskar Vilas Sandipan, Joint Secretary, Department of Agriculture, on behalf of the Government of Chhattisgarh and Junaid Kamal Ahmad on behalf of the World Bank. Dr CS Mohapatra stated, "In India, agriculture is a major livelihood provider and the Government of India is committed to achieving the goal of doubling farmers' income by 2022. The CHIRAAG project in Chhattisgarh will lay the foundation for a diverse and nutritive food and agriculture system, mobilise smallholders into farmer producer organisations and increase incomes by improving their access to profitable markets."

Owing to rich biodiversity and diverse agro-climatic zones, Chhattisgarh open doors to focus on an alternative model of development allowing the tribal-dominated areas to leverage its natural resources, diversify and grow resilient crops and assure a production system that takes care of the nutritional needs of every household.



According to Junaid Kamal Khan, “This project is part of the state government’s on-going efforts to build an inclusive development pathway for tribal communities, with special emphasis on the empowerment of tribal women... By focusing on diversifying cropping systems, enhancing nutrition, and encouraging investments in irrigation and post-harvest technology, the operation will support tribal communities through agricultural growth and increases in farmers’ incomes.” Moreover, a number of climate-resilient and profitable activities will also be introduced to make agriculture nutrition supportive. Works on water-harvesting structures and irrigation facilities; integrated farming systems blending crops, fishery and livestock production; climate-smart production technologies and practices; developing value chains to ensure that surplus commodities reach profitable markets; and making nutritious food available to tribal households, are areas where investments will be focused. Further, the project will enable the stabilisation and restoration of the local food supply and production, secure livelihoods and expand income and job opportunities for people returning to their villages in pandemic-affected project areas.

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## **Internal Differences: A New Method for Seeing into Cells**

Invading cells’ private space – prying into their internal functions, decisions and communications – could be a powerful tool that may help researchers develop new immunotherapy treatment for cancer. As reported in Cell, a research group at the Weizmann Institute of Science has developed a technology that enables them to see inside tens of thousands of individual cells at once in greater details than ever before. The group, headed by Prof. Ido Amit of the Institute’s Immunology Department, applied this method to define the immune cells that infiltrate tumors, identifying a new subset of innate immune cells that “collaborate” with cancer. Blocking these inhibitory immune cells in mice greatly enhanced the anti-tumor immune response, killing the cancer. Amit and his group had previously made significant inroads into seeing into cells when they developed single cell RNA-sequencing – a means of sequencing all of the RNA in thousands of individual cells at once. The new technique, called INs-seq (intracellular staining and sequencing) – developed in Amit’s lab in a project led by research students Yonatan Katzenelenbogen, Fadi Sheban, Adam Yalin and Dr. Assaf Weiner – enables scientists to measure, in addition to the RNA, numerous proteins, processes and biochemical pathways occurring inside each of the cells. To do this, they had to develop new methods of getting inside the cell membranes without harming its genetic content. This wealth of “inside information” can help them draw much finer distinctions between different cell subtypes and activities than is possible with existing methods, most of which are able to measure surface proteins only.

In fact, Amit compares those existing methods of cell characterization with buying

watermelons: They all appear identical from the outside, even though they can taste completely different when you open them up. Distinguishing between subtypes of cells that seem identical from the outside, such as inhibitory- versus effector-immune cells, may be crucial when it comes to fighting off cancer. Although the principal groups of immune cells had been identified many decades ago, there are hundreds of subtypes with many different functions, which haven't been classified. "Specific immune subtypes, for example, may play a role in promoting cancer or enabling it to evade the immune system, provoke tissue destruction by overreacting to a virus or act mistakenly in autoimmune syndromes, attacking our own body. Until now, there was no sufficiently sensitive means of telling these apart from other subtypes that appear identical from the outside," says Sheban. In order to sort through these different immune functions inside tumors, the Weizmann scientists used their technology to address an issue that researchers had been trying to resolve for decades: Why does the immune system fail to recognize and kill cancer cells, and why does immunotherapy for most tumor types often fail? In searching for an answer, they asked whether cancers might hijack and manipulate particular immune cells to "defend" the cancer cells from the rest of the immune system. "The suspicion that some kind of immune cell might be actively 'collaborating' with cancer is not as strange as it seems," explains Yalin. "Immune responses are often meant to be short-lived, so the immune system has its own mechanisms for shutting them down. Cancers could take advantage of such mechanisms, enhancing the production of the 'shut-down' immune cells, which, in turn, could prevent such immune cells as T lymphocytes that would normally kill them from taking action."

Indeed, the team succeeded in identifying T-cell-blocking immune cells, which belonged to a general group known as myeloid cells – a broad group of innate immune cells that mostly originate in the bone marrow. Although this particular subset of suppressive myeloid cells was new, it was distinguished by a prominent signaling receptor that Prof. Amit and his group had seen before, called TREM2. This receptor is critical for the activity of the cells that block the actions of tumor-killing T cells; and normally cells bearing this receptor are crucial for preventing excess tissue damage after injury or calming an inflammatory immune response. But Amit had also come across a version of this receptor in other immune cells involved in Alzheimer's disease, metabolic syndrome and other immune-related pathologies. The group's next step is to develop an immunotherapy treatment using specific antibodies that target this receptor and could prevent these immune-suppressive cells from supporting the tumor. "Because this receptor is only expressed when there is some type of pathology," says Weiner, "targeting it will not damage healthy cells in the body." Preliminary evidence for the TREM2 therapeutics was demonstrated by the scientists in mouse models of cancer with genetically ablated TREM2 receptors. In those mice, tumor-killing T cells "came back to life" and attacked the cancer cells; and the tumors shrank significantly. If treatment based on this finding is, in the future, proven effective for human use, it might be administered on its own or in combination with other forms of immunotherapy.

## **NTT Enables the Latest Technology Trends for the Leader in India's Banking and Money Market System**

NTT Ltd., a world-leading global technology services provider, on February 09, announced that it is strengthening the IT infrastructure ecosystem at one of India's premier banking institution, through the deployment of its software-defined infrastructure solutions. NTT has enhanced efficiencies within the client's virtualized environment by integrating a software-defined storage solution with their existing private cloud to enable business agility and optimized resource allocation. Given the highly regulated environment within which the client operates and the exponential growth of data and workloads, it is imperative to integrate and manage data that is typically stored in silos, across the enterprise. The solution deployed allows for pooled resources to be managed centrally and intelligently. A unified management platform offers full visibility and easy access to data, thereby enhancing business efficiency and provisioning quicker troubleshooting through a managed services model. Rahul Ambegaoker, Senior Director & Region Head, West, NTT Ltd. in India says, "Organizations are looking to future-proof their IT infrastructure and improve efficiencies across the board. While assessing a solution, decision-makers must factor in all costs, capacity requirements and limitations. By accounting for present and future application usage, security, data retention, and analytics needs, NTT designed and deployed a solution that transformed the storage environment to be more efficient, flexible, agile, and scalable. We overcame challenges and completed this project amid a pandemic, leveraging our strength in delivering complex hybrid cloud projects in the Financial Services domain". NTT will consolidate three of the client's data centres and manage servers and storage centrally, by combining it with the client's existing private cloud. "The meaningful transformation of data to knowledge is possible only when it is methodically collected, stored, processed, shared, disseminated and used. Rather than being overwhelmed by the volume of data, NTT's solution enables the client to convert it into insights, intelligence and innovation – the three Is of modern IT infrastructure. This deployment reinforces their vision of enabling IT as a strategic resource for enhancing enterprise knowledge, improving customer service, and increasing the overall efficiency by using relevant data and information effectively," adds Ambegaoker.

The proposed technology stack is a unique solution that enables digital behaviour agenda of the Financial Services domain – a core sectoral area of expertise for NTT in India. This solution serves as a stepping stone for new avenues such as data centre automation and the opportunity to build resilient IT solutions that are designed to provide scale and availability while addressing exigencies such as the recent pandemic that crippled many businesses. Since the implementation, the client is

reaping benefits such as reduced operational costs due to the consolidation and integration of the software-defined storage solution with their existing infrastructure. Technology infrastructure has played a key role in enabling timely availability and access to vital information in the fast-evolving financial macro space. Through this process of technology reengineering, NTT can enhance business adaptability, improve focus on organizational goals, reduce the complexity of existing IT systems, improve the agility of new IT systems, and ensure a closer alignment between IT deliverables and business requirements.

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## **FASTag to Be Mandatory from Today Midnight**

In a significant move to digitisation, the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways (MoRTH) has decided that all lanes in the fee plazas on National Highways shall be “FASTag lane of the fee plaza” with effect from February 15 midnight. Following this, as per National Highways Fee Rules 2008, any vehicle not equipped with FASTag or vehicle without valid functional FASTag entering into the FASTag lane of the fee plaza is liable to pay double the fee applicable to that category. According to a statement released by the Ministry on February 14, it has clarified that the move is with respect to further promotion of fee payment through digital mode, reduce waiting time and fuel consumption. Also, it will provide for a seamless passage through the fee plazas. Earlier, MoRTH had mandated FASTag in M&N categories of motor vehicles i.e, for taxis, cargos, and other commercial vehicles having four wheels or more, with effect from January 1, 2021.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/15/2021

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## **Now, Indian Private Players Can Map & Produce Geospatial Data: Deptt. Of Science & Technology**

The Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, has opened map-making process and producing geospatial data in the country for Indian private players. Prime Minister Narendra Modi appreciated the move and informed the country in a series of tweets calling the move a significant step towards making India Aatmanirbhar. As of now, mapping was rested with a government preserve, handled by the Central government’s Survey of India. However, following the announcements from today, any Indian entity can participate in the process and profit from it. Citing the reason for the move, DST said, on the principle that what is readily available globally need not be restricted in India. The announcements by DST could probably lure the potential private players seeking maps and data that suit their specific purposes. As reported by a national daily, according to Ashutosh Sharma, Secretary,

DST, “Geospatial data is foundational and vital to all manner of planning, governance, services, infrastructure, and applications.” Speaking in New Delhi today, he said the ease of collecting data, using it, and sharing it was a key concern of the government as it took the decision to free the process. He also said that deregulation, i.e., not requiring prior approval for survey, was another criterion. “Government agencies and private sector must collaborate very strongly to avoid duplication and also to bring in speed and scale in the whole process of collecting and using data,” he said. Moreover, the Government of India issued some guidelines for the new rules to function. For instance, there is a restriction on revealing the attributes or features of sensitive areas even though there would be none on surveying the area itself.

Also, for terrestrial mapping and surveying, only Indian entities have been shown a green flag and the data generated from such processes can be owned only by Indians. However, foreign private players are allowed to licence the information but not own it. The Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, has opened map-making process and producing geospatial data in the country for Indian private players. The Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, has opened map-making process and producing geospatial data in the country for Indian private players. Prime Minister Narendra Modi appreciated the move and informed the country in a series of tweets calling the move a significant step towards making India Aatmanirbhar. As of now, mapping was rested with a government preserve, handled by the Central government’s Survey of India. However, following the announcements from today, any Indian entity can participate in the process and profit from it. Citing the reason for the move, DST said, on the principle that what is readily available globally need not be restricted in India. The announcements by DST could probably lure the potential private players seeking maps and data that suit their specific purposes. As reported by a national daily, according to Ashutosh Sharma, Secretary, DST, “Geospatial data is foundational and vital to all manner of planning, governance, services, infrastructure, and applications.” Speaking in New Delhi today, he said the ease of collecting data, using it, and sharing it was a key concern of the government as it took the decision to free the process. He also said that deregulation, i.e., not requiring prior approval for survey, was another criterion.

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## **PM Modi Launches 'Mahabahu-Brahmaputra', to Improve Waterways Connectivity in Northeast**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on February 19, launched the 'Mahabahu-Brahmaputra', a programme to strengthen connectivity through waterways. Moreover, the PM launched multiple development projects in that state and laid the foundation stone of Dhubri Phulbari Bridge via video conferencing. PM Modi said that the Centre along with the Government of Assam has been trying to strengthen the cultural and physical integrity of Assam. Naming the Brahmaputra river as one of the major sources of connectivity for years, the PM said that the Centre has been making recurring efforts to link Assam with the northeastern states. Speaking on Dhubri Phulbari Bridge, the PM highlighted that the 8 km long bridge connecting Kalibari Ghat to Jorhat will be a boon for thousands of families in Majuli. Further, he said, "We are working towards strengthening the multimodal connectivity of Assam and the North East states." Meghalaya is 250 km from Assam by road. As per the PM's address, the distance will be shortened to 19-20 km owing to the bridge. "This bridge will also prove to be significant for the international movement of traffic to other nations," the PM added. PM Modi cited multimodal connectivity as a string example of Aatmanirbhar Bharat and added that the first helipad of Assam has also been built in Majuli. Therefore, Majuli residents are going to get a faster and safer alternative to road transportation. Expressing his thoughts on the Mahabahu-Brahmaputra programme, the PM deliberated that this program will strengthen connectivity through waterways across the region leveraging the waters of the Brahmaputra.

Also, the PM inaugurated a state data centre for Assam. While its inaugurating, he said, the data centre will help in establishing a robust BPO ecosystem in the northeast. It will give a new boost to the Digital India Mission in the North East. According to the Center, the commencement of operations of the Ro-Pax vessel will mark the launch of the Mahabahu-Brahmaputra programme. The vessel will operate between Neamati-Majuli Island, North Guwahati-South Guwahati and Dhubri-Hatsingimari. The programme is expected to provide seamless connectivity to the northeastern states of India. Also, it includes various development activities for the people living around the Brahmaputra river and the Barak river.

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## **Allahabad High Court Launches e-Court to Clear Traffic Violation Cases**

In a significant move towards digitisation, the Allahabad High Court launches a virtual court at the Allahabad district court to digitally clear cases related to road traffic violations, the Interoperable Criminal Justice System (ICJS) and the Integration of Civil Court with Land Records (Bhulekh). With the new ICJS in place, data-exchange between the courts, police, prosecution, jails and the forensic labs is expected to result in speedy justice. Whereas, the integration of civil court with land records will turn out to be a great aid in getting property disputes resolved quickly. A similar virtual court scheme is expected to be launched in other districts of Uttar Pradesh by March 31. The virtual court is meant to digitally deal with 'on-spot traffic challans' generated by the traffic police. With this in place, digital challans captured for a given day will be reflected on the dashboard of the virtual court judge. Accordingly, the judge shall issue special summons to the violators via mobile phone, under the Motor Vehicles Act. Once a violator receives intimation, he would have the option to either contest the summon or pay the fine online through the web portal <https://vcourts.gov.in> Besides openings convenient and time-saving option for both the courts and the people, the revenue generated via new e-courts will add to the treasury of the state government.

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## **Smart City Is Formed with Smart Citizens**

In India, the focus has always been on implementing best of the technological measures to make a city smart. But there is a need to understand that it is not limited to the smart urban infra or smart governance but what is more essential are smart citizens, writes Adarsh Som of Elets News Network (ENN). Citizens have always been the most integral part of any city. In India, where the Smart Cities Mission is on boom, the authorities must wake up to the fact that citizens need to be aware about the government's initiatives, newly formed policies and the technological advancements being implemented to 'smarten' their cities. In simple words, placing different coloured dustbins needs to be backed up with an awareness programme to make people understand the importance of waste segregation and therefore will help in making citizens smart in terms of managing their everyday waste. A major purpose for creating smart cities is to improve quality of life of citizens by implementing technological measures and simplifying people's day-to-day operations and also to enable the government to take better decisions and civic bodies to enhance delivery mechanism and quality of Municipal services. Although, the Centre, state governments, private service providers, tech companies and various other stakeholders are coming up with efficient ways time and again to enhance urban fabric in the country, but, they cannot skimp on efforts to sensitise people about correct usage of these solutions and services. B Purusharth, Divisional Commissioner of Jalandhar, while addressing the Karnataka Smart Cities Investment Summit said, "There is no doubt that smart city could never have been imagined

without technology but, smart strategies have to start with people first. Technology comes as the enabler not as the goal in itself.”

Technological solutions and integration of civic services on common digital platforms do aid the urban issues but, are these making cities truly smart. The smart initiatives taken under the Smart Cities Mission will only be beneficial when the citizens are able to put it to their optimum use. For example, installation of smart meters will optimise the consumer-provider communication but will not help in inculcating a behavioural change that will result in reducing energy consumption by people. To bring in the behavioural changes, the authorities need to take step to make people aware about energy usage, renewable sources and more. Therefore, the authorities must try to increase citizen participation in order to address real problems and implement better solutions. Sweden has done exemplary work in creating citizen-friendly infra and services. The smart initiatives implemented in the country's smart cities had citizen participation as an essential aspect. Vallastaden, a city district in Sweden, is a unique city that has been designed for and by its citizens. Nearly 40 different developers have built around 1,000 residences. The city has architectural variety displaying a mix of detached houses, terrace houses, apartments, and commercial places. It is built around central theme of environmental and economic sustainability. The Nordic country has stood as an example of citizen participation in city building. The Vallastaden model displays a better form of social planning model which directly involve citizens at the core of development, planning and governance. Another project taken on similar lines was redevelopment of Drottninghög. Prior to beginning the project, the civic officials interacted with almost one third of the residents in Drottninghög and did more than 300 interviews.

The exercise to interact with citizens was conducted to know about people's wishes, needs and dreams. Hence, dialogue and sustaining relations was a key factor in developing Drottninghög as a residential area together with the residents. The civic authorities have built a state of the art playground with a princess and dragon theme. The park not only provides space for socialising, recreational activities and play area for children, but, it helps majorly in enhancing liveability in the city. Although developed countries like Sweden has taken exemplary initiatives to engage citizens in city building, India is not far enough. A few Indian cities like Indore, Surat, Greater Hyderabad are giving citizen's feedback utmost importance. In a recent survey known as Citizen's Feedback Survey, an essential part of the Ease of Living Index 2019 marked Indore as rank 1 for collecting most number of citizen feedbacks. The survey involved engaging citizens to take their feedback on liveability of the city. Indore is one of the leading examples. Indore was followed by Surat and Greater Hyderabad in the rankings respectively. An initiative like 'Citizen Feedbacks' under the Ease of Living Index is a commendable move by the Government of India to make cities for people and not for technology alone. The move created a stir among cities, especially the 100 smart cities, to take corrective measure against issues they face, satisfy the citizens with improved civic services to finally gain feedback about



liveability of the city. Incorporating competition in regular urbanisation process has helped the civic authorities to act in a more responsible manner while planning cities and executing their plans. This has also impacted lives of citizens in a positive manner. However, cities such as Indore, Surat should not rest on their laurels as there is a long way to go. Also, other cities need to buck up as better steps can be taken to make our cities smarter with smart people utilising the smart tech in a smart way which can justify the true meaning of smart cities.

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## **SRI LANKA: Mobitel Empowers Police with Hi-Tech Body Cameras**

As part of supporting the nation's fight against COVID-19, Mobitel, Sri Lanka's National Mobile Service Provider introduced the latest Body Cameras to Sri Lanka Police at an event held at the Police Park Headquarters recently. The landmark event which took place under the patronage of the Senior Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Sri Lanka Police, Deshabandu Tennakoon had the presence of officials representing both the Police and Mobitel (PVT) Ltd. Further, Mobitel also made a financial contribution to support the ongoing efforts of the Police in curtailing the spread of COVID-19 along with food packs meant to be distributed among Police personnel who are managing checkpoints for hours to safeguard the people of Sri Lanka. Mobitel believes that Sri Lanka Police need to be appreciated for their outstanding efforts and for tirelessly working around the clock to keep people safe. The contribution showcases Mobitel's unwavering commitment in times of national crisis to partner with the Tri-Forces and the Health Sector while simultaneously helping Sri Lankans avail of its diverse digital healthcare and superior mobile experience during this challenging time. Mobitel is sharing the government's responsibility in facilitating the safety of citizens at this critical time through a variety of other digital measures. As the caring network provider, Mobitel introduced numerous packages ranging from special Pre-Paid plans to Bonus Data add-ons, Free Health Advisory services, Digital Payment solutions, Data extensions and many more to help its customers to carry out their day to day activities without any hassle. Furthermore, both local and international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and Sri Lanka Health Promotion Bureau are leveraging on Mobitel's superior reach to communicate vital messages about COVID to raise awareness across Sri Lanka. In a time of the crisis facing the nation, Mobitel remains a pillar of strength and refuge not only for its customers but for the rest of the country as well.

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## **Cyber Care App Launched to Combat Cyber Violence in Sri Lanka**

The COVID-19 outbreak with the resultant lockdown and stay-at-home measures have led to a surge in online activity by young people. This increased online presence has heightened their susceptibility to online sexual abuse, cyber bullying, exploitation, and other risks. To address this growing concern and to help combat online hate faced by many youth in Sri Lanka, the 'Cyber Care' mobile application was launched recently on World Safer Internet Day, commemorated each year on 9 February 2021. The app, which was created by Team Cyberwarders, a team who has successfully completed the incubation phase of the HackaDev: National Youth Social Innovation Challenge, aims to help alleviate and prevent cyber violence affecting youth of all genders in Sri Lanka. Given the rise in cyber violence affecting youth in the country, in 2019 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Sri Lanka, through its premier Youth Social Innovation Platform 'HackaDev', launched a thematic challenge for young people to develop a solution to address the escalating threat of cyber violence. Cyber violence ranges from cyber bullying, non-consensual sharing of intimate images (revenge porn), sextortion, cyberstalking, up skirting, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, threat, and blackmail among others. Speaking at the virtual launch held recently, Faiza Effendi, Deputy Resident Representative of UNDP Sri Lanka noted, "looking at how societies are transforming digitally, cyber violence needs to be understood, and acted upon as a matter of critical importance. I am heartened to see a group of young people that have come forward in seeking a solution to this challenge. Working together as UNDP, we will continue to create opportunities, take a chance on young people, and provide meaningful platforms of engagement, where innovative and entrepreneurial talents of youth can be harnessed to the fullest."

The Cyber Care App, a timely initiative built by youth, for youth, aims to raise awareness on cyber violence including the relevant laws and regulations in Sri Lanka pertaining to cyber-crimes; offer interesting gaming features as means of raising further awareness; provide important information on helplines and authorities or organizations that assist victims of cyber violence; provide news on incidents relating to cyber violence, and gamified ways of learning about cyber violence among other features. Bimali Ameresekere, Gender Specialist of UNDP Sri Lanka stated, "the creation of this mobile app is timely, given the research studies put forward by UNICEF in 2018 and the study undertaken by CENWOR commissioned by the National Committee on Women (NCW), which highlighted the need for greater awareness on prevention and response to cyber violence. The study identified adolescent unmarried girls and young women as the main victims of online violence in Sri Lanka, while the most common medium used to perpetrate violence was largely through social media, peer to peer networks, mobile phones and other internet-based communication platforms." Today, the world is in a new normal context, with greater advances in technology, digitization, increased use of social

media platforms and the high usage of the internet to communicate as a part of daily life. Online violence and abuse has accelerated with the onset of COVID-19, with devastating mental and physical impacts on youth. Niroshika Hettiarachchi, Legal Officer at Women In Need (WIN), highlighted, “we have seen a distinct rise in the number of cases. Between July and December 2019, WIN recorded 170 complaints of cyber violence. During the first month of the COVID-19 lockdown, from March to April 2020, the WIN Helpline received 584 calls. Of these, 341 were from victims of domestic violence and 39 were as a result of cyber violence. As an organization, we have been able to support 615 persons through online interventions on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) and other issues.”

Cyber violence can steer adverse offline consequences such as psychological trauma, rape, self-harm – which sometimes leads to extreme cases of loss of life, income and employment, marital discord, disruption in education and other forms of physical and sexual violence. Addressing the need for more youth to take the lead in combating this online menace, Team CyberWarders stated, “Today, the Internet has become a crucial part of our lives. We noticed that many people, young and old, were unaware and made critical mistakes when sharing personal information on the internet. Bullying behind a computer is easy, but the consequences are cruel. As a team of young people, we decided it was time to take steps to put a stop to this ‘online bullying culture’ and to stand up for what is right. The Cyber Care App is a Sri Lankan solution, that provides awareness on cyber-violence to youth and children of this nation.” The UNDP HackaDev Innovation Challenge, through a thematic challenge on cyber violence, worked closely with the youth team connecting with relevant stakeholders and resource persons in order to roll out the mobile app. The Cyber Care app was supported by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the National Committee on Women, the National Child Protection Authority, Sri Lanka Computer Emergency Readiness Team (SLCERT), Criminal Investigations Department (CID) Cyber Crimes Unit, Centre for Women’s Research (CENWOR), Women In Need, UNICEF Sri Lanka, Grassrooted Trust, Save the Children, Hithawathi team at LK domain, University of Colombo and experts from the ICT sector. With financial assistance from the Government of Norway, under UNDP’s SDG 16 portfolio on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, the app is one of many ongoing projects addressing Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka. The Cyber Care app is now available for download via the Google Play Store and will be available for iOS in the coming weeks. Link to app: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=co.cyberwarders.cybercare>

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## **Spotify Launches in Sri Lanka**

Spotify, the world's most popular audio streaming subscription service, officially launches today in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, offering a revolutionary music experience tuned to your personal taste. With a worldwide community of more than 345 million monthly active listeners including 155 million Premium subscribers, Spotify will offer a personalized listening experience for local and international music of over 70 million tracks. The Spotify service is available for free or with an upgrade to Spotify Premium, a subscription service that allows users to enjoy music without ad interruptions. Users can upgrade to Spotify Premium for the ultimate Spotify experience for 529 LKR per month. The Premium Family subscription plan is available for 849 LKR per month for up to 6 family members living under one roof. The new Spotify Premium DUO (679 LKR per month) is a subscription plan for two people living at the same home address, which includes Duo Mix, a regularly updated playlist made just for the two subscribers to discover audio they both love and enjoy together. Spotify Premium for Students subscription plans will cost 265 LKR per month. Direct carrier billing payment options are also available through Dialog, SLTMobitel and Hutch. Spotify comes to Sri Lanka with an unrivalled mix of features and the freedom to play across a wide range of devices and app integrations. Music fans will also enjoy Spotify's personalized music recommendations, which will help them to enjoy, discover and share new music from both local and international artists. "We are incredibly excited about the opportunity to bring together creators and listeners around the world. As we've expanded our international reach over the years, we've connected over 8 million artists with listeners across nearly every continent, putting Spotify firmly at the heart of the global audio economy," said Alex Norström, Chief Freemium Business Officer of Spotify. "Launching in these new markets is a key next step to fulfilling our ongoing commitment to building a truly borderless audio ecosystem."

"We want to share the gift of music with as many people as possible to enrich the lives of not only our listeners, but the local artists who will now have access to a global audience," said Claudius Boller, Spotify Managing Director Middle East and Africa, who will lead a team of music and audio experts for the newly launched South Asian markets. "We always want to be where our fans are, and with this expansion we are furthering our mission of sharing the sounds of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka with the rest of the world." The new playlists offer expertly curated and regularly updated music by Spotify's team of local music experts, across a range of popular genres for any mood or moment, including Hot Hits Sri Lanka, Sinhala Rap-zillas, Sinhala Pop, Sinhala Lounging and more. A major feature of the Spotify service is its personalisation, which allows fans to find the music they already love with ease, and also to help them discover new music and artists to love, based on their taste and listening patterns. When a new user joins Spotify, they are guided through a 'Taste Onboarding' process, which helps Spotify quickly customize recommendations to their music tastes. Spotify's music recommendation engine allows local listeners to enjoy personalised discovery features including Daily Mix (up to six individual playlists combining your favourite tracks with new songs we think

you'll love), Release Radar (a personalised playlist of new music based on the artists you follow and listen to most, updated every Friday) and Discover Weekly (a playlist based on your unique listening habits).

Spotify also offers: Mood and genre hubs: Head to Browse and choose from a wide range of hubs including Workout, Chill, Party, Focus, Gaming, Sleep, Dinner, Kids and many more.

Play everywhere: Download the Spotify app on mobile, laptop and tablet.

Listen everywhere: Listeners have the freedom to engage with Spotify across a wide range of devices and app integrations with Instagram, Facebook, Samsung mobile & TV, Apple TV, Apple Watch, Chromecast, Google Maps, Fitbit and more.

Offline listening for Premium users: Simply download your music to your mobile device or desktop when you're online to enjoy while you're offline.

High audio quality for Premium users – up to 320 kbps.

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## Central-West Asia

### **AZERBAIJAN: To Investigate Impact of Artificial Intelligence Technologies on Society**

The Institute of Information Technologies of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS) will conduct research on the impact of artificial intelligence technologies on various spheres of society, Trend reports with reference to the Institute. The planned works for 2021 include research on the formation and development of an intelligent electronic government. Moreover, it is also envisaged to develop a model for the intellectual analysis of demographic processes based on the technology of interactive data analysis OLAP (Online Analytical Processing), collected in electronic registries by industry. The Institute also said that it is planned to develop improved models of democratic processes in the electronic environment.

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### **Innovations in Azerbaijani Public Administration to Simplify State Control**

The creation of the "Information System of State Control" will give an impetus to an increase in the effectiveness of the administrative reforms which are carried out in Azerbaijan, as well as strengthen the state control, Joshgun Jafarov, analyst at the Azerbaijani Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication, said,

Trend reports. "The control over the efficiency of work which is carried out within the project and program management is one of the main factors that should be paid attention to during the implementation process," Jafarov added. "Amid the modern challenges, simplification of the control process in public administration and the introduction of technological innovations in the implementation of state control are of particular importance," analyst added.

Jafarov stressed that the state control information system, consisting of eight different subsystems, will allow coordinating management and control processes based on the principles of efficiency, ease of use and flexibility, as well as ensuring the implementation of the control process on a modular basis. "The 'Tasks' subsystem includes processing and evaluation of information on the status of tasks, the 'Key performance indicators' subsystem envisages an assessment of the activity of local executive bodies based on key performance indicators, which will play an important role in creating a competitive environment between local executive bodies, improving quality and efficiency of work, as well as timely implementation of activity in accordance with decrees, orders and instructions," Jafarov said. "Summary reports on all subsystems will be received through the reporting subsystem," he said. "This, in turn, will create conditions for determining the overall effectiveness of various state structures."

Moreover, the analyst stressed that e-information systems facilitate document management and other business operations on a digital basis. "Carrying out all operations in the information system through an e-signature is essential for ensuring information security," Jafarov added. "The e-information systems will play an important role in project and software management," Jafarov said. "These systems open up a new approach to solving problems and constraints through e-monitoring of project and program implementation, achieving development goals and tracking results, and making preventive alerts of deficiencies and gaps," analyst said. "The creation of such e-systems also provides the access to a centralized database that provides users with instant access to the data." "The creation of such a system of state control will ensure the efficiency and coordination of state control by expanding the use of modern technologies in public administration," analyst added.

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## **Azerbaijan Launches Online Platform for World's First Startup Accelerator**

A new educational platform, Startup Academy, has been launched in Azerbaijan, Director of the SUP.VC innovation center, Vusal Karimli, told Trend. He noted that the platform is available to all citizens free of charge. To date, the platform has been launched in the beta testing stage, the full version of which will be presented in

cooperation with foreign countries, said Karimli. The innovation center's director also stated that the project will provide an opportunity to gain knowledge for startups in the districts of Azerbaijan. "We offer solutions for effective company management based on best practices, useful resources and recommendations," he stressed. The developer of the Startup Academy platform is the SUP.VC acceleration center. Startup Academy is a free online platform for all categories of citizens who want to create their own startup project. The platform is based on video lectures and messages from business professionals Y Combinator (a venture capital fund operating in a business incubator format for small information technology companies, founded in March 2005 by a group of investors led by Paul Graham).

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## **All Players of Innovation Ecosystem Can Use Opportunities Of INNOLAND Center - ASAN Service**

The State Agency for Public Services and Social Innovations (ASAN service) under the President of Azerbaijan held a meeting entitled the 'Innovation Ecosystem' at the INNOLAND incubation and acceleration center, the ASAN Service told Trend. The meeting was attended by Chairman of the ASAN Service Ulvi Mehdiyev, as well as the heads of 11 different incubation and acceleration centers actively operating in the field of innovations in Azerbaijan. During the meeting, Chairman of the ASAN service, Ulvi Mehdiyev, noted that on behalf of the Azerbaijani president, the relevant structures are carrying out certain work to harmonize the field of innovation. He noted that the opportunities of the INNOLAND center can be used by all players of this ecosystem equally. Mehdiyev further highlighted the importance of promoting innovative ideas in Azerbaijan, developing a startup environment, applying favorable legislation and funding mechanisms.

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## **Role of Innovations in Development of Digital Payments in Azerbaijan During Pandemic**

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic we are living in, plays an important role in determining the trends of developing the digital payments, Tamerlan Rustamov, head of the expert group "On Payment Systems and Digital Banking" of the Association of Banks of Azerbaijan, told Trend. "The development of remote banking services, the expansion of the sphere of electronic commerce and the growth of the volume of contactless payments are based on testing digital payments," Rustamov added. "The benefits which applied by the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) during the pandemic (a 50 percent reduction in service fees for cards, contactless options for extending

the validity of payment cards, delivery of bank cards at the request of customers, an increase in the amount of contactless payments and a number of other services) had a positive impact on the development of digital payments," head of the expert group said.

"Moreover, the processes of banks' introduction of new products and services in the digital ecosystem were accelerated, reforms were carried out to improve mobile banking services, the spheres of activity of non-bank payment service providers were expanded and their interaction with banks was intensified, the activity of e-commerce platforms were improved," Rustamov said. "Moreover, according to the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, as of December 1, 2020, 55,000 POS terminals were installed in the country in retail trade, catering and other facilities in Azerbaijan," head of the expert group said. "An average of 83 payment transactions were made in the amount of about 4,069.4 manat (\$2,393.7) during November through each of the POS-terminals installed in retail trade, public catering and other facilities," head of the expert group said. "This figure reached 1,796.6 manat (\$1,056.8) or 37 successful transactions for the same period of 2019 while in 2018 - 1,616.2 manat (\$950) or 23 payments through one terminal," Rustamov said.

"The total volume of non-cash payments through the network of POS terminals with payment cards issued in the country amounted to 1.9 billion manat (\$1.1 billion) for 11 months of 2020," head of the expert group said. "This figure has doubled compared to the same period of 2018." "The total volume of e-commerce transactions for the analyzed period amounted to 3.3 billion manat (\$1.9 billion)," Rustamov added. "An increase of 2.5 times is observed here." In general, Rustamov stressed that the turnover of non-cash payments on transactions with payment cards amounted to 22 percent. "Taking into account the statistics data, the products and services which are provided by payment service providers, small and medium-sized businesses should highly appreciate the existing potential for accepting non-cash payments," Rustamov added.

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## **Azerbaijan Increasing Competitiveness of Transport Corridors**

Azerbaijan is increasing the competitiveness of transport corridors, Trend reports referring to the State Customs Committee. According to the committee, an online meeting was held with experts from the World Bank on the topic of logistics assessment within the private sector diagnostics. The event participants were the Committee's Deputy Chairman, Major General of the Customs Service Javad Gasimov, representatives of the relevant structures of the committee, World Bank (WB) expert Daniel Saslavsky and representatives of the bank. Gasimov noted that long-term relations have been established and fruitful cooperation is constantly



developing between the World Bank and the Customs Committee. He pointed out that the reforms carried out under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev in recent years have created favorable conditions for enhancing the human resources, material and technical, regulatory and legal base of customs authorities, expanding and developing customs cooperation on an international scale.

The deputy chairman stressed that the measures taken to improve the business environment in Azerbaijan are regular. Noting the importance of the indicators of the WB's assessment tools and reports for Azerbaijan, he added that the measures taken to improve the business environment have yielded positive results. According to Gasimov, in order to improve the favorable business environment in Azerbaijan, a special commission and a working group under the leadership of the State Customs Committee have been created. Speaking about the development of logistics and trade, including projects implemented in this area, he also informed about the work carried out to create logistics centers, open new customs checkpoints, and expand the infrastructure of existing checkpoints, including increasing the competitiveness of transport corridors. The WB expert Saslavsky spoke about the links between the structure he represents and the State Customs Committee, and also thanked for the information provided for the meeting and diagnostics of the private sector. Besides, Saslavsky expressed confidence that the interaction will further strengthen, and effective cooperation will accelerate international trade and improve the business environment. Then, the meeting attendants discussed issues of assessing the logistics sector, increasing the opportunities for private sector participation in the economy.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 02/21/2021

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## **Azerbaijan State Agency Talks Ongoing Work to Eliminate Traffic Jams in Intra-Country Road**

Work on the expansion of the section of Baku-Sumgayit highway from the 'January 20' tunnel to the Masazir bridge will be completed in June 2021, Saleh Mammadov, Chairman of the Board of the State Agency of Azerbaijan Automobile Roads, said, Trend reports. He made the remark at a briefing on the work carried out in 2020 and the tasks ahead. "The purpose for expanding the part of the highway is to eliminate the rapidly increasing heavy traffic of vehicles from the northern and north-western directions to the center of Baku and to partially solve the problem of traffic jams in this and the opposite directions on the section of the Baku-Sumgayit road," Mammadov stressed. According to the chairman, the most important work is the reconstruction of the existing tunnel on the Khirdalan circle, the creation of a tunnel of 8 traffic lanes - 4 in each direction, and a road junction consisting of four-lane auxiliary roads. Mammadov said that the dismantling of the railway bridge after the

newly built tunnels, the supports of which fell on the carriageway, and the construction of a new single-span railway bridge, eliminated congestion in this area.

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## Oceania

### **AUSTRALIA: Morrison Talks Tough Against Tech Giants**

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has accused tech giants of taking a free ride on Australian media, claiming credit for forcing them to pay for news. The world-first media bargaining code will force online powerhouses including Facebook and Google to pay for displaying news content. Facebook will reinstate news pages after banning them during a dispute with the government about the terms of the code. Google threatened to pull its search engine from Australian users before backing down and striking multiple deals worth millions of dollars with media companies. "We are not going to let big tech companies take a free ride on our free press," Mr Morrison said. "Holding these companies to account shows the strength of resolve of our government to stand up for the things that are important to Australia." The prime minister likened the media bargaining code to a tax crackdown on multinational companies that sparked a protest from Amazon.

"They left in protest and they came crawling back because our government held its ground," he told parliament. Mr Morrison said all countries needed to stand up to the online behemoths on making sure governments' actions were respected. "Big tech companies may be changing the world but they shouldn't run it," he said. Facebook has agreed to reverse its Australian news ban after securing last-minute amendments to the media bargaining code. The code will no longer automatically apply and digital platforms will be given more time to negotiate payment with media organisations. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said negotiations with the social media giant were always bound to be complex and difficult. "We saw the market power of digital giants like Facebook when they pretty much blacked-out the Australian news media business from their platform just last week," he told Sky News.

"That was a wake-up call for the whole world, really." Facebook signed an in-principle agreement with Seven West Media after the government agreed to change its landmark code. Communications Minister Paul Fletcher expects other media companies will follow suit. The journalists' union fears small publishers could be shut out of commercial arrangements with Facebook and Google if the internet giants skirt around the code by signing individual deals with big media companies. "We now face the strange possibility that the code could be passed by parliament and it applies to precisely no one," Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance federal president Marcus Strom said. "It will just sit in the treasurer's draw as a threat to misbehaving digital

companies."

Google has announced a series of deals with major publishers in recent weeks, including News Corp, Nine Entertainment, Guardian Australia and Seven West Media. As Facebook also eyes the major media players, Mr Fletcher is hopeful the network will consider smaller regional outlets. "The news media bargaining code includes a mechanism for the digital platforms to make a default offer to smaller and regional players," he told the ABC. Labor has backed the amendments to the media bargaining code, assuring its passage through parliament.

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## **Australian Scientists Focus on Blood Clots**

A new Australian biomedical invention could help prevent deaths from stroke, heart attack and coronavirus-induced lung failure. The cake-box sized diagnostic device can measure a blood clot's consistency and weight, to within a thousand millionth of a gram. It will help doctors better assess patients' disease risks and develop medical treatments for them. It may also assist the study of micro-blood clots in capillaries involved in lung failure related to COVID-19. "We can now measure the stickiness of the blood clot down to a single platelet," optical engineer Steve Lee said on Thursday. The new portable device advances the room-sized prototype made by Australian National University scientists in 2018 and can now fit on a hospital bench. It uses high-speed optical fibre technology - known as coherent optical scattering and interferometry (COSI) - to create 3D holographic images of patients' platelets.

Dr Lee said existing imaging tools are too slow to capture single platelets, which are tiny blood cells that help your body form clots to stop bleeding. "COSI has a very fast and high-resolution imaging process, so it can capture the behaviour of individual platelets before they clump together," he said. The ANU team are currently trialling COSI on a variety of patient samples with National Platelet Research and Referral Centre medical researchers. They hope the device will be in production for hospital use within two years. The team's work was published in the Biophysical Journal.

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## **Emissions Rise as Virus Restrictions Ease**

Australia's emissions rose slightly last quarter, driven by a transport rebound as coronavirus restrictions eased across the country. The government's latest emissions data covering the September quarter reveal a 1.7 per cent increase compared to the previous period. Emissions decreased by 4.4 per cent in the year to September,

largely thanks to the electricity sector, transport, agriculture and industrial processes. Australia is signed up to the Paris Agreement, with the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 26 to 28 per cent of 2005 levels by 2030. Energy Minister Angus Taylor calculates emissions are 19 per cent below 2005 levels. "Despite upward pressure from exports and industry, emissions per capita and the emissions intensity of the economy continue to fall and are at their lowest levels in three decades," he said.

Unlike all states and territories the federal government has not committed to reaching net zero emissions by 2050. The Morrison government faces growing international pressure to do so but some coalition members stridently oppose it. Mr Taylor has outlined a technology-based plan to reduce Australia's emissions but there is no government projections for when net zero would be reached on current trends. Labor MP Chris Bowen has recently taken on the climate portfolio for the federal opposition. The party has also struggled to find a happy middle-ground on energy and climate policy. Mr Bowen says he's focused on putting together a road map for net zero by 2050. "That road map will have job creation, investment in our regions and suburbs, ensuring the investment framework for cheaper electricity so we can see some reinvigoration of manufacturing," he told the ABC.

"We need a plan to reduce emissions and create jobs and that is exactly what our plan will do." The data released on Friday showed transport emissions rose by more than 10 per cent and agriculture saw a 8.3 per cent increase as drought conditions eased. The government is focusing on the data on trend terms, which show a one per cent decrease in the September quarter compared to the previous three months. Another slew of climate data released this week shows energy company AGL is Australia's biggest polluter by far, followed by Origin, Stanwell Corporation and Energy Australia.

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## **Govt Handed Aged Care Inquiry Final Report**

The aged care royal commission has handed its final report to the federal government after years of harrowing evidence at hearings across the nation. Governor-General David Hurley received the report, which is likely to include more than one hundred recommendations for reform, at Sydney's Admiralty House on Friday. The two-year inquiry was told countless tales of abuse and neglect, with its 2019 interim report recommending a complete overhaul of a "woefully inadequate" system. The government will review the report over the weekend and provide an interim response by the middle of next week, Health Minister Greg Hunt has said. "We are anticipating it could be well over a thousand pages and there could be more than a hundred recommendations," he told reporters on Thursday. A more detailed

response is expected by the May federal budget.

The commission's interim report found pay and conditions for staff were poor, workloads heavy and there were severe difficulties in recruitment and retention. It also found there was an overuse of drugs to "restrain" aged care residents and younger people with disabilities were stuck in aged care. Lawyers assisting the commission have made 124 reform recommendations, including for mandated staffing ratios, increased regulator powers and new laws to protect the rights of elderly people. The sector, which is predominantly funded by the Commonwealth, has come under increased scrutiny during the pandemic with 685 aged care residents dying from COVID-19. The federal government has poured extra money into aged care in recent years, and announced in December a \$1 billion boost aimed largely at creating 10,000 more home care packages. Some 240,000 Australians currently live in residential aged care. The commission heard from 641 witnesses and received more than 10,500 submissions.

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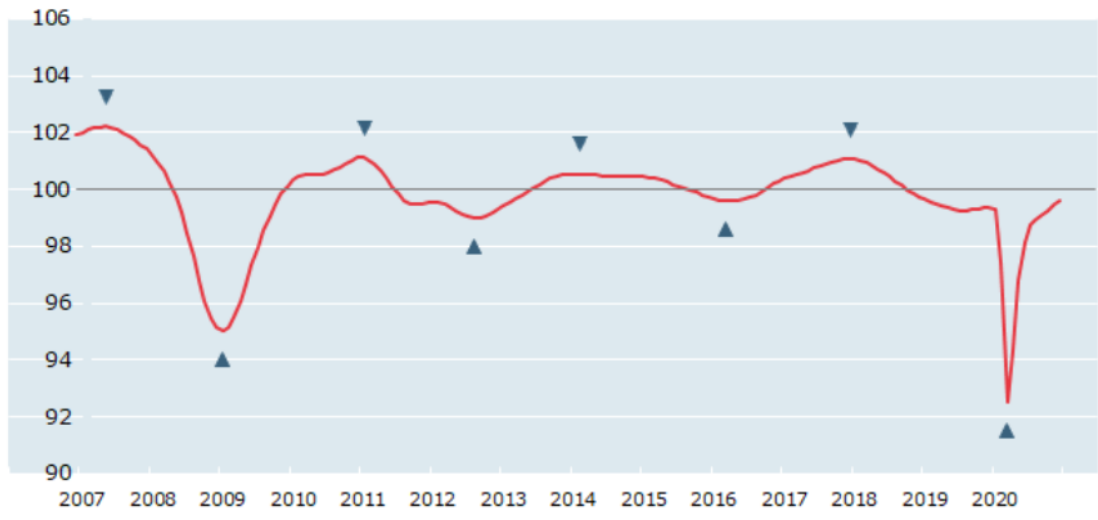
## 4、 Economic and Social Development and ICT

### Asia-Pacific

#### **CLIs Point to Stable Growth in Most Large OECD Economies**

The OECD Composite leading indicators (CLIs), designed to anticipate turning points in economic activity relative to trend, point to stable growth in most large OECD economies. The CLIs continue to signal stable growth in the United States, Japan and the euro area as a whole, including Germany, France and Italy. In Canada, the CLI now points to stabilising growth. The CLI for the United Kingdom still signals a slowdown. Among major emerging economies, the CLIs for the manufacturing sector of China and for India and Brazil all point to a steady increase in growth. In Russia, the CLI continues to signal stable growth. The CLIs should continue to be interpreted with care as fluctuations in the underlying components are likely influenced by the changing measures to contain Covid-19 and the progress of vaccination campaigns.

### OECD area: stable growth



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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### Services Trade Restrictions Increased in 2020, Compounding COVID-19 Economic Shock

The global regulatory environment for services trade became more restrictive in 2020, with new barriers compounding the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic on exporters, according to a new OECD report. OECD Services Trade Restrictiveness Index (STRI): Policy trends up to 2021 shows an increasing pace in the erection of new barriers to services trade across all major sectors. New restrictions are affecting services traded through a range of commercial establishments, in sectors including computer services, commercial banking and broadcasting. Global services trade fell by 24% in the third quarter of 2020 compared to a year ago, a small uptick from the 30% year-on-year decline registered in the second quarter. While the overall trend was toward greater restrictiveness, governments around the world did lower barriers to cross-border digital trade in 2020, as part of the overarching policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic. More facilitation measures for digital trade were issued than in previous years, helping remote working and online business operations.

“We have experienced a major shift in trade during the pandemic,” OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría said. “Transport and travel have collapsed, but

digitally-delivered trade and enabling services such as telecommunications have contributed to the resilience of our economies. Lifting restrictions to trade in services will be critical as governments seek to put the global economy on the road to a strong, inclusive and sustainable recovery.” The report, which covers services trade regulations in 48 countries, representing more than 80% of global services exports, identifies top performers in terms of regulatory best practices, including Czech Republic, Latvia, the Netherlands, Japan, Lithuania and the United Kingdom. It also highlights recent reform efforts in Brazil, China, Iceland, Indonesia and Kazakhstan. National and collective action to ease barriers to services trade can reduce trade costs for firms that provide services across borders. On average across sectors and countries, services trade costs could decline by more than 15% after 3-5 years if countries could close half of the regulatory gaps with best performers. An ambitious services trade agenda, including new services market access commitments in comprehensive trade and investment agreements, can drive such gains, the report said.

For further information on OECD work on the services trade, see: <https://www.oecd.org/trade/topics/services-trade/>. Direct media queries to John Drummond, Head of the Trade in Services Division of the OECD Trade and Agriculture Directorate (+33 1 45 24 95 36), or Lawrence Speer in the OECD Media Office (+33 1 45 24 79 70). Working with over 100 countries, the OECD is a global policy forum that promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

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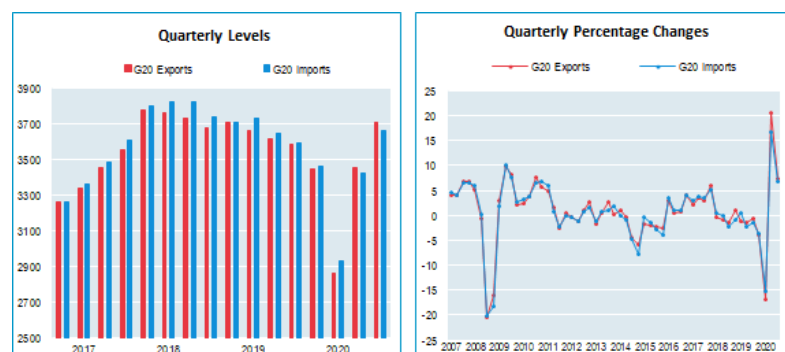
## **Final Quarter of 2020 Shows Continued Recovery in G20 International Merchandise Trade**

G20 international merchandise trade continued to rebound in the fourth quarter of 2020 (exports up 7.2% and imports up 6.8%), following the sharp falls seen in the first half of 2020, as lockdown measures affected trade globally. Although growth in the fourth quarter of 2020 was strong, it shows a reduction compared to the unprecedented expansion observed in the third quarter, when exports and imports increased by 20.6% and 16.8%, respectively. With the exception of Argentina, hampered by strikes in their wheat export supply chain, all G20 economies experienced international trade growth in the fourth quarter of 2020. In general, quarterly levels of international merchandise trade were somewhat above those in 2019. Limited provisional data available for January 2021 show international trade growth continuing. A strong driver of 2020 merchandise trade growth in the G20 was China, which already experienced a rebound in the second quarter of 2020 and has seen solid international trade growth continue in the last two quarters of 2020 (exports up 7.0% and 6.1%; and imports up 7.6% and 3.1%, for the third and fourth

quarter, respectively). Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia (exports up 11.6% and imports up 7.9%) and Japan (9.7% and 6.5%) saw strong trade growth in the fourth quarter of 2020, while growth in Indonesia (6.2% and 1.7%) and Korea (5.0% and 4.5%) was more moderate.

The EU27 as a whole (exports up 7.7% and imports up 6.4%), as well as France (9.4% and 3.1%), Germany (8.0% and 7.3%) and Italy (8.6% and 7.8%) all recorded strong growth in the fourth quarter of 2020, reinforcing the rebound observed in the third quarter. The United Kingdom recorded double-digit growth in both exports (10.0%) and imports (16.0%) in the fourth quarter of 2020. The strong growth number for imports could be linked to anticipation of the withdrawal from the EU single market and may also have supported the strong export numbers for the G20 EU economies (i.e. France, Germany and Italy). G20 economies in the Americas also continued to gain ground in the fourth quarter of 2020. Brazil exports were up 2.8%, while imports increased by 25.8% (largely as the result of the purchase of oil extraction equipment). Canada recorded steady international trade growth (exports up 4.8% and imports up 4.7%), while the United States saw stronger growth numbers (8.6% and 6.1%).

G20 total international merchandise trade  
Seasonally adjusted, in current prices and current US dollars billion



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## Urban Intelligence Rising: Why Smart Cities Are Better Cities

Smart cities that run on data aren't just more efficient to run. They're also more enjoyable to live in. Since the 1990s, the term "big data" has echoed through industry like the sound of dripping water in a cave. What began as a trickle eventually became a torrent. Now, its true potential is finally becoming clear. And nowhere more so than in cities. Cities around the world are replacing educated guesses with data-based decisions that are better for citizens and for the environment. In the process, they're building an entirely new type of infrastructure that marries bits and bytes with steel and stone. The result is a paradigm shift in the urban experience. Instead of being known for their problems — cities of the past were criticized for being dense,



dangerous and dirty — cities are becoming esteemed for their solutions: Cities of the future will be lauded as safe, healthy and efficient. In a word, cities are becoming smarter. You've heard the term "smart cities" before. What you might not realize, however, is just how much a city's IQ affects its residents. Smart cities will be more than dots on a map. They will be portals through which humanity discovers new ways to live, work and play. And that's going to change everything.

#### What Makes Cities 'Smart'?

Understanding smart cities' potential requires understanding what makes them smart to begin with. The answer, of course, is technology. But not just technology. Rather, integrated and automated technology. A traditional city is a series of silos. There is a department in charge of housing, for example, a department in charge of transportation, and another department in charge of streets and sanitation. Although they're united under a single mayor and a single city council, each has its own discrete ecosystem that serves its own distinct mission. They don't compete, necessarily. But they don't exactly collaborate, either. A smart city, on the other hand, is a system of systems wherein each city function is connected to all others, creating a single web of information from otherwise segregated streams. The product of that web is a holistic instead of fractured urban portrait that gives citizens and governments the unabridged insight they need in order to solve complicated social problems.

Consider something as common as traffic accidents.

In a smart city, traffic cameras can capture accidents in real time. When an incident happens, they can use artificial intelligence to instantly recognize that a collision has occurred, then automatically alert stakeholders with location coordinates and other relevant intelligence about the situation. The result — a faster response — could help save lives and reduce traffic congestion, thereby making the city safer as well as more enjoyable to live in. Machine learning algorithms can subsequently process traffic data and, over time, learn to predict accidents before they happen. Armed with that information, the city can re-engineer streets and traffic signals, post signage, issue public alerts or take other pre-emptive actions. Traffic lights could also be adjusted based on needs. For example, say there is a sporting event in a stadium that finishes at 9 p.m. Traffic emptying out of the area will spike. A smart city would adjust traffic lights durations in anticipation to help the area empty out faster. The same use case applies when traffic densities change, the city recognizes that fact and adjusts traffic light duration accordingly.

#### Tomorrow's Cities, Today

The smartest cities are still years away. Already, though, cities around the world are demonstrating serious intelligence. In Egypt, the government is building a brand-new capital outside of Cairo that will soon become the smartest city in Africa. At the heart of the unnamed metropolis will be a central command center created in partnership with Honeywell, whose technology will be the brain that powers the city's digital

nervous system. That system will rely on ubiquitous sensors for continuous monitoring and management of traffic, utilities, public safety and more. Honeywell has also been a partner to several cities in India, including Rajkot and Faridabad, as they work to incorporate smart technology to improve lives of their citizens and become smart cities.

#### An Intelligent Investment

Clearly, smart cities will do neat things. But the question begs: Why should they do them now? Technology is one reason. Sophisticated sensors, cloud infrastructure and massive data stores have become extremely powerful and extremely cheap, which makes smart cities more practical than they've ever been before. In addition, urbanization is pervasive. That means the challenges of running a city are getting tougher as cities continue to grow. The cheap and ubiquitous sensors plus big data and AI technologies can easily be deployed at scale to solve the problems cities face. And yet, perhaps the most compelling reason of all to invest in smart cities is for the tremendous good that they can do. Centuries of urbanization already have proven the merits of city living, from smaller environmental footprints to increased innovation and productivity to higher standards of living. To make cities smarter is to make them better for people, for the economy and for the planet.

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## **World Bank Group Debars Ferrostaal Oil & Gas GmbH**

The World Bank Group today announced the thirteen-month debarment of Germany-based Ferrostaal Oil & Gas GmbH (“FSOG”), an international engineering, procurement, and construction contractor for oil, gas, and other industrial plants, in connection with a fraudulent practice under the Bank-financed Ayeyarwady Integrated River Basin Management Project in Myanmar. The debarment makes FSOG ineligible to participate in projects and operations financed by institutions of the World Bank Group for thirteen months. It is part of a settlement agreement under which the company acknowledges responsibility for the underlying sanctionable practice and agrees to meet specified corporate compliance conditions as a condition for release from debarment. The Ayeyarwady Integrated River Basin Management Project was designed to strengthen integrated, climate-resilient management and development of the Ayeyarwady River and, in the event of an eligible crisis or emergency, to provide an immediate and effective response to said eligible crisis or emergency.

According to the facts of the case, FSOG assisted a company by acting as the company’s local Myanmar partner and agent to prepare a bid for a contract under the project. FSOG’s local representative and managing director of its Myanmar branch instructed the company not to disclose the agreed commission to be paid to FSOG in

the initial bid and did not correct this omission in a later amendment to the contract. This constitutes a fraudulent practice under the World Bank Group procurement guidelines. The settlement agreement provides for a significantly reduced period of debarment with conditional release in light of FSOG's extraordinary cooperation and voluntary remedial actions. As a condition for release from sanction under the terms of the settlement agreement, FSOG commits to complete integrity compliance programs consistent with the principles set out in the World Bank Group Integrity Compliance Guidelines. FSOG also commits to continue to fully cooperate with the World Bank Group Integrity Vice Presidency. The debarment of FSOG qualifies for cross-debarment by other multilateral development banks (MDBs) under the Agreement for Mutual Enforcement of Debarment Decisions that was signed on April 9, 2010.

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## **Education for All Refugee Children Is Within Reach – Finds World Bank-UNHCR Report**

The average annual cost of educating refugees is less than 5 percent of public education expenditure in developing nations hosting 85 percent of the world's refugees, according to a joint World Bank – UNHCR report released today. The principle of inclusive education, in this case, opening education up to all refugee children and their inclusion into national education systems can also lead to better services for local communities in host countries. This can be achieved at an estimated annual cost of US\$4.85 billion globally. This is a pre-COVID estimated cost of educating all refugees and is likely to increase as the impacts of the pandemic continue to unfold. The Global Cost of Inclusive Refugee Education report provides a standardized methodology to estimate refugee education costs across all host countries. It hopes to catalyze the development of country-level costed refugee-inclusive education plans. "Wherever they are, children must go to school. Education can help refugee children and youth to succeed despite the severe challenges they face," said Mamta Murthi, Vice President for Human Development, World Bank. "Providing quality education for all school-aged children in countries affected by fragility, conflict, or violence will require the international community and host governments to come together in the spirit of cost and responsibility sharing, but, as the report finds, it is within our reach."

At mid-2020 the number of forcibly displaced people globally surpassed the 80 million mark, accounting for one percent of the global population. Among them were 26 million refugees, half of whom are below the age of 18. Many of these children live in protracted crises. They often spend long periods, if not the entirety of their schooling years, in displacement. Educating them is of paramount importance to their future and self-sufficiency. "Refugee children and youth belong in schools, like

all children. For boys and girls forced to flee violence and persecution, inclusion in national education systems means hope and a critical opportunity to define their future, realize their potential,” said Raouf Mazou, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. “Our study clearly shows that this is possible with a genuine commitment and with what is a manageable price tag in the global context.” The report provides a “what it would take” figure rather than international commitments and obligations or current domestic expenditure on refugee education. Challenges remain in funding refugee education adequately, sustainably, and in a coordinated manner. There is an urgent need to improve the coordination of education financing in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funding is not the only condition for universal access and completion of education. While the report is focused on estimating the cost of access to education for refugee children, the importance of improving the quality of education cannot be ignored. The eradication of learning poverty, that is, being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10, applies to host country populations and refugee children alike.

The World Bank Group (WBG) is one of the largest sources of funding for refugee education. Our priorities focus on building inclusive and adaptable education systems in fragile and adverse environments; strengthening skills and resilience of individuals whose lives and education are affected by adversity; and improving education services for displaced populations and host communities. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, protects people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We work in over 130 countries, protecting millions of people by responding with life-saving support, safeguarding fundamental human rights and helping them build a better future.

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## **OECD Calls on Countries to Crack Down on the Professionals Enabling Tax and White Collar Crimes**

Countries should increase efforts to better deter, detect and disrupt the activities of professionals who enable tax evasion and other financial crimes, according to a new OECD report. Ending the Shell Game: Cracking down on the Professionals who enable Tax and White Collar Crimes explores the different strategies and actions that countries can take against those professional service providers who play a crucial part in the planning and pursuit of criminal activity, referred to in the report as “professional enablers.” White collar crimes like tax evasion, bribery and corruption are often hidden through complex legal structures and financial transactions facilitated by lawyers, notaries, accountants, financial institutions and other professional enablers. The report notes that the majority of professional service providers are law-abiding, and play an important role in assisting businesses and individuals understand and comply with the law. The aim of the new OECD report is

to assist countries in dealing with the small subset that use their specialised skills and knowledge to enable clients to defraud the government and evade their tax obligations.

Professional enablers often play a critical role in the concealment of the commission of tax and other financial crimes perpetrated by their clients. Those who facilitate the concealment of such crimes undermine the rule of law and public confidence in the legal and financial system, as well as the level playing field between compliant and non-compliant taxpayers. Highly publicised recent tax scandals have highlighted the cross-border nature of these practices, further undermining public trust in the integrity of the tax system. “Professional enablers often hold the key to the successful commission of white collar crimes like tax evasion, bribery and corruption, which depend on ensuring anonymity and hiding the financial trail,” said Grace-Perez Navarro, Deputy Director of the OECD’s Centre of Tax Policy and Administration. “Professional enablers help criminals conceal their identities and activities through shell companies, complex legal structures and financial transactions, relying on their specialised knowledge and veneer of legitimacy. Our ongoing work is intended to help countries develop and strengthen national strategies and international co-operation to crack down on the so-called professionals, whose actions are undermining government revenue, public confidence and economic growth.”

The report calls on countries to establish or strengthen national strategies to deal with professional enablers more effectively. Such strategies should:

- ensure that tax crime investigators are equipped to identify the types of professional enablers operating in their jurisdiction, and to understand the risks posed by how they devise, market, implement and conceal tax crime and financial crimes;
- ensure the law provides investigators and prosecutors with sufficient authority to identify, prosecute and sanction professional enablers, both to deter and penalise;
- implement multi-disciplinary prevention and disruption strategies, notably through engagement with supervisory, industry and professional bodies, to prevent abusive behaviour, incentivise early disclosure and whistle-blowing and take a strong approach to enforcement;
- ensure relevant authorities proactively maximise the availability of information, intelligence and investigatory powers held by other domestic and international agencies to tackle sophisticated professional enablers operating across borders;
- appoint a lead person and agency in the jurisdiction with responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the professional enablers strategy, undertake a review of its effectiveness over time and devise further changes as necessary.

The report will be presented during a dedicated session at the virtual OECD Global Anti-Corruption and Integrity Forum on 24 March at 16:45 to 17:45 (CET). The Forum will be open to the public and interested participants are invited to register to attend.

- Download the report
- Access the FAQs

•More on the OECD's work on Tax and Crime

For media enquiries, please contact Grace Perez-Navarro, Deputy Director of the OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration (+33 1 45 24 18 80), Achim Pross, Head of the International Co-operation and Tax Administration Division (+33 6 21 63 27 67) or Lawrence Speer (+33 1 45 24 79 70) in the OECD Media Office.

Working with over 100 countries, the OECD is a global policy forum that promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

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## **APEC Sees Softer Contraction in 2020, Uneven Recovery in 2021-2022**

A new updated report by the APEC Policy Support Unit finds that the rebound in economic activity in the second half of 2020 and the continuation of fiscal and monetary support by member economies have brought about a slight improvement to the region's economic growth. Economic growth in APEC is now estimated to decline by 2 percent in 2020, up from its initial forecast of a 2.5 percent contraction in November, bringing the total output loss to USD 1.5 trillion. "Governments around the region continue to mitigate the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic with a series of stimulus measures, including liquidity support and loan moratoriums extended to businesses as well as cash handouts and wide-ranging subsidies to households," explained Dr Denis Hew, director of the APEC Policy Support Unit. "These measures stimulate domestic consumption as economies reopen gradually." The new report also projects economic growth for the region at 5.7 percent in 2021 and 4.1 percent in 2022.

Despite the slight uptick in 2020's economic growth and a relatively optimistic outlook for 2021 and 2022, the report notes that growth will be uneven across APEC economies, with the speed and strength of the recovery largely determined by the effective management of the pandemic and successful vaccination programs. "Different levels of access and schedules as to when at least 60-70 percent of the population will be vaccinated will eventually affect the timing of economic and border reopening, translating into diverging speeds of economic recovery across the region," said Rhea C. Hernando, an APEC Policy Support Unit researcher, who updated the report. The report notes that several APEC economies could achieve widespread vaccination as early as the latter part of this year, with 10 other members by mid-2022. "There is an urgent need for closer cooperation between policymakers and the private sector to educate the public about the efficacy of each vaccine, in order to combat misinformation and encourage higher vaccine uptake," Hernando added.

Challenges remain for APEC to address the unequal impact of the pandemic on

various segments of society, especially the poor, women and the youth. In terms of trade, the region recorded a better performance in the third quarter of 2020, with the value of merchandise exports and imports declining at a lower rate of 2.4 percent and 5.7 percent, respectively, from as much as 16 to 17 percent in the previous quarter. This improved performance is in line with global trade, supported by a 50 percent growth in trade of medical supplies since April 2020. Commercial services continued to tumble, largely resulting from major losses in the transport and travel sectors. For the period January to September 2020, commercial services plunged by a cumulative 22.9 percent for exports and 24.5 percent for imports.

Nevertheless, the rise of remote work and work from home initiatives also increased demand for home office and communication equipment, giving trade in this sector as well as apparel and textile a boost. “It is crucial for member economies to sustain the fiscal and monetary stimulus in order to prevent further livelihood losses, but equally important is to also take advantage of digital opportunities,” said Dr Hew. “When fiscal space allows, economies can invest in digital infrastructure, green jobs and new technologies, while also ensuring the upskilling or reskilling of the workforce.” New Zealand is leading APEC’s effort towards a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery guided by its theme for APEC 2021, Join, Work, Grow. Together. “For APEC to move towards these goals, it needs to collectively take meaningful steps to ensure that no one is left behind,” Dr Hew concluded.

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## **ADB, Energy Absolute Sign Green Loan for Renewable Energy and Electric Vehicle Charging Network**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Energy Absolute Public Company Limited (Energy Absolute) signed a 1.5 billion Thai baht (\$47.62 million) green loan to finance ongoing renewable energy projects and a countrywide electric vehicle charging network in Thailand. The loan will finance the Nakornsawan Solar and Hanuman Wind power plants, and deploy fast and standard chargers at charging stations across Thailand. Thailand aims to be a regional leader in electric vehicles to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from conventional transportation, which currently accounts for around 26% of the country’s total annual emissions. “ADB aims to increase awareness of green financing by continuing to support Thailand’s renewable energy sector and investing in the electrification and decarbonization of its transport sector,” said ADB Private Sector Operations Department Infrastructure Finance Division Director for East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Jackie B. Surtani. “ADB sees Energy Absolute’s leadership in green investment as an invaluable step in developing the financing of renewable energy in the region.”

This green loan is the first climate loan in Thailand to be certified by the Climate Bond Initiative, which administers the international Climate Bond Standards and Certification Scheme. Green loans are used to fund projects that benefit the environment, while climate loans focus on climate change benefits. “We are positioned to grow our businesses in green energy and have been investing in modern technology-based industries that offer a total solution for promoting renewable power and electric mobility in Thailand and other countries,” said Energy Absolute Deputy Chief Executive Officer Amorn Saphaweeikul. “ADB’s continued support not only helps us financially but also highlights our trustworthiness and enhances our reputation.” Established in 2006, Energy Absolute is the largest renewable energy company on the Stock Exchange of Thailand. Its six renewable power plants generate a total of 664 megawatts, while its biodiesel production capacity totals 800,000 liters daily. Energy Absolute has diversified into large-scale production of lithium-ion batteries for transport and power, and electric vehicle charging infrastructure for various types of electric vehicles such as e-ferries, e-buses, and e-cars.

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## **People, Place and Prosperity: Asia-Pacific Business Community’s Call to Action**

Business leaders from 21 Asia-Pacific economies met virtually this week to discuss how to work together to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuild the region’s economies. “We are living through the crisis of a century and strength comes from our determination to work together,” said the Chair of the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC), Rachel Taulelei. “Overcoming the current adversity, whether restoring public health, reopening borders, securing economic recovery or achieving more equitable communities, demands constructive, creative and above all collaborative approaches,” Ms Taulelei added. “The need for this kind of coordinated thinking has been brought home very vividly by the spectre of vaccine export restrictions; it remains true, as it has been since the beginning of this crisis, that we all remain vulnerable if any of us remains vulnerable,” Ms Taulelei warned. Ms Taulelei was commenting after the first ABAC meeting of 2021, which was opened with an address from the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern.

“Our focus this year in ABAC is on people, place and prosperity – in the Māori language, tāngata, taiao, me te taurikura. These three elements are all essential to creating the kind of societies we want to live in. “Inclusion for all people is our North Star – so we will be working on how to ensure access for all to COVID vaccinations, essential goods and food supplies; how small businesses can operate on a level playing field; and how to empower women and indigenous populations for success. “Place is about safeguarding our planet. We aspire to lead on climate change.



We will be looking for ways to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy, through boosting renewable energy, encouraging innovation and by weaning ourselves off environmentally-harmful subsidies,” Ms Taulelei explained. “And achieving a prosperous region, especially after the body-blows of 2020, demands that most fundamental of APEC goals – free and open markets. That means building a seamless Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific, and championing the World Trade Organisation, including initiatives to keep supply chains functioning and trade flowing as well as the reopening of borders and resumption of travel that will revive the region’s economic growth.”

Underscoring all of this is the digital economy, the Chair noted. “Digital tools are fundamental to resilience, sustainability and inclusion,” Rachel Taulelei observed. “Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence can unleash even greater opportunities – but we need a trusted, interoperable enabling environment to realise that potential.” Ms Taulelei noted that the APEC Putrajaya Vision, agreed by APEC Leaders late last year, provided an imperative to act. “Despite – or perhaps because of, the pandemic – we have the highest possible ambitions for this year. We cannot emerge unchanged from COVID; but nor should we want to. The vision calls for an open, dynamic, resilient and peaceful Asia-Pacific community by 2040. The road to get there will not be easy. But the business of business is solving problems – and ABAC is ready and eager for the challenge,” Ms Taulelei concluded.

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## **Investing in Digital Upskilling and Reskilling of APEC’s Workforce Is Critical**

Hiring workers with digital skills has grown substantially in the last three years across the APEC region, according to a recent report highlighting the gap between workforce supply and demand and emphasizing the urgent need for member economies to invest in digital upskilling and reskilling of their workforces. Research by LinkedIn and Burning Glass Technologies in the APEC Closing the Digital Skills Gap Report - Trends and Insights finds that the digital hiring rate across the region increased three-fold between 2016 and 2019. While the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a hiring slowdown in the first quarter of 2020, the report sees continued strong demand for digital talent, with a greater than one-fold increase in March 2020 as compared to the previous year. “Digitalization offers us many opportunities and challenges, the most pressing one is to address and manage the discrepancy between industry and education and training systems, where the former moves and innovates a lot faster than the latter,” said Professor Park Dong Sun, the chair of APEC Human Resources and Development Working Group. “COVID-19 has accelerated digital transformation and adoption in almost all aspects of our lives, it is

extremely critical for policymakers to look into measures to support the upskilling and reskilling of our workforce,” Park added.

Read: APEC Closing the Digital Skills Gap Report - Trends and Insights

The report stresses the importance of reskilling workers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic as many are looking for new opportunities, and it is “necessary to have at least baseline digital skills.” It is also critical to equip new workers with digital skills so they can thrive in the workforce. Moreover, as businesses are forced to adjust to a more digital work environment, workers may need to expand their skillset to be able to work efficiently and effectively from home or other locations. In addition to efforts to measure the digital skills gap, the initiative also announced the finalization of a digital readiness checklist designed to help APEC governments, employers, and academia understand their levels of preparedness for jobs in the digital age and to support their efforts to upskill and reskill workers amidst COVID-19.

“Digital skills and remote work have become critical to retaining employment and to economic survival, with occupations requiring higher levels of digital skills more likely to offer remote work opportunities during these challenging times,” explained Andrew Tein of Wiley, co-chair of the APEC Closing the Digital Skills Gap Forum. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed the risks for those whose jobs are least digital, such as workers in the front-line service sector. As these least digital jobs are also least open to remote work, workers in this sector are negatively affected. This dichotomy may deepen inequality if they do not have the necessary digital skills to transition to other jobs. “We must come together to prepare the current and next generation of workers to have the digital skills necessary to succeed in the new economy,” said Jennifer Thornton of the Business-Higher Education Forum and the co-chair of the APEC Closing the Digital Skills Gap Forum. “A skilled workforce is key to our continued success and to increasing opportunity across APEC economies,” she concluded.

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## East Asia

### **CHINA: E-commerce Becomes New Farm Work in China's Rural Areas**

Mobile phones are evolving into new farm tools and e-commerce has become a part of farm work for China's rural population, as online sales emerge as an important force in the fight against poverty, according to a report released on Wednesday. By the end of 2020, e-commerce had covered all of the country's 832 national-level poverty-stricken counties, read a report on China's internet development from the China Internet Network Information Center. Online retail sales in rural areas jumped

to 1.79 trillion yuan (about 277 billion U.S. dollars) last year, from 180 billion yuan in 2014, data from the report shows. New forms of rural online shopping, including livestreaming and e-commerce, not only benefit consumers, but also boost the sales of high-quality agricultural products in rural areas, the report read. Amid government efforts to expand rural internet coverage over recent years, residents in 98 percent of China's poor villages had access to the internet through fiber-optic cables by the end of 2020, up from less than 70 percent about five years ago, according to the report. As of December 2020, around 309 million people, or 31.3 percent of China's online population, live in rural areas, where the internet penetration rate stood at 56 percent.

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## **Mobile Payment Penetration Continues to Rise in China: Survey**

Mobile payment penetration continues to rise in China as more consumers have acclimated to the popular technology, the latest survey from China UnionPay showed. In 2020, 98 percent of the 65,000 surveyed listed mobile payments as their most commonly used channel, up 5 percentage points from the previous year, according to the report jointly released by China UnionPay and 17 commercial banks and payment institutions. The share of QR code payment users reached 85 percent, an increase of 6 percentage points from the previous year, the report showed. Affected by the epidemic, more offline payment scenarios have been migrating online. The survey report showed that 30 percent of respondents often use livestream shopping. Meanwhile, small physical stores such as vendors and fruit stores have increased their online and offline payment integration, winning them customers during the epidemic. The survey report also showed insufficient self-protection in payment security, with "all payment passwords being the same" and "payment while connected to public Wifi" as the two most prominent risks.

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## **China Taps Economic Development Zones for Veteran Job Opportunities**

China has released a new document to promote veteran employment and business start-up in its economic development zones (EDZs), the country's hives of high-tech industries and enterprises. Highlighting the leading role of EDZs in China's industrialization, economic opening up and the entrepreneurial drive, the document has placed high hopes on the economic hubs in facilitating military personnel to join the workforce after service. EDZs are instrumental in diversifying veterans' job

opportunities and helping them start businesses, a spokesperson with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs told Xinhua. More than that, the preferential business policies and incentives inherent to such economic complexes would make it more likely for ex-service people to land high-quality jobs and start successful businesses, according to the spokesperson. The document also called for efforts to shore up preferential treatment and financing assistance to veterans who would like to start a business. It urged down-to-earth enforcement of the preferential treatment and supporting policies for veterans in job placement and business start-ups, while stressing the importance to observe market rules, level the employment playground and factor in local conditions. The document was jointly released by eight central government departments including the Ministry of Veterans Affairs.

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## **China's Consumer Inflation Eases, Factory-gate Prices Rise**

China's consumer inflation eased while factory-gate prices rebounded in January, official data showed Wednesday. The country's consumer price index (CPI), a main gauge of inflation, declined 0.3 percent year on year in January, compared with a 0.2-percent increase in December last year, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said. Food prices increased 1.6 percent year on year last month, up 0.4 percentage points from December and contributing about 0.3 percentage points to the CPI increase, said Dong Lijuan, a senior statistician with the NBS. China saw a CPI hike in January 2020, which was mainly driven by the effect of the Spring Festival holiday. Dong said the relatively high base was the main factor that dragged the country's CPI into negative territory last month. In breakdown, prices of vegetables climbed 10.9 percent in January from a year earlier, while those of pork, chicken and duck declined 3.9 percent, 10.7 percent and 6.8 percent year on year, respectively.

Excluding food and energy, the core CPI declined 0.3 percent year on year, which was mainly due to a decrease in service prices. On a monthly basis, the CPI edged up 1 percent, expanding 0.3 percentage points from a month earlier. Dong attributed the increase to the coming Spring Festival, local epidemic situation and low temperatures, among other factors. Wen Bin, a chief analyst at China Minsheng Bank, said in a co-authored research note that there is no need to read too much into the negative growth of January's CPI. As the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic fades out and domestic demand rebounds, tourism, catering and accommodation sectors will recover and prices in those sectors will rise, said Wen. Wednesday's data also showed China's producer prices, which measure costs for goods at the factory gate, rose 0.3 percent year on year in January amid a steady recovery in domestic demand.

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## **China's Online Advertising Market Expands in 2020**

The scale of China's internet advertising market expanded to nearly 500 billion yuan (about 77 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020, up 14 percent year on year, according to the latest statistical report on internet development. The figure marked the third year in a row that market growth had slowed. Internet advertising via mobile devices commanded a market share of 85 percent last year, up from 70 percent in 2018, said the report released by the China Internet Network Information Center. Key opinion consumers (KOCs), or those who can influence their friends and fans and generate consumption behavior, are reconstructing the internet marketing communication chain and boosting advertising, the report noted. China's social networking platforms are now home to a large number of KOCs who have attracted customers of different brands and seen their own advertising value gradually emerge.

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## **Online Payments Soar in China During Spring Festival**

Online payments through NetsUnion, a Chinese online payment clearinghouse, and China UnionPay, a card payment giant, surged during China's Spring Festival holiday. The online payments on the two platforms during the holiday, from Feb. 11 to Feb. 17, totaled 6.36 trillion yuan (about 985.5 billion U.S. dollars), data from the two platforms showed. In breakdown, NetsUnion processed 7.94 billion online payment transactions during this year's holiday, with the total transaction volume reaching 4.98 trillion yuan. The company saw a 66.61-percent surge in average daily transactions compared with that made during the same holiday last year, while its transaction volume soared by 84.07 percent. Online payments through China UnionPay hit a record high of 1.38 trillion yuan during the Spring Festival holiday. It is up by 4.8 percent from last year's holiday. China has seen buoyant consumption activities during the holiday. The combined sales of retail and catering enterprises rose by 28.7 percent, year on year, to 821 billion yuan, data from the Ministry of Commerce showed.

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## **China's Online Mediation Platform Faces Surging Applications**

Nearly 5.2 million disputes were resolved in 2020 on China's online mediation platform with a success rate of 65 percent, saving more people the bother of going to court, according to the Supreme People's Court (SPC). Mediation applications have surged more than 300-fold on the platform since the launch of the service in early 2018, said the SPC. It added that 2020 saw an average of 66 submissions for the service in every minute within the working time. The country's 3,502 courts have all opened mediation services on the platform so far. Also, 32,937 mediation organizations have moved in and brought the number of online mediators to 165,333, said Qian Xiaochen, head of the case-filing tribunal of the SPC. They have settled more than 13.6 million disputes in three years. Data showed that China's courts accepted 13.14 million civil lawsuits in 2020, a decrease of 5.17 percent from 2019. The number of successful pre-trial mediations in these cases rose to 4.24 million in 2020 from 1.46 million in 2019. This can be partly attributed to the platform's increasingly prominent role in the country's legal dispute-settlement system, said Qian. Mediation on the platform needs to conclude in a maximum of 30 days. Otherwise, a court trial might ensue. On average, it takes 23.33 days for a dispute case to be resolved, according to Qian.

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## **FTZ in China Province Attracts Billions in Investment**

The free trade zone (FTZ) in northeast China's Heilongjiang Province had attracted 196 projects with a total investment of 228.2 billion yuan (about 35.3 billion U.S. dollars) as of the end of 2020, according to the provincial economic planner. Since its inauguration in August 2019, the Heilongjiang FTZ had seen 7,378 enterprises established in its three sections, with one in the provincial capital of Harbin and the other two in the cities of Heihe and Suifenhe on the China-Russia border, by the end of 2020, said the provincial development and reform commission. The Heilongjiang FTZ has taken a series of measures to attract investment, including promoting online registration, improving business environment and lowering operating costs for foreign trade enterprises. The province's total foreign trade reached 153.7 billion yuan in 2020, with exports growing 3.2 percent year on year to 36.09 billion yuan.

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## **China's Poverty Alleviation Tax and Fee Cuts See Results**

China's tax and fee cuts aimed at facilitating poverty alleviation topped 102.2 billion yuan (about 15.84 billion U.S. dollars) last year, official data shows. The amount

increased from 74.2 billion yuan in 2019, with average annual growth exceeding 30 percent since 2015, according to a statement released on the State Taxation Administration's official website on Monday. The total sales revenue of more than 4,500 companies selling poverty alleviation products nationwide grew 32.9 percent year on year in 2020, read the statement, citing value-added invoice data. The growth outpaced that seen in 2019 by 19.4 percentage points, indicating the success of China's solid efforts to reduce poverty through consumption, the statement read. China began a full-scale battle against poverty in 2012. After eight years of continuous efforts, the country has lifted all rural poor under the current income standard out of poverty and removed all impoverished counties from its poverty list.

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## **How to Have Healthy and Age-Friendly Cities in the People's Republic of China**

Rapid urbanization and aging in many countries have highlighted the urgency of making cities healthier and more accessible for the elderly and also more friendly for children. A new ADB report offers an operational framework for creating an urban society fit for four generations in the People's Republic of China – and elsewhere. In 2018, the United Nations reported that 55% of the world's population resided in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), the urban population has been increasing at a particularly high speed, from 17.9% in 1978 to 60.6% at the end of 2019. Urbanization in the PRC is coinciding with an aging of society, with about 20% of the urban population projected to be over 60 years old by 2030; and many of these older people will live to very advanced ages. As the world and the PRC continue to urbanize, sustainable development will depend on making cities livable, environmentally sustainable, low-carbon, climate resilient, and socially and age-inclusive.

“Integrating health and aging as part of sustainable city planning and urban design will deliver specific additional health and urban livability benefits,” says ADB Senior Urban Development Specialist Stefan Rau. “It is a great opportunity to bring together many agencies and specialists to use the emerging four-generation urban world as an opportunity for transforming urban community life.” Health and well-being have been shaping urban development since cities existed and they can now be considered critical factors contributing to competitiveness of cities, especially in high-income and upper-middle-income countries such as the PRC. A new ADB publication, *Healthy and Age-Friendly Cities in the People's Republic of China*, proposes health impact assessments as well as healthy and age-friendly city action and management plans as holistic tools to improve urban livability, services, and

public spaces. Integrated with urban planning, these practical tools can help make cleaner, healthier, and safer cities that are more pleasant for people of all ages, and more attractive for businesses, and economic development.

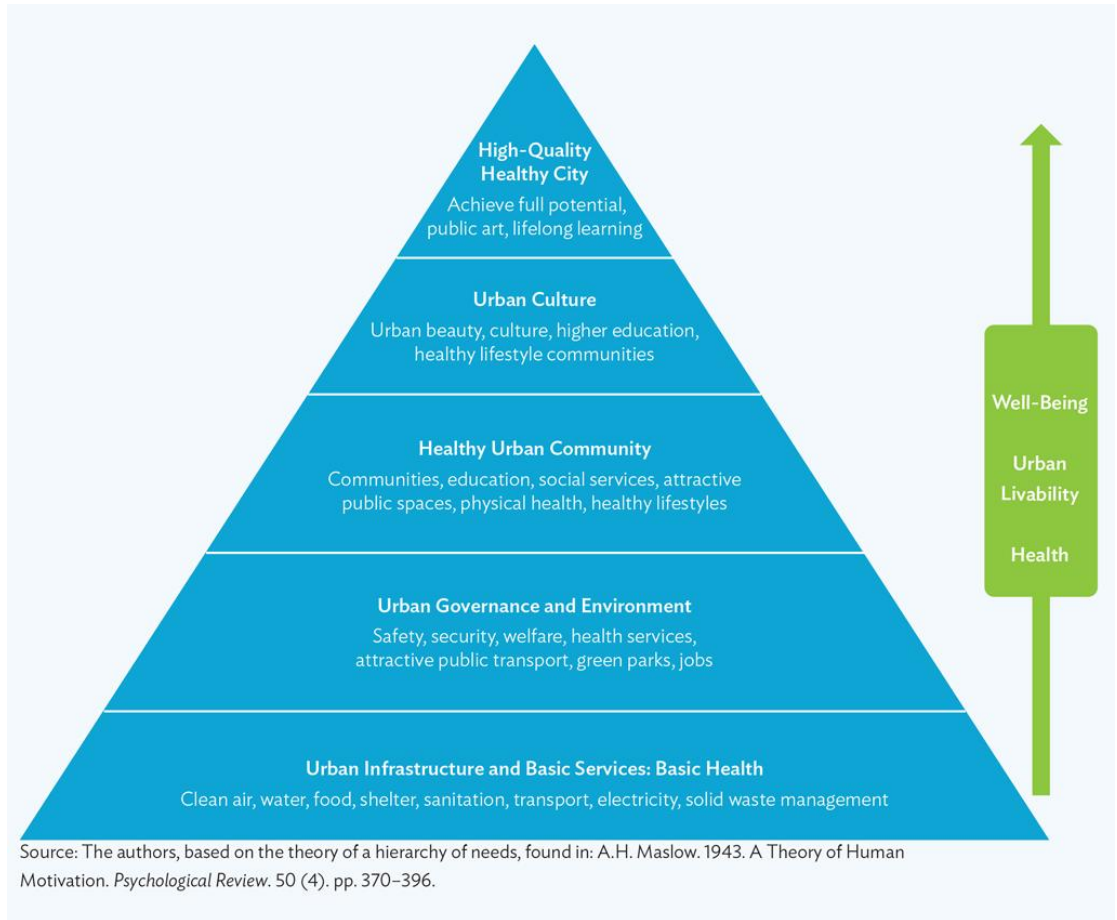
Healthier cities and integrating the needs of the elderly and also children

According to the report, making cities healthier requires clean and walkable environments, accessible health-care services, and infrastructure that improves the urban environment and promotes healthy lifestyles. All of these will help ease public health management in an era when infectious diseases such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, noncommunicable diseases, and the challenges of increasingly aging populations are converging, as is the case of the PRC. “Well-planned, decentralized, and conveniently located urban health services ideally within walking distance to many residents and public transport, early detection of infectious diseases, and measures for vulnerable groups such as the elderly can help reduce noncommunicable diseases, control infectious diseases, and promote well-being,” says ADB Health Specialist Najibullah Habib.

Cities need to combine an age-friendly public transport system with safe and convenient sidewalks, bicycle parking, parks, public spaces, and public service facilities. This effort needs to be integrated with universal urban design to ensure that public spaces, sidewalks, parks, and buildings are accessible for people of all ages and the physically impaired. This much-needed low-carbon, climate-resilient urban planning and design would also contribute to improved health from reduced emissions and lessened risk of climate-related disasters such as flooding, droughts, heat waves, and storm surges, which also endanger lives and safety. “Cities would greatly benefit if they govern, plan, and invest holistically in the promotion of public and community health, healthy lifestyles, gender and age equality, disease prevention, and improved social services,” says Susann Roth, ADB Chief of Knowledge Advisory Services Center.

Figure 1: A Hierarchy of Urban Health and Well-being





The report says healthy cities should first ensure that basic health needs are met (i.e., physiological needs and safety, and the elimination or reduction of exposure to infectious diseases). Then, healthy lifestyles and healthy communities should be promoted, and the risks of noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases and cancer should be reduced, resulting in longer life expectancies (Figure 1). Healthy cities should enable a high quality of living; healthy lifestyle choices that are easy to make; and the self-fulfillment of citizens, families, and communities. The planning of healthy cities should consider all aspects of physical and mental health, vibrant and diverse human interactions, and culture and education to ensure that all urban residents can develop to their full potential.

#### Operational framework

The framework combines two practical tools for urban planners and city governments: a health impact assessment (HIA) and a healthy and age-friendly city action and management plan (HACAMP) as step-by-step guide. The framework is applicable to existing urban areas and proposed urban master plans for new areas and projects. It builds on city health sector plans, fits within the context of sector operations and plans, and contributes to urban master development plans and local institutional arrangements and responsibilities. “While the initial target country of this report is the PRC, the objectives and framework developed here could also be applied to other

countries in Asia and the Pacific and beyond,” the report says. “They are highly relevant for cities at all development stages, especially given the recent pandemic and the demographic transition that has been occurring for some time.”

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## **Multilingual E-commerce Platform to Help China's Ethnic Farmers in Foreign Trade**

A multilingual e-commerce platform, available in Chinese, Uyghur, Tibetan, Mongolian and English, selling China's distinctive agricultural products has begun its trial run. The platform has been developed by Yu Hongzhi, a professor at Northwest Minzu University located in Gansu Province, and her team. Targeting Belt and Road countries, the platform is expected to facilitate cross-border trade for farmers from various ethnic groups and help more local specialties go global, according to the developers. Shining light on the platform's advantages, Yu said fruit farmers from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, for instance, could upload the information about Hami melon, the region's popular specialty, onto the platform in Uyghur, and English-speaking consumers could instantly browse its English version. More than 2,600 characteristic agricultural products from China are available on the e-commerce platform, including fruits, vegetables and milk. "Through this platform, we aim to break the language barrier in trade and help more Chinese farmers find new markets online, as well as facilitate trade with Belt and Road countries," Yu said. China's trade in goods with Belt and Road countries amounted to 1.35 trillion U.S. dollars in 2020, up 0.7 percent year on year, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

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## **China's Sharing Economy Turnover Grows 2.9 Pct in 2020: Report**

China's sharing economy demonstrated remarkable resilience and potential in 2020 amid the COVID-19 epidemic, with its market turnover up around 2.9 percent year on year, a report from the State Information Center showed. The total turnover of the market stood at around 3.38 trillion yuan (about 522.3 billion U.S. dollars) last year, according to the report on the development of China's sharing economy. In breakdown, the sharing economy in the areas of knowledge and skill as well as health care saw substantial market expansion, with the size of the market growing 30.9 percent and 27.8 percent year on year, respectively. Disrupted by the COVID-19 epidemic, the market size of sharing economy forms involving offline activities decreased. The market of shared accommodation, shared office and shared transport shrank 29.8 percent, 26 percent and 15.7 percent respectively from

2019, said the report. The report also expected the growth rate of the sharing economy to reach 10 percent to 15 percent this year considering the potential strong recovery of China's economy.

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## **Digital Economy Picks Up Steam in China's Guiyang**

The digital economy is picking up steam in Guiyang, capital of southwest China's Guizhou Province, authorities said. During the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), Guiyang's gross domestic product (GDP) registered an annual increase of 9 percent, with new economic forms, led by the digital economy, contributing 24 percent of the city's GDP last year, according to the city government. The city aims to bring the added value of its digital economy to more than 180 billion yuan (about 28 billion U.S. dollars) in 2021, according to Chen Yan, mayor of the city. As the heartland of China's first national big data comprehensive pilot zone, Guiyang aims to build industrial clusters featuring big data centers, electronic information manufacturing, and software and information technology services, Chen said.

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## **Xi Stresses High-quality, Sustainable Development of Social Security**

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, has stressed improving the social security system that covers the entire population and promoting high-quality and sustainable development of social security. Xi made the remarks while presiding over a group study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee on Friday. He urged efforts to intensify redistribution, strengthen mutual assistance, and have more people benefit from the social security system that will meet the multi-level and diversified demands of the people. Improvements should also be made to have a sustainable multi-level social security system which shall cover the country's entire population, coordinate the needs from urban and rural areas and be fair and unified, so as to further promote the sustainable and high-quality development of the country's social security undertakings, Xi said. Members of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee heard a report from an expert in the field and discussed related matters. Xi reviewed China's progress on establishing social security system since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, emphasizing the leadership of the CPC and the

institutional advantages of China's socialist society as well as the principles of putting the people first and pursuing common prosperity.

He urged summing up the experiences of previous successes and optimizing the country's social security system. Although China has basically established a fully-functional social security system that covers the largest population in the world, the country still needs to attach great importance to and make practical improvements on the weak links of the system, as the principal contradiction in Chinese society has evolved and urbanization, population aging and employment diversification are speeding up, Xi said. Social security is the most imminent and realistic issue the people care about, Xi said, making specific requirements on improving social security work during the 2021-2025 period. In the new development stage, China should have a strategic vision and meet people's expectations for a high-quality life, and increase risk awareness to make proper judgments in advance on new development trends such as population aging and changes in labor force structures, Xi noted.

Stressing that reforms in the sphere of social security should be advanced in a more systematic, coordinated, and efficient manner, Xi urged efforts to accelerate the building of a multi-level and multi-pillar endowment insurance system to meet people's diverse demands. While integrating social assistance in rural areas into the rural vitalization strategy, the country needs to improve elderly care services and social welfare for the physically challenged and orphans, Xi noted. In terms of laws and regulations in social security, Xi called for efforts to push forward the development of social security under the rule of law and strengthen related legislation. Xi also stressed the importance of improving social security governance by optimizing administration and improving the quality of service. China should summarize successful practices in COVID-19 prevention and control and improve social security emergency-response mechanisms against major risks.

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## **JAPAN: Bus Firm Gears Up for Teleworking Service**

Tokyu Bus Corp. will start operating a “shared office” bus service this month for telecommuters who need to work on the move. Equipped with free internet access, the bus will make a round trip once a day between a commuter town in Kanagawa Prefecture and central Tokyo on weekdays from Feb. 16 to April 28. The service will depart from Tokyu Ichigao Station in Yokohama at 8:45 a.m., stopping at Tama-Plaza and Shibuya stations before arriving at Tokyo Station at 10:45 a.m. The bus will depart from Tokyo Station at 4:25 p.m. for the return leg, and arrive at Ichigao Station at 5:55 p.m. Tokyu Bus expects the service to attract employees who are commuting to their offices about once a week and may want to use the travel time to do work. A

one-way ticket between Ichigao Station and Tokyo Station is ¥1,600. Reservations are required in advance. The number of services that allow people to telework while on the move is increasing. Earlier this month, East Japan Railway Co. introduced Shinkansen train cars in which passengers are allowed to make phone calls or participate in online meetings.

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## **Concerns over Monopolization by IT Giants Expressed in JFTC Report**

Strong concerns about monopolization and oligopoly by IT giants such as Google of the United States were expressed in the final report on digital advertising released by the Japan Fair Trade Commission (JFTC). In the report, which was released on Wednesday, the JFTC called on IT giants to make voluntary efforts to prevent possible violations of antitrust laws and opaque transactions. The report clearly states that Google may not only be engaged in unfair trade but also become a monopoly that impedes competition, saying, "The risk of antitrust problems as a private monopoly is increasing." Google has a 70-80% share of the "search-linked" advertising market, overwhelming that of Yahoo Japan Corp., which accounts for 20-30%. Google also has an edge in other forms of digital advertising.

Google's source of strength comes from having a business model, which dominates the entire digital advertising industry. In addition to a search engine that displays ads and social media such as YouTube, the company is also involved in the advertising intermediary business, receiving orders from companies that wish to advertise, as well as the construction of advertising systems. This is known as a "vertically integrated" business model. Facebook of the United States and Yahoo also operate powerful social media and search engines, and they have large market shares. The report revealed the superiority of IT giants to advertising brokers and media outlets in business. Such cases included unilateral agreements that allowed IT giants to abruptly shut down their services, in addition to IT giants restricting advertising brokers and media outlets from doing business with other IT giants.

In response to the concerns raised by the JFTC, IT giants stressed that they are not doing anything detrimental to their business partners but they are taking necessary measures. For example, regarding claims by their business partners that there were unilateral changes to contracts, IT giants justified their actions by saying the changes were "aimed at improving services and maintaining security," or "to deal with any violations of the terms of service." Even in the case of system changes, IT giants claimed that they provide sufficient transition periods. In response, the JFTC called for sufficient explanations to be given to business partners when changing contracts

or systems, and for business partners to be provided with opportunities to express their opinions. The JFTC also noted that it is desirable for IT giants to take into account any rational reason why a business partner cannot accept a change. “Problematic behaviors will hinder technological innovation. We expect IT giants to make improvements voluntarily,” Shuichi Sugahisa, the secretary general of the JFTC, said at a press conference on Wednesday.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 02/18/2021

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## **Govt. Lowers Assessment of Japan Economy**

Japan's government has downgraded its assessment of the economy for the first time in 10 months, saying a state of emergency for the coronavirus has hit spending. Officials say there is weakness in some parts of the economy, although it continues to show signs of picking up overall. They lowered their assessment of private consumption for the third month in a row in their February report. They noted people are spending less at restaurants as the pandemic continues to bite. On the other hand, the report says business investment is showing upward momentum as auto-related spending accelerates. Officials say imports are also showing signs of improvement, with people splashing out on appliances as they stay at home more. Looking ahead, officials warn of the continued impact of the pandemic as it keeps casting its shadow over the economy.

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## **Consider Making Digital Textbooks Free for Elementary, Junior High Schools in Japan, Panel Says**

Consideration into whether digital textbooks will be provided free just like printed textbooks is being called for by an expert panel of the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry. The panel, in its draft interim report drawn up Monday, wants the discussions to be based on a nationwide digital textbook demonstration project to be implemented from the 2021 school year, which starts in April. The education ministry is looking into the full-scale introduction of digital textbooks, so the panel is also considering what the new textbook screening system should entail. The interim report is scheduled to be published in March, after which the ministry will solicit opinions from the public. Currently, only printed textbooks are distributed free to elementary and junior high schools. Digital textbooks, which display on a terminal the same content as printed versions, have been available as teaching materials for classes since the 2019 school year.

In the draft interim report, the 2024 school year, when elementary school textbooks

are next revised, is positioned as the “first opportunity” for the full-scale introduction of digital textbooks. It also noted that printed textbooks “have supported the foundation of school education” and are superior in their ease of browsing. The panel proposed five options for the use of digital textbooks, from all digital to combined use with printed versions to leaving the choice up to local governments. Based on the demonstration projects and their popularity, the panel asked the government to consider whether to include digital textbooks in the free textbook program. As for making video and audio elements of digital textbooks subject to new textbook screening, the draft report said, “It is appropriate to consider this issue with an eye on the screening cycle scheduled for the 2025 to the 2028 school years.”

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## **SOUTH KOREA: Suffering Biggest Job Loss Since 1998**

South Korea suffered its biggest monthly job loss in over two decades in January due to the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Statistics Korea on Wednesday, the number of employed people reached 25-point-81 million last month, down 982-thousand from a year earlier. That's the largest drop since December 1998 when it shed one-point-28 million. The nation has reported job losses for eleven straight months since March of last year, the longest decline after it posted losses for 16 months from January 1998 to April 1999. The employment rate for those aged 15 and older slipped by two-point-six percentage points on-year to 57-point-four percent, the lowest figure for any January since 2011. The country's jobless rate rose by one-point-six percentage points on-year to five-point-seven percent last month. The number of jobless people soared by 417-thousand on-year to one-point-57 million last month, the largest since June 1999, when the nation started compiling related data.

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## **Telcos Pin Hope on Further 5G Adoption This Year**

South Korean mobile carriers are aiming for mass user migration to 5G networks this year after failing to meet their subscriber targets in 2020 amid the pandemic. The country ended last year with a total 11.85 million 5G subscribers, with SK Telecom Co., the country's largest wireless carrier, leading the pack with 5.48 million users, followed by KT Corp. at 3.62 million and LG Uplus Corp. at 2.75 million, according to ICT ministry data. The total figure fell short of initial forecasts of around 15 million made before the COVID-19 outbreak, which weighed on user growth in the first half of the year. Telecom operators are banking on mass migration to the latest generation networks this year as they seek to boost their earnings. Early this month,



SK Telecom said in a conference call that it targets 9 million 5G users this year, while smaller rival LG Uplus said it aims for 4 million. KT forecast its 5G users to account for 45 percent of its total handset subscribers, compared with 25 percent last year.

Subscriber counts on 5G networks are a key growth factor for local mobile carriers given costlier monthly data plans. Even with disappointing user growth last year, telecom operators reported robust annual earnings, with SK Telecom's 2020 operating profit rising 21.8 percent on-year to 1.35 trillion won (US\$1.2 billion). The companies have also recently diversified their 5G data plans, offering cheaper alternatives that cut costs by solely using online retail channels. KT said in its fourth-quarter conference call that the cheaper plans will lead to overall growth in its average revenue per user by spurring migration of low-cost plan subscribers to previous networks. "Resistance to 5G migration has been removed by the release of affordable plans, and subscriber growth is expected to continue this year," IBK Securities analyst Kim Jang-won said.

Upbeat subscriber forecasts also come as the country's 5G networks have matured since their commercialization in April 2019. While the networks were initially criticized for spotty connections and slower-than-expected speeds, they have improved. South Korea had the fastest 5G download speeds globally at 354.4 megabits per second and placed second in terms of the proportion of time 5G users stayed connected to the network after Kuwait, according to a report earlier this month from mobile analytics company OpenSignal. The three companies have also promised to focus on adopting new 5G technology this year, such as millimeter wave (mmWave) 5G, which promises faster speeds, and a standalone version of the network, which does not require support from previous 4G networks. The three telecom operators are racing to install nationwide 5G coverage ahead of a government deadline set for next year and promised last year to spend up to 25.7 trillion won to update network infrastructure by 2022.

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## **S. Korea's Online Food Market Grows Explosively in 2020 amid Pandemic**

South Korea's online food market posted explosive growth in 2020 from a year earlier due to the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, data showed Monday. The value of online food transactions in Asia's fourth-largest economy came to 43.4 trillion won (US\$39.2 billion) last year, up 62.4 percent from a year earlier, according to the data from Statistics Korea and industry sources. The online food market surpassed the 40 trillion-won mark last year after reaching 26.7 trillion won the previous year. Last year's surge was attributed to a marked increase in contact-free consumption in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. The tally covers online



transactions of food, groceries, farm produce, meat and fisheries goods, as well as food delivery services. Mobile shopping stood at 35.1 trillion won, or 70 percent of the total, with internet shopping taking up the remainder. Industry sources said food companies are beefing up efforts to catch up with soaring online shopping due to the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

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## **Gov't to Increase Number of Eco-Friendly Cars, Reduce Emissions by 2030**

The South Korean government has vowed to increase the number of eco-friendly vehicles in the country to seven-point-85 million and reduce car emissions by 24 percent by 2030, in line with its vision to go carbon neutral by 2050. The announcement came on Thursday as a part of the government's five-year plan on promoting eco-friendly vehicles. The government is seeking to increase the number of eco-friendly cars from 820-thousand last year to seven-point-85 million by 2030, requiring all vehicles used in the public sector to be eco-friendly. A purchasing target system will be introduced for car rental businesses and conglomerates, while subsidies and incentives will be expanded for operators of taxis, buses and trucks. The government will increase the number of charging stations to more than 500-thousand by 2025, allowing at least one charger for every two vehicles. Vehicle prices are aimed to be reduced by at least ten million won per unit by 2025, through localization of parts, extended tax benefits and the introduction of a battery lease program.

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## **S. Korea Expands Public Wi-Fi Availability**

South Korea's ICT ministry said Wednesday it made over 15,000 new public Wi-Fi service zones available across the country and in buses last year, bringing the total locations with free public Wi-Fi to over 57,000. The Ministry of Science and ICT said the public can access free Wi-Fi in 28,132 public locations, such as bus stations, public facilities and parks, and also in 29,100 buses. By region, there are 2,529 public Wi-Fi locations in Seoul, with 4,358 locations in the surrounding Gyeonggi Province, according to the ICT ministry. South Korea has recently boosted efforts to expand public Wi-Fi zones that had previously been limited to indoor facilities, such as community centers and traditional markets. The ICT ministry said it has focused on outdoor locations, installing free Wi-Fi at 7,949 bus stations, 1,286 parks and 320 major streets across the country from 2019 to 2020. The ministry has also replaced

18,000 aging routers with the latest Wi-Fi 6 equipment, resulting in speeds that are three times faster on average. The ministry said it plans to establish 15,000 additional public Wi-Fi zones this year.

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## **S. Korea Suffers 1st Population Decline Last Year on Record Low Births**

South Korea reported the first natural decline in population last year as the number of deaths outpaced that of newborns amid the country's rapid aging and chronic low birth rate, data showed Wednesday. The number of newborns came to a record low of 272,400 last year, down 10 percent, or 30,300, from a year earlier, according to preliminary data provided by the Statistics Korea. Last year, an all-time high of 305,100 people died, up 3.4 percent, or 10,000, from the previous year. This resulted in a decline of 33,000 in the country's population. The number of deaths topped that of newborns here in what's called a "dead cross" phenomenon for the first time since 1970, when the statistics agency began compiling related data. This means the country's population will naturally decline. South Korea is struggling with a decline in childbirths as many young people delay marriage or give up on getting married or having babies amid a prolonged economic slowdown. "A natural fall in the population could accelerate as the number of marriages sharply declined last year amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which will likely reduce childbirths further," Kim Su-young, a Statistics Korea official, said at a press briefing.

The country's total fertility rate -- the average number of children a woman bears in her lifetime -- hit a new record low of 0.84 in 2020, down from 0.92 the previous year. It marked the third straight year that the rate dropped below 1 percent. South Korea was the only country whose total fertility rate stayed below 1 percent among 37 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As of 2018, the average fertility rate among OECD nations came to 1.63. The country's crude birth rate -- the number of births per 1,000 people per year -- also reached an all-time low of 5.3 last year, down from 5.9 the previous year. A fall in the fertility rate is feared to accelerate the country's so-called demographic cliff: a major drop in the working population amid the low birth rate. The country is also expected to cross the threshold of a super-aged society in 2025, in which the proportion of those aged 65 or older will hit 20 percent of the total population. South Korea became an aged society in 2017. The government earlier forecast the country's total population, currently estimated at 51.6 million, to peak in 2028 and start to fall the following year. The total population is calculated based on the number of childbirths and deaths and the immigration trend.

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## South-East Asia

### **CAMBODIA: PM Signs Sub-Decree on Establishing National Internet Gateway**

Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen has signed a sub-decree on establishing the National Internet Gateway (NIG) with the aim of facilitating and managing online traffic. The sub-decree, signed on Tuesday and released to the media on Wednesday, said a NIG operator, which will be appointed by the government, will set up a one-stop system to bring all overseas internet connections through a single point. "The establishment of the NIG is to facilitate and manage domestic and international internet connections, to enhance national revenue collection effectively, to protect national security and to maintain social order," the sub-decree said. It added that the NIG operator, in cooperation with relevant authorities, would take action in blocking and disconnecting all network connections that affect national revenue, safety, social order, dignity, culture, tradition and custom. The Southeast Asian nation has seen a rapid rise in internet users in recent years. According to the Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia, the kingdom has six mobile internet and 37 fixed internet service providers. The country has about 14.8 million mobile internet subscribers and 249,132 fixed internet subscribers. Also, it has roughly 10.9 million Facebook users.

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### **THAILAND: High Uncertainty Weighs on Thai Economic Outlook - Central Bank**

Thailand's economic outlook remained highly uncertain with considerable downside risks, the Bank of Thailand, the country's central bank, said Wednesday. Although the impact of the recent COVID-19 outbreak on the economy would be less severe than last year, the pace of recovery would be slower and more uneven among sectors and firms, the central bank said in a statement on its website. The public sector should implement sufficient, targeted and front-loaded measures to offset the negative impact on the economy, it said. On Feb. 3, the central bank held the policy rate unchanged at 0.5 percent, its sixth straight hold, to support the economic recovery in the Southeast Asian country. "The problem facing the Thai economy was less about the level of the policy interest rate as lending rates and bond yields were already at a record low," the central bank said. It vowed to preserve the limited policy space to act at the appropriate and most effective timing to maximize its effectiveness. Thailand's economy contracted 6.1 percent in 2020, the sharpest decline since 1998. It is projected to rise 2.5 to 3.5 percent this year, according to the

National Economic and Social Development Council. As of Wednesday, the country's total COVID-19 caseload rose to 24,961, with more than 20,000 of the infections being detected since the new wave of the coronavirus outbreak erupted in mid-December.

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## **VIETNAM: E-Wallets Offer Online Lucky Money Services amid Virus Outbreak**

E-wallets are gearing up to offer online lucky money services as the Tết (Lunar New Year) holiday approaches amid the third coronavirus outbreak in Việt Nam. Online lucky money was implemented with the spirit of preserving the tradition of giving small amounts of money in a red envelope to children for good luck in the new year and promoting cashless payments. SmartPay, an e-wallet with about 3.7 million users, said that it implemented the online lucky money services from January to February 21. With each transfer of lucky money, users would receive a number for a lucky draw. Momo is implementing online lucky money services for the third year running, from January 28 to March 5. For each transfer of online lucky money, Momo users would get the chance to win gifts or vouchers. ViettelPay and AirPay would start this service this week. According to Nguyễn Bá Diệp, co-founder and deputy chairman of Momo, the online lucky money service with promotions aimed to contribute to creating the habit of limiting the use of cash and small notes during Tết holiday.

Diệp said that this was also an opportunity for goods and services suppliers and the e-wallet's partners to approach 23 million Momo users. For AirPay which was a part of the ecosystem of Shopee, the online lucky money service also aimed to promote shopping and consumption on this e-commerce platform. Trương Văn Quý, director of online marketing firm EQVN, said the online lucky money service would bring two major benefits, attracting new users and implementing promotions provided by the e-wallets and partner retailers. The online lucky money service was also a part of the effort to limit the use of cash and small notes during Tết, especially in the COVID-19 outbreak. Recently, the Monetary Authority of Singapore was calling on residents to digitalise cash gifts for the Lunar New Year as a "new normal" after the onset of the pandemic with the expectation that it would help prevent the spread of the virus by discouraging crowds and also is good for the environment because the number of new bills issued could be reduced. Quý said this was the way to go. However, it would take time to create the habit of using digital money.

Currently, online lucky money is mainly popular among young people. First introduced in China by WeChat and Tencent in 2014, online lucky money became popular. Statistics by Statista showed that about 823 million people received digital

cash gifts for the Lunar New Year in 2019. Experts also said that it was necessary to develop an ecosystem for digital money. A recent report by global payments technology company Visa showed that the COVID-19 pandemic was changing the habit of small-sized enterprises. More than 28 per cent started to implement marketing on social media, 27 per cent of products and services were sold online and 20 per cent accepted online and card payments. A report by the Ministry of Planning and Investment showed that banking transfers remained the most dominant payment method in global trade every year, equivalent to US\$330 billion. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) needed to start with the integration of payment solutions into their operations to optimise efficiency.

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## **Hybrid Model, The New Rising Trend in Office Market**

A hybrid working model comprising both remote and office-based work is a trend that many companies will embrace since working methods have changed globally after the pandemic broke out, including in Việt Nam, experts have predicted. In a note on trends in the property market this year, property consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) said a year of lockdowns that forced people to work from home showed many tasks could be done remotely, spurring companies to adopt new, hybrid working models. The shift was already underway at many businesses, but was accelerated by COVID-19 like many other things, it said. “In 2020 a work from home experiment took place globally and showed that businesses can continue to operate effectively by leveraging technology” Paul Fisher, country head of JLL Vietnam, said. “But for many, the lack of face-to-face interaction has put pressure on teams and whilst a number of our clients expect to adopt flexible working practices in the future, for the majority this will include the office remaining the central point for business activities.”

But many aspects of work would not change, the note said. People would still need to collaborate, innovate and liaise with managers on projects and their careers, a reason why people missed the office, and it was why for many offices would retain a central role in corporate life. The office still existed as the best and most convenient place for team building and connecting with management. WeWork predicted at an ongoing roundtable on office trends in the region that beyond economic pressures and realities that enterprises face, tapping new workspace strategies is crucial for future-proofing themselves in a volatile climate. Amidst the changing face of its enterprises, Southeast Asia is seeing a shift towards flexible workspaces bridging enterprises’ challenges and opportunities, it said. Talking about the future of the workplace after the pandemic, Elizabeth Fuller, the company’s head of growth, SEA, said after a year of pandemic working from home might be an alternative option for many companies.

But this is not sustainable for businesses in the long term, she claimed. In the workplace, innovation, creativity and organisational health hinges on successful collaboration, and a loss of these would hinder sustained business performance, employee engagement and organisational health in the long run, she said. The new work order would thus be a hybrid of flexible workplace arrangements, she said. She cited the example of two Fortune 500 companies that have expanded their presence with WeWork across several buildings by establishing a headquarter presence in one location and supporting functions and business units in the others. “They have leveraged our CBD presence, with locations in close proximity to each other. This allows them to scale accordingly without having to renegotiate existing real estate commitment, implement distributed workforce as a safety measure and also enjoy engagement.” Property consultancy CBRE said the pandemic has changed the structure of office demand. Due to COVID-19, technology and online shopping utilisation have increased significantly, which led to the expansion of e-commerce companies last year, it reported.

The pandemic has also changed the real estate strategies of occupiers. Previously employees were heavily relying on being in office, but are now more willing to work in different spaces. Phạm Ngọc Thiên Thanh, associate director, CBRE Vietnam, said: “COVID-19 has reshaped the market’s dynamics, and unaffected sectors will drive market demand in 2021. “Besides, tenants will start paying more attention to all factors including saving rental costs, ensuring employees’ wellness and maintaining business performance. “To do that, occupiers tend to adopt a hybrid workplace model, designing offices with lower density and also diversifying the workplace into different sites such as decentralised options and co-working spaces. “The market will be intensely competitive in the next two years with a wave of new supply. To stay ahead of the competition, landlords should consider applying workplace strategy tools to evaluate current strengths and deficiencies of their buildings to come up with an optimal solution to increase their assets’ values.” The HCM City office market remained in a deep slump last year due to COVID, which badly affected many enterprises. It witnessed negative net absorption of - 20,544sq.m of leasing area. Three new office buildings came into the market, Friendship Tower (grade B), UOA Tower (decentralised grade A) and Opal Tower (grade B), with a combined 65,372sq.m of net leasing area, but it represented a fall of 31 per cent in area compared to the previous three years.

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## **HCM City Primary Schools Flexible with Their Online Learning**

Primary schools in HCM City are adopting various online learning tools and resources amid the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nguyễn Lê Thanh Tuyền, a first-grade teacher at the Đồng Đa primary school in Tân Bình

District, said teachers were using videos, PDFs and Word documents to design lessons. Video lessons were uploaded on the school's website and parents can download them, she said. Teachers also designed homework assignments on Word and sent them to parents on social networks, she said. Most parents were co-operative and arranged time after work to download the lessons, she added. This approach combining offline lessons and discussions on social networks between teachers and parents is preferred by many primary schools since young kids can find online classes with dozens of students difficult to focus on. A principal at a primary school in District 6 said teachers uploaded video lessons of all subjects on the school's website every Monday and students would have to submit their homework within a week. Parents could opt for weekday evenings or weekends to help their children with it, the principal said. Other primary schools offer daily online classes, but many parents have a legitimate complaint that it is hard for them to sit with their children in the morning and afternoon since they are busy at work. Từ Quốc Tuấn, principal of Lương Định Của primary school in District 3, said that only important subjects such as mathematics, Vietnamese and foreign languages were taught online for first, second and third graders to keep their workload down. "It is tough for young students to focus on online classes without adults' assistance," he said. "Offline video lessons make it easier for parents to arrange time to help their kids," he added. The city Department of Education and Training said online learning was designed using various tools and resources and delivered at the most convenient time for students.

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## **Foreign Investment Tops \$5.46b In Jan-Feb**

Foreign investors poured US\$5.46 billion into Việt Nam in the first two months of this year, a year-on-year decrease of 15.6 per cent, according to the Foreign Investment Agency (FIA). Up to 126 new projects were granted investment licences during the period, down 75 per cent year-on-year while the registered capital topped \$3.31 billion, plunging 34 per cent compared to the same period last year which saw the \$4 billion Bạc Liêu LNG-to-power project from Singapore licensed. However, if the project was excluded, total investment this month would be 83 per cent higher than last year, the FIA said. It added 115 existing projects were allowed to add capital totaling \$1.62 billion, representing a yearly slump of 24 per cent in the number of projects but 2.5 times higher in level of capital. Meanwhile, capital contributions and shares purchased by foreign investors stood at over \$543 million, down 34.4 per cent. The resurgence of COVID-19 in many countries including Việt Nam has affected investors' travel as well as their decisions in making new investments and in project expansion. Therefore, the number of new projects, the level of capital added into operating projects and their capital contributions and share purchases in two months of 2021 both decreased over last year's corresponding period, the FIA noted.



In a bright spot, however, FDI disbursement saw a slight increase of 2 per cent to an estimated \$2.5 billion, it said, attributing this encouraging figure to business recovery of foreign companies and their efforts in ensuring production amid the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Foreign investors pumped capital into 17 sectors in the period, with processing and manufacturing holding the lead at nearly \$3 billion, representing 56 per cent of the total. Electricity production and distribution ranked second with \$1.44 billion or 26.5 per cent, followed by real estate and science and technology with \$485 million and nearly \$153 million, respectively. Japan surpassed Singapore to become Việt Nam's largest source of FDI with \$1.64 billion, accounting for 30 per cent of the total. Singapore came next with \$1.07 billion or 19.6 per cent while South Korea was third with \$1.05 billion or 19.3 per cent, followed by mainland China, Hong Kong and the US. As of February 20, the country is home to 33,215 valid foreign-invested projects, worth \$388.8 billion. Over half of the total has been disbursed.

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## **E-Commerce to Continue Booming in 2021**

The Vietnamese e-commerce market is forecast to continue to boom in 2021, with revenue surpassing last year's figure. A report by the Việt Nam e-Commerce and Digital Economy Agency (iDEA) under the Ministry of Industry and Trade showed that with 53 per cent of the population participating in online shopping, the e-commerce market in Việt Nam grew 18 per cent, reaching \$11.8 billion last year, accounting for 5.5 per cent of total retail sales of consumer goods and services nationwide. Nguyễn Thế Quang, the agency's deputy director, said e-commerce had had an impressive year of growth and would continue to explode this year and beyond. According to the national master plan on e-commerce development in 2021-2025, by 2025, up to 55 per cent of the population will participate in online shopping, with the average value of online purchases of goods and services reaching US\$600 per person annually. The revenue of the B2C e-commerce model increases by 25 per cent each year, reaching \$35 billion, accounting for 10 per cent of the total retail sales of goods and services in the whole country.

Việt Nam has a growth rate of retail market share among the top three countries in the region. From 2015 up to now, the growth rates of the three largest internet economies in the region have averaged 35 - 36 per cent, of which, Việt Nam grew by 36 per cent, Indonesia 41 per cent, and the Philippines 30 per cent. Nielsen research shows that, since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the demand for shopping on e-commerce floors has increased sharply. Last year, 70 per cent of Vietnamese people had access to the internet and 53 per cent of e-wallet users made payments when buying online, up 28 per cent compared to 2019. In Hà Nội and HCM City,



e-commerce activities grew strongly and accounted for 70 per cent of the total number of e-commerce transactions of the country. According to Amazon Việt Nam, Vietnamese sellers exceeded \$1 million in sales on Amazon last year, a three-fold increase from 2019. Experts predicted e-commerce would continue to thrive in this year and created a new impetus for economic growth, at the same time, this was also an opportunity for Vietnamese businesses to build new business strategies and approach modern distribution channels, helping to expand markets and recover from the pandemic.

Amid digital transformation and the development of the online shopping market, iDEA has implemented the Online Vietnamese Store programme on three major e-commerce floors in Việt Nam, including Tiki, Sendo and Voso. The programme has created a new playground for manufacturing enterprises to develop distribution systems with digital transformation solutions and apply e-commerce and digital technologies in connecting the domestic market. Đặng Hoàng Hải, director of iDEA, said the agency would implement the GoOnline programme to accompany businesses in the e-commerce application process. The programme has the companionship of telecommunications, technology and e-commerce systems in the country, targeting manufacturers, businesses and individuals nationwide who want to access and apply e-commerce. Promoting e-commerce in parallel with perfecting the electronic payment system and improving the quality of shipping activities would create a very exciting and potential shopping and trading environment.

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## South Asia

### **INDIA: Going Online Is a Necessity No More an Option**

“E-governance was there from the past 15 to 20 years but the COVID pandemic has flagged it as the most essential thing in governance,” Sarvesh Kaushal, Former Chief Secretary to the Government of Punjab, opened his address on this note. “Physical contact has to be minimised for combating the pandemic. There is no way that any government or any organisation can ignore the online handling of its systems or online delivery when everything has to be done contactless one has to go online. G2C and B2C services have no option but to digitise,” he highlighted. Pandemic is a tragedy but for the IT applications, it posed as the biggest opportunity, Kaushal added. When asked about the challenges that the Government faced initially in implementing the IT applications, he answered, “Initially we lacked the backbone infrastructure. We did not have efficient connectivity and in many areas, there was no connectivity at all. Also, there existed huge digital illiteracy earlier. In addition, the hardware was not pocket-friendly, unmanageable in terms of size and was not even available easily.” Unfortunately, there was not an equitable spread of IT

transformation and most of it was through central funding which started diminishing with time. The institutionalised and standardised growth of IT was missing and this caused regional imbalances, he added. Speaking on the growth of IT in the past few years, Kaushal said that there have been excellent models of growth but unfortunately most of them have been silos. "So we are basically reinventing the wheel simultaneously at different places, synergy and integration are lacking." There should be a national policy and a state policy which should be consistent, considering the next 20 to 30 years' vision, deliberated Kaushal. Pointing out a few solutions, Kaushal said, "There is a need to devise an open-source mechanism which allows integration of efforts so that officers (district/ city leaders or policymakers) do not end up reinventing the wheel every third year." Emphasising on integration and knowledge sharing, he added, "When some solution is being implemented in Delhi or Kerala and when it is adopted in Patna, then Patna should not start from scratch but it should start from the level where Delhi is at present."

The national response to the COVID pandemic has brought out the best response in any country including India. The basic governance gets toned up in such times. If all the wheels of governance doing their individual jobs in a complete synergy then technology can be applied to their efforts so that their service delivery becomes effortless and contactless, he pointed out. On the way forward, Kaushal said, "I visualise a quantum jump as the issues are clearly flagged now, especially after COVID, however, for this we need apt manpower and liberal funds from the Centre. The potential to grow is now being tapped with all the goals, challenges, probable outcomes, clearly flagged. Also, the new generation of officers are digitally literate and hence, I see the next five years will be a revolution in the application of IT in governance."

From <http://egov.eletsonline.com> 02/01/2021

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## **Microsoft Imparts Digital Skills to 7.7 lakh Indians in Pandemic**

Microsoft on Wednesday announced it has trained close to 774,000 learners in India as part of its global skills initiative launched in June this year, to help 25 million people worldwide gain more digital skills in the pandemic-hit year. In the three months since the launch, Microsoft, its professional networking platform LinkedIn and open source repository GitHub have reached 10 million learners in 231 countries and territories. Across 21 markets in Asia Pacific, more than 1.5 million learners across 21 markets in Asia Pacific have been reached to date. "Addressing and closing the skills gap is an urgent task, key to inclusive economic recovery and digital transformation," said Dr Rohini Srivathsa, National Technology Officer, Microsoft India. "While we are close to the halfway point of our goal to help 25 million people globally, we continue to strive in our commitment to drive societal progress and help improve lives of people in India by advancing their capabilities and expertise". Within

India, the top learning paths are software developer, data analyst and digital marketing specialist. Globally, the most popular in-demand learning paths are software developer, customer service specialist, and data analyst. Microsoft on June 30 announced the global skills initiative to help 25 million people worldwide acquire new digital skills by the end of the year. The announcement comes in response to the global economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. "Covid-19 has created both a public health and an economic crisis, and as the world recovers, we need to ensure no one is left behind," said Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella.

"We're bringing together resources from Microsoft inclusive of LinkedIn and GitHub to reimagine how people learn and apply new skills -- and help 25 million people facing unemployment due to COVID-19 prepare for the jobs of the future". Earlier this month, Microsoft joined hands with industry-driven learning ecosystem Nasscom FutureSkills to launch a nation-wide initiative that aims to skill 10 lakh students in Artificial Intelligence (AI) by 2021. Commenced from September 21, the initiative called "AI Classroom Series" will be placed in three modules. The online classes will include live demos, hands-on workshops and assignments through self-learning, virtual instructor-led training, and mentoring.

From <https://www.siliconindia.com> 02/02/2021

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## **Fighting Nation-State Cyber Adversaries: Wait Until It Hits or Re-think the Approach**

Late last year, the world saw Sunburst/Solorigate cyberattacks against government agencies and global enterprises where the malware attacked organizations via the supply chain through a compromised networking program. Like our peers, Forcepoint also pushed out protection updates to help mitigate the attack and protect our customers as soon as details emerged, writes Nicolas Fischbach, Global CTO & VPE SASE, Forcepoint. While there is still much that potentially remains unknown, one thing is clear: fighting these cyber adversaries requires re-thinking of the security approach. In most cases, our adversaries' goal is more than monetary. It is to infiltrate, learn by staying under the radar and finally to exfiltrate sensitive data. Sometimes it is to prepare for future disruption or cause direct havoc. Nation-state adversaries, in particular, are well funded and able to mount complex operations to circumvent multiple layers of protection. Further compounding this challenge, they are also evolving their tactics more quickly than most organizations can fortify their security, detection and response posture for these modern-day threats. (On a side note, often the attackers fail to protect themselves with good OPSEC and it's not uncommon to see multiple actors ride on each other's compromise or failing to notice that they are themselves being watched.) When we look at the last 10 years and the many headline-making breaches that have been reported, the common denominator in all of them is the exfiltration of data for direct or indirect financial gain.

The reality is that breaches often follow the same modus operandi. But first, let's take a trip down memory lane. What has changed is the level of sophistication in how the attackers come through the door, be it yours or the cloud services', become persistent or have a way to return in the environment, and the tricks they employ to exfiltrate critical data "under the radar". And, as we saw in the Sunburst attack, sophisticated attackers have the patience to lie in wait for months or even years before they execute their plan. Using that time to learn about your network, your users, and, more importantly, where all the digital crown jewels are stored. Given the attackers were discovered months after they first gained access to target government and enterprise networks via a supply chain attack in March 2020, we will likely never know the full extent of the Sunburst attack. However, it is clear that the scope is large and the victims represent important pillars of global governments, the economy and critical infrastructure. With the information stolen from those systems, or malware these criminals have likely left behind, we can expect it to be used for follow-on attacks in the years to come both in the digital and in the physical world. Gartner predicts 75 per cent of CEOs will be personally liable for Cyber-Physical Security (CPS) incidents by 2024. Gartner predicts that the financial impact of CPS attacks resulting in fatal casualties will reach over \$50 billion by 2023. Even without taking the actual value of human life into the equation, the costs for organisations in terms of compensation, litigation, insurance, regulatory fines and reputation loss will be significant. So, what is the modern security path forward when infrastructure security is not enough? Does a complete shift needed in how the industry, government agencies and enterprises approach security today? If so, then a holistic approach to security is required in today's modern threat landscape and cloud era – one that understands network, cloud, and in particular users and the critical data they create, interact with, share and store.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/03/2021

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## **Ram Vilas Paswan Integrates Ladakh & Lakshadweep Under 'One Nation One Ration Card'**

Recently, while reviewing the progress of the implementation of 'One Nation One Ration Card' plan, the Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Ram Vilas Paswan also took note of the requisite technical readiness of Union Territories of Ladakh and Lakshadweep and approved the integration of the two UTs with existing national portability cluster of 24 States/UTs. Both the UTs have completed the trial and testing of national portability transactions with other States/UTs in the national cluster. Following the addition of the two UTs, a total of 26 States/UTs are now seamlessly connected with each other under the 'One Nation One Ration Card' plan. Also, with the new plan, the migratory PDS beneficiaries in these 26 States/UTs can access their subsidised foodgrains at the same scale and

Central Issue Prices from any Fair Price Shop (FPS) of their choice w.e.f. September 1, 2020. A total of more than 65 crore beneficiaries in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Ladakh, Lakshadweep, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Telangana, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, are now potentially enabled with an option to lift their subsidised foodgrains through 'One Nation One Ration Card' system. Remaining States/UTs are targeted to be integrated in national portability by March 2021.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 02/03/2021

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## **UP Govt Asks Centre to Build Eklavya Schools in 4 More Districts**

In an effort to improve literacy among the underprivileged sect of the society, the Government of Uttar Pradesh has sent a proposal to the Centre to build Eklavya Model Residential Schools. The state government proposes the schools to come up in Lucknow, Sonbhadra, Bijnor and Shravasti districts of Uttar Pradesh. The Eklavya Model Residential Schools have brought into existence with an objective to provide quality education along with residential accommodation to children from economically weaker sections and tribal regions of the state. In the Union Budget 2021 released on February 1, the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the setting up of additional 750 such schools across the country. Considering Uttar Pradesh, Eklavya schools are currently running in Bahraich and Lakhimpur districts and one more is under construction at Lalitpur in Bundelkhand. As reported by a national daily, Sonbhadra district has a considerable tribal population and the government has already allocated funds for opening Eklavya schools in the district. However, the state government has sent the proposal to the Centre to build such schools in Lucknow, Bijnor and Shravasti districts as well, stated a government spokesperson.

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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> 02/08/2021

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## **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.

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 02/14/2021

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## **Making Power Infra Smart & Sustainable**

Intelligent power systems equipped with advanced technology is a sustainable alternative to the traditional power infrastructure in use today, deliberated Mrityunjay Kumar Narayan, Joint Secretary, Transmission & IT, Ministry of Power, Government of India, in a chat session themed 'Intelligent Energy for a Sustainable Future' at the

Digital Governance Cloud & AI Summit with Navtez Bal, Executive Director Public Sector, Microsoft India. Narayanan touched on the 'Saubhagya' scheme of the Central government wherein the government plans to provide electricity connections to all the households. He said, "Access was a bit of an issue as many households were not connected. However, in a short span of 15 to 16 months we connected 27.5 million households, it was a noteworthy achievement for the Ministry." Now, it can be said that all the households are connected, he added. Continuing on the project, he said, "The Ministry is now taking steps to ensure 24×7 qualitative and reliable supply of power." In addition, Narayanan highlighted, "Improving the quality and reliability of power supply is not possible without a massive application of technology. So, we have to use technologies like AI, big data, machine learning, etc. and these play a critical role in improving the quality of the power supply." Further, he spoke on 'One Nation One Grid' saying that this basically unites the five major regional grids and forms a large synchronous grid. With this in place, there is massive inter regional supply capacity of 1 Lakh MegaWatt (MW) for the entire nation. Also, now the generator need not have to be within a specific state boundary but can be allocated anywhere across the country.

Adding on he highlighted, "For the grid, stability is most important. The power that is being induced in the system has to be stabilised minute to minute as per the demands. Also, generators are placed at different places far and wide and they are too many in number. This requires load forecasting and this is where AI comes in handy. For this, we have state load dispatch centres and national load dispatch centres and the data from these are tallied for getting the forecast." Speaking of other ambitious programmes, he said, "We have an ambitious programme to convert conventional meters to smart meters. India is a big country and there will be installation of 250 million smart meters. Also, we are working on the smart grid project. We have sufficient technologies powering the systems as far as generation is concerned. However, the distribution is still somewhere behind. Concluding the session, Narayanan addressed upskilling of the employees and raising the human capital saying, "Certainly we look forward to building capacity and it is very important. Electricity and technology are enablers of each other and together they enable economic advancements. Also, for new technologies, there is a need to build capacity among the employees for better operations and proper delivery of services.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/18/2021

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## **Power Consumers in Punjab Are Now Making Digital Bill Payments**

Chairman and Managing Director of Punjab State Power Corporation Ltd. (PSPCL) A Venu Prasad stated that power consumers of Punjab are now adopting digital modes



for paying their electricity bills. Owing to this, PSPCL has fetched around Rs 15,950 crore revenue from 114 lakh digital transactions occurred from April 2020 to January 2021. Prasad is of the view that digital payments have resulted in the reduction of long queues at the PSPCL counters and are also saving time and energy for the consumers. Such attainment becomes more significant and it is a matter of pride for the entire state of Punjab when it is generally considered as an agrarian economy. Prasad also shared about the improved, cost-effective, convenient to use and smooth digital bill payment platforms like SBI BHIM, PNB, HDFC Payzapp, Paytm, PhonePe, Just Dial, Google Pay, Amazon, Umang, etc. He said that PSPCL has contributed to the facility of all digital modes like Net Banking, credit cards, debit cards, Rupay Card, UPI, mobile wallets, RTGS/NEFT, POS Machines for the facilitation of power consumers of Punjab by providing round the clock seamless services. He said that all queries of consumers regarding digital payments are being properly and promptly resolved by PSPCL. He further disclosed that PSPCL is planning to organise camps at various locations in the state for the awareness of the citizens regarding digital modes and its convenience.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/18/2021

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## **India & World Bank Inks Pact for Developing Green, Resilient & Safe Highways**

With an aim to build green and safe national highway corridors in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, the Government of India and the World Bank signed a \$500 million project on December 22. The move will also include enhancing the capacity of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) in mainstreaming safety and green technologies. The project will support MoRTH construct 783 km of highways in the identified states by integrating safe and green technology designs such as local and marginal materials, industrial byproducts, and other bioengineering solutions. The project will help reduce GHG emissions in the construction and maintenance of highways. The agreement was signed by Dr Mohapatra, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, on behalf of the Government of India and Sumila Gulyani, Acting Country Director, India, on behalf of the World Bank. Dr CS Mohapatra stated that the Government of India is committed to environmentally sustainable development in its infrastructure projects. This project will set new standards in the construction of safe motorable roads. The selected stretches in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh will also help improve connectivity and promote economic development.

The National Highways of India carry about 40 per cent of road traffic. The project will also support analytics to map the freight volume and movement pattern on the National Highway network, identify constraints, and provide innovative logistics



solutions. Several sections of these highways have inadequate capacity, weak drainage structures and black spots prone to accidents. The project will, therefore, strengthen and widen existing structures; construct new pavements, drainage facilities and bypasses; improve junctions; and introduce road safety features. Also, infrastructure investments are climate-resilient. To this effect disaster risk assessment of about 5000 km of the National Highway network will also be undertaken under the project along with support to the ministry for mainstreaming climate resilience aspects in project design and implementation. The \$500 million loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), has a maturity of 18.5 years including a grace period of five years. (With inputs from PIB)

From <http://egov.eletsonline.com> 02/23/2021

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## **SRI LANKA: E-Learning for Continuing University Education**

In response to the ongoing concerns in relation to the COVID – 19 virus, the Sri Lankan government has encouraged all Universities, Campuses, Higher Education Institutes to promote e-learning to ensure uninterrupted university education during this prevailing situation. This timely and valuable decision should be highly appreciated because e-learning has the power to move towards more effective and efficient teaching and learning process in any situation, if we use it correctly with a clear understanding. However, in the Sri Lankan higher education sector, E-learning is still at the initial stage. Therefore, to help you to understand more on the e-learning environment, I decided to share the meaning of e-learning and to inform you on how to make e-learning a success. What is e-learning? E-learning is a very broad, inclusive term for learning which occurs through the medium of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Different terms are used to describe learning through ICT and these terms provide different/varying meanings – they are not synonyms. Commonly used terms are;

Digital teaching and learning (DTL),

Virtual learning communities (VLC),

Technology enhanced learning (TEL),

Mobile learning, web-based learning,

Online learning, distributed learning,

Computer assisted instruction (also called computer-based training or internet-based learning),

Computer mediated communication,

Virtual classrooms,

I-campus

Computer-driven interactive communication.

The term electronic learning represents as “e-learning”. However, due to these inconsistencies of terms and their meanings, there are diverse and conflicting

definitions of e-learning. This makes it difficult to find a single definition of e-learning. As studied by researchers, it is a risk in adopting an inclusive definition of e-learning because e-learning definition connects its different elements and features, which can obstruct the understanding of the concept. Therefore, following definitions can be selected as an appropriate definition of e-learning based on technological and teaching/learning perspectives.

The Commonwealth of Learning who empowers individuals through learning that leads to economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation, defines e-learning as “using information and communication technologies (or ICT) to expand access to education and to enhance and transform teaching and learning”. E-learning is part of a teaching and learning continuum that starts with face-to-face teaching in support of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) at one end and fully online distance learning at the other end. As we move along the continuum from fully face-to-face teaching, technology is used to replace the face-to-face elements. Initially, this has very little impact on how teaching is organized and how learning occurs because the technology is used primarily to enhance the face-to-face teaching. But as we move further along the continuum, the nature of teaching and how it is organized is increasingly affected by the use of ICT. In a blended learning environment, fewer face-to-face sessions are held as technology is used increasingly to deliver teaching and to facilitate learning. And the nature of the face-to-face sessions changes. Instead of coming to class to listen to a teacher, students come to discuss, and to work and collaborate in small groups. Once we reach the right end of the continuum there is no longer any face-to-face teaching and we have fully online learning in which all teaching is technology-mediated. During this interim crisis period, fully online teaching and learning is expected to continue with a collaborative and constructivist perspective. The educational institutes around the world are shifting towards to more constructivist approaches because they understood that the new ways of teaching and learning are required to meet the needs of a new generation of learners i.e. digital natives. Sri Lanka also understood the importance of new pedagogy to move towards student-centered and activity-based teaching and modern assessment. By doing this, students will benefit from modern pedagogical and assessment methods via online.

How to make e-learning sustain and success? Most of higher education institutes in Sri Lanka use their own Learning Management Systems (LMS) as an e-learning method which mostly apply as a supplementary tool to the face-to-face education. During the closure of universities in the light of the rapidly changing situation due to the ongoing Covid – 19 outbreaks in Sri Lanka, the University Grants Commission requested that the use of e-learning for continuing university education to students wherever possible. Therefore, continuing education through fully online mode could be a newer experience for universities, their academics as well as students. Hence, higher education institutes should use strategic dimensions to formulate and

implement coherent internal and external processes in order to optimize the learning potential of integrating e-learning into their programs and courses. During this interim crisis period, we cannot expect that all universities have fulfilled the following strategic dimensions but after the prevailing situation in the country returns to normalcy, to face into any situation in near future all universities or higher education institutes should revisit and refine their strategic planning processes and plans for e-learning systematically through building the capacity of universities to drive, sustain and scale up their e-learning practices. Otherwise, due to the sudden requirement e-learning would continue somehow based on capacity of individual departments or faculties but that has limited sustainability and scalability within and across programs in the university. Therefore, it is important to adhere to the following strategic dimensions by each university for building the e-learning capacity and thereby making e-learning success. These strategic dimensions were identified from previous research on e-learning/blended learning implementation.

1. A clear vision should be grounded in the institution's philosophies for learning and teaching in e-learning environments. Therefore, the universities should design a shared institutional vision by anticipating the ultimate goal and outcomes they want to achieve from institutional, student, as well as academic staff perspectives.

2. Universities should empower students to be future-ready with 21st century skills like collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity and computational thinking, it's becoming increasingly important to equip students with the technology skills they'll need to thrive in a digital economy. Skills like cloud computing, artificial intelligence, machine learning, productivity and more are already in demand in organizations around the world, yet jobs remain unfilled, and the talent gap persists and is set to widen. Therefore, universities can no longer be places for gaining content knowledge through the transmission of PowerPoint presentations; the curriculum should therefore develop higher-order thinking and 21st century competencies at the program and course levels. As an appropriate approach to meet these curricular outcomes, e-learning must therefore be pedagogically appropriate.

3. Academic staff has a crucial role for the successful implementation of e-learning. Although academics are experts in their respective fields, they may not have the expertise and experience to plan for and implement e-learning in their courses. Hence, the introduction of e-learning challenges academic staff to rethink their roles in a technology-enhanced learning environment. Therefore, universities should definitely provide continuing professional development for e-learning.

4. Although today's students can be branded as "Digital Natives", it has to be accepted that not all university students own digital devices that support e-learning. However, to support such university students, a couple of years back the Sri Lankan government has introduced laptop loan scheme. This is a special offer that provides an interest free bank loan of Rs. 75,000 to all government university students to purchase a computer of their choice. On the other hand, students mostly use technology for the purposes of entertainment and communication. They lacked experience of using technology for learning, generating and constructing knowledge.

Therefore, providing learning support such as technical support and educational guidance to use technological tools strategically for their learning is essential.

5. The integration of e-learning into current learning and teaching practices in higher education requires establishing an appropriate plan for technological infrastructure, facilities, and technical and service support. Lack of knowledge of pedagogy, lack of understanding of how technology and content influence and constrain one another, and how teaching and learning change when particular technologies are used are all perceived to have a strong influence on academics' technology integration. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has instructed the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL) to provide free Internet facilities for all undergraduates in State universities, who had registered for e-learning. This is a timely important decision, so students may without interruption continue with their education. Not only during the crisis period but in everyday life, providing equity of access to IT/ICT, supplying rural broadband services, establishing National broadband policy, and decreasing cost of access to internet and other technologies are important to upscale e-learning opportunities.

6. National and institutional level policies are essential for organizational change and development. Universities should formulate an e-learning master plan and corresponding policies, specific guidelines and mechanisms to promote academics staff to engage in e-learning. This will help each university to promote and motivate their all academic staff members to use e-learning equally and equity, otherwise those who have capacity and self-interested on e-learning will only engage with it and other academics may eliminate from e-learning.

7. In terms of e-learning, university should build up two types of partnership: internal and external. Internal partnership encompasses inter-faculty collaboration for working together with the technology and teaching to promote and support e-learning. External partnership includes public and private sector collaboration to access and explore different learning technologies and shape the direction of future e-learning practices in universities with industry experts.

8. E-learning practices have to be informed and driven by research and evaluation because revisions and modifications are always mandatory for the quality improvement of learning and teaching in universities. As informed by previous research, pilot projects need to be conducted to test possibilities and potentials before moving to large-scale implementation of e-learning is deliberated. This kind of pilot projects may help universities to identify and address potential problems and evaluate academic staff and students' reactions to a new initiative before moving to its large-scale implementation. However, due to the urgency of current situation in Sri Lanka we should continue e-learning without thinking whether we did the pilot project or not. After the prevailing situation in the country returns to normalcy, we should consider this as a pilot project to identify issues and academics and students' reactions. So that we will be able to implement successful e-learning program in near future under any circumstances. The above mentioned strategic dimensions allow

universities or higher education institutes to reflect upon their existing e-learning strategies, identify gaps in these strategies with respect to their vision for how e-learning may enhance learning and teaching and possibly develop new strategies or revise existing ones to address these gaps. There is no argument that e-learning is the best solution for education in the prevailing situation in the country due to COVID-19. Therefore, we should take this situation as a lesson to go forward with e-learning.

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## **Responsive Web and App Design: New Trends on the Horizon, in 2021.**

Although software development in Sri Lanka started out as an offshoring destination for IT services, this has long since moved from being just a niche operation that only serves to reduce labour costs for international clientele. With leverage from leading cloud support services, the country's IT landscape has evolved to deliver more than just application development services – but also lead in terms of delivering the best strategies based on today's fast-changing technology advancements. Responsive design, just like any other application development aspect (as well as the technology space at large) is constantly experiencing rapid change too. What was once only subject to screen sizes is now under consideration for much more – ranging from smart devices to internet connectivity. As always, technology goes hand-in-hand with consumer demands, economic shifts and business objectives. Together, we have an intricate mix of variables, all of which determine what needs to be prioritized in the area of responsive digital design. Likewise, here are a few such trends, spanning across the consumer-economic-business spectrum. Smart call-to-action placements. It's true that responsive design, at its essence, is about ensuring that your website or application is compatible with screens of any dimension. So it is self-explanatory that important features such as call-to-action buttons are also moulded accordingly. Or is it, really? In the wake of designing for multiple devices, screens and even operating systems, CTAs can be an area of oversight. While it is necessary for your application to mould itself to any device or screen dimension, it's wise to pay extra attention to CTA buttons and navigation. For at the end of the day, the ultimate objective of any business is to drive conversions and sales – and strategic CTA placement is what will help spearhead this goal.

Prioritizing page load speeds.

Responsive design, and UI/UX design in general, is closely tied to page load speeds. For one, the manner in which images and other visual elements are placed determine overall load time. On the other hand, the level of optimization done for visual elements also impact how long it takes for any given page to load. Page load and consumer engagement share a simple relationship, though; if pages take too

long to load, users are going to get frustrated and abandon your website/application. Search engines are also monitoring this at the same time. Higher page load times and increasing bounce rates are a sign for search engine bots to place such applications further down the list of search results. In other words, high page load times negatively impact SEO. Therefore, focusing on how your website can be rendered such that it fits the dimensions of a user's device, while being fast enough at load time is something that needs to always be considered – since the implications are many. Responsiveness in the wake of poor internet connectivity. Many businesses, irrespective of size or sector, have been gradually expanding to markets outside of their regular geographical region. While this brings in greater scope in terms of a larger customer base, many hurdles stand in the way – some of which are out of control. From an application standpoint, poor internet connectivity can significantly compromise the overall rendition and quality of your business's digital presence. While spotty internet connections cannot be controlled, the calibre of your application can be moderated to the point where it can function at peak performance – in spite of poor connectivity.

From a business standpoint, variables such as internet connectivity stands between a high-potential customer base and business goals. But it doesn't have to. With the right responsive design toolkit, this can be circumvented to reveal digital applications that are expertly crafted to withstand such challenges. Making the most of white space and overall simplicity. The adage 'less is more' is a highly viable one, in the field of responsive design. Just like how clutter in and around our homes can hamper our sense of wellbeing, an overload of elements and options within an application can overwhelm users to the point of abandonment. Colours that contrast with one another (especially white) along with ample spacing between elements is a UI strategy that has been in place for a long time now – and for good reason. Because this works, designers capitalize on simplicity to offer key features within easy reach, delivering business objectives while maintaining an interface that is easy on the eye. This doesn't mean that intricate visual elements such as hand-drawn illustrations and 3D animations are obsolete. Instead of occupying the entire application, such elements can be strategically placed to indicate a focal point – even using them for displaying dynamic bits of data that change on a real-time basis. In a nutshell... As the world keeps changing around us, so does the scope of technology. Responsive design, just like any other field within the arena of application development, is prone to changes depending on what's shifting in the world around us. Businesses have become more autonomous than ever before; with backing from globally renowned cloud service providers, especially by means of partnerships (such as an AWS partner, for example), companies now call the ultimate shots on what to utilize, how much, when and where.

Consumers are no different either; with endless options out there, the need to stay loyal to a singular brand alone is almost non-existent. In this regard, the level of engagement you are able to attain from your users is the true test of your business's

competencies. In other words, high engagement rates and low bounce rates determine the overall satisfaction of your customers – which can result in favourable levels of conversion and revenue in turn. This is why responsive designs are important, in essence. How well your website or application moulds itself to varying devices, screens and operating systems can greatly improve user retention levels for helping overarching business objectives. As SEO also gets subsequently impacted, the quality of your application's design bears many implications than otherwise expected.

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## Central-West Asia

### **AZERBAIJAN: Revealing Amount of Loans Guaranteed Through E-Credit Platform in 2020**

The Entrepreneurship Development Fund under the Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy, through an electronic credit platform, created in the country for the first time by the Ministry of Economy, guaranteed 433 loans worth 148 million manat (\$87 million) in 2020, Chairman of the Fund's board, Kanan Najafov said, Trend reports. Najafov made the remark at an online press conference on the Fund's activities for 2020 and tasks for 2021. According to Najafov, in June 2021, in order to support entrepreneurs working in coronavirus-hit areas, two mechanisms, namely, loan guarantees and subsidized interest rates were launched. For the first time in the country, the Ministry of Economy has created a digital credit platform and launched it for entrepreneurs to receive online applications for new business loans as part of the loan guarantee mechanism, Najafov said. "In 2020, more than 3,300 applications for new business loans worth 949 million manat (\$558.2 million) were registered through this platform. Of these applications, the Fund guaranteed 433 loans worth 148 million manat (\$87 million). The volume of guarantees for guaranteed applications made up 86.1 million manat (\$50.6 million). The loan volume for the applications that came into force amounted to 130 million manat (\$76.4 million), and the amount of the guarantee - 74.8 million manat (\$44 million)," he said. The Entrepreneurship Development Fund has been operating since 2002. It was created to strengthen state support for entrepreneurship, it is an important institutional organization that provides soft loans to entrepreneurs and implements its activities in accordance with the priorities of the development of the Azerbaijani economy.

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## **Growth of Startup Ecosystem - One of Azerbaijan's Priority Tasks, Ministry Says**

The growth of a startup ecosystem in Azerbaijan is one of the country's priority tasks, Rashad Azizov, head of the innovation and digital development department at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies, said. Azizov made the remark during an online event on the topic 'Entering of innovation ecosystem and local startups on international arena', Trend reports. According to him, since 2012, the Azerbaijani government has begun to pay special attention to the startup ecosystem of the country. "Along with the above, for the first time in Azerbaijan there appeared ASAN (Azerbaijan Service and Assessment Network) service and technological parks, the activities of which became the basis for the formation of a certain legal base in this field," he added. Besides, according to the ministry representative, some changes have been made in this industry since 2018. "These changes affected not only state organizations, but also a number of others. In the same year, innovation centers and agencies were established under the Ministry of Communications to directly support the startup environment, provide assistance and provide the necessary conditions for entrepreneurs in the development of their activities in this direction," he said. Azizov also noted that in 2020, the Innovation Agency has developed a solution that allows to divide startup projects into certain categories. At the same time, he pointed out that the formation of such a classification will allow more correctly develop projects, and see progress of the project at each stage of its development. "The formation of the legal framework allows, first of all, the state most profitably, for all participants, to create investment funds, make investments in projects and a number of other important issues," concluded Azizov.

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## **UNCTAD Reveals Azerbaijan's E-Commerce Development Rating for 2020**

Azerbaijan ranked 65th in terms of the development of e-commerce in the general list of 152 countries in 2020, Trend reports citing the annual report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Among the neighboring countries of Azerbaijan, Russia took 41-st place, Turkey - 57th, Georgia - 47th, Armenia - 84th place. "At the same time, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Denmark are in the first three places in the ranking. The last three places in the ranking are taken by Burundi, Chad and Niger," reads the report. The basis for assessing the level of development of online commerce in countries was the B2C E-commerce Index developed by UNCTAD experts, which consists of four indicators that are most directly related to online shopping. These are the proportion of residents with mobile payment accounts, the proportion of Internet users in the population structure, the



reliability of mail and the presence of secure internet servers. Each indicator was assessed on a 100-point scale, and the arithmetic mean of four indicators was the final index.

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## **Azerbaijani Minister Meets with Turkish Digital Transformation Office's Chief**

Head of Azerbaijan's Transport, Communications, and High Technologies Ministry Rashad Nabiyev met with Turkey's Digital Transformation Office's chief Ali Taha Koc, Trend reports referring to the ministry. According to the ministry, Nabiyev discussed with Koc the future cooperation between the countries in the field of artificial intelligence, big data, and government cloud. "The parties agreed on the implementation of joint projects and exchange of experience," said the ministry. Besides, the minister visited the office of the Turkish Association of Information and Communication Technologies, where he got acquainted with telecommunication and postal services, regulation rules, and Turkey's experience in this area. As earlier reported, on February 17, 2021, Nabiyev met with the Turkish Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Adil Karaismailoglu and Minister of Industry and Technology of Turkey, Mustafa Varank. The meetings took place in Turkey.

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## **Azerbaijan, Turkey to Expand Co-op on Cybersecurity and Communications**

Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan Rashad Nabiyev held a meeting with Minister of Transport and Infrastructure of Turkey Adil Karaismayiloglu, the ministry told Trend. During the meeting, the ministers discussed issues of mutual interest in the field of transport, cybersecurity, and communications expressed confidence in the further expansion of cooperation in these areas. In addition, on February 19, 2021, a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in Research and Development in the Field of Transport and Communications was signed between the parties within the framework of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission. On February 17, 2021, Rashad Nabiyev held his first meeting with Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Adil Karaismailoglu and Minister of Industry and Technology of Turkey Mustafa Varank. During his visit to Azerbaijan, President of the Turkish Space Agency Sardar Huseyn discussed with the Azercosmos OJSC delegation the strategic goals of Turkey's national space program and the possibilities of cooperation with Azerbaijan.

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## **Azerbaijani Depository Center to Introduce Electronic Register Service**

The National Depository Center of Azerbaijan (NDC) will increase the number of electronic services to meet customers' demand, Trend reports on Feb.22 referring to a source in the NDC. According to the source, in this direction, it's planned to view the register of securities holders online and provide an electronic extract from the register. For this purpose, an electronic personal account will be created for the issuers in the NDC Electronic Services system. Clients with the 'ASAN Imza' certificate will be able to log in to the system and receive an electronic register. The source said that at the same time, the issuers will have access to exchange and over-the-counter transactions, debt forgiveness, and inheritance through their personal electronic account. The register of securities owners at the moment has only a documentary form. However, when the new service is launched, at the request of the issuers, it will be possible to access the register both in paper form and electronically by means of an electronic signature, added the source. Presently, individuals who have 'ASAN Imza' and hold securities can access information about their securities online by accessing the NDC Electronic Services system.

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## **Bakcell Launches Internet Package for Online Education and Work**

The new package can be used for Skype, Zoom, MS Teams, and Go to Meeting platforms. Taking into consideration the current social importance of online learning and working, as well as the increased communication needs of customers, Bakcell launched a special internet package for online education and work. Thanks to the brand-new "Online work and education" internet package of Bakcell, the users have the possibility to easily connect to work meetings or online lessons from anywhere and any mobile device. The new internet package will suit the needs of even the most heavy and busy users, since by paying only 10 AZN per month, the customers will enjoy 40 GB of internet traffic. The new package can be used for such online platforms as Skype, Zoom, MS Teams, and Go to Meeting. The students who study online or persons working from home will benefit from the best mobile network in Azerbaijan along with highest customer experience. Visit <https://www.bakcell.com/en/online-edu-work> for more detailed information about the "Online work and education" internet package. It should be noted that last year, Bakcell made a large contribution to ensuring high quality virtual education process during Covid-19 pandemic. Within the frames of this contribution, Bakcell presented

a special tariff for thousands of teachers, featuring a free mobile number, free calls between colleagues, 1 GB of internet traffic and 100 minutes of countrywide calls for 5 AZN per month. Bakcell will continue focusing its activities on delivering convenience and outstanding user experience to customers.

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## **Upgrading of Internet Equipment in Azerbaijan's Khachmaz District Continues – Ministry**

Azerbaijan's Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies has recently conducted activities on replacing the old Internet equipment with new ones (ONU - Optical Network Unit), repairing the linear network, and expanding the network in Khachmaz district's villages, a source in the ministry told Trend on Feb.25. According to the source, this process still continues. "Today, as a result of the work done, the level of providing citizens with telephony and the Internet has significantly increased," the source said. "In 2018, as a pilot project, a wireless LTE network (Long Term Evolution - long-term development) was commissioned in the villages of Hulovlu and Garachi, and in the homes of the village residents receiving equipment was installed. Currently, the residents can use high-speed Internet and other multimedia services." Appeals of citizens from all the country's regions to the service areas of the ministry are being registered and work is underway to provide residents with telephone and Internet services, added the source.

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## **KAZAKHSTAN: Sharing Details on Shadow Economy**

Measures taken within the Action Plan to counter the shadow economy for 2019-2021 in Kazakhstan have already allowed a decrease in its level from 27 percent to 23.6 percent of GDP, said Marat Sultangaziyev, Chairman of the State Revenue Committee under the Ministry of Finance said, Trend reports referring to Kazinform. Sultangaziyev made the remark during a press conference at the Service for Central Communications under Kazakhstan's President. According to him, the priority goal of the committee is to reduce the level of the shadow economy to 15-17 percent of GDP, that's the level of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. "We have created the National System of Tracking Goods, which has become the main tool in the fight against shadow turnover. Astana-1 and ESF (e-invoicing) information systems have been introduced, 99 percent of tax and 100 percent of customs declarations are submitted remotely. The E-Window information system has united 13 information systems that issue

permitting documents. Owing to it the time for providing the services has been reduced from 30 to 5 days," the chairman said. He noted that the most effective was the application of the ESF system. Besides, for certain commodity items, the 'Virtual warehouse' module has been applied, which allows seeing the warehouse accounting of goods and online - transactions with counterparties. In total, 505,000 users have been registered and more than 558 million e-invoices processed. The number of additional receipts in 2020 made up 149 billion tenge (\$350 million). "This became possible thanks to the use of a risk management system. The system is provided with tools for big data analytics and intellectual analysis with the possibility of machine learning. In total, we have created 86 different risk models, processed over 12 billion digital documents, and ensured payment of 320 billion tenge (\$760 million)," stressed Sultangaziyev.

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## **UZBEKISTAN: Online-system for Charter Flights Launched in Test Mode**

Uzbekistan has simplified the process of obtaining permits for charter flights by launching an online-system, Trend reports with reference to the Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan. According to the information, the Uzbek Civil Aviation Agency has developed an electronic system for processing requests and issuing permits to operators of civil aviation of foreign states for one-time flights to the airfields of civil aviation in Uzbekistan. It was noted that the creation of this electronic platform will allow the applicant to submit online requests for obtaining permits for a one-time flight, promptly cooperate in processing requests with Uzbekistan airports of the Civil Aviation Agency, and Uzaeronavigation, and reduce the processing time of requests to 24 hours. The platform has been launched online in test mode since February 15 of this year. Operators of civil aviation aircraft of foreign states have the opportunity to apply for performing one-time flights to civil aviation airfields of Uzbekistan on the website of the Uzaviation Agency at the link <http://uzcaa.uz/en/permission>.

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## **Uzbekistan Accelerates Introduction of Artificial Intelligence Technologies**

The institute for the development of artificial intelligence will be created in Uzbekistan within the framework of the decree on measures to create conditions for the accelerated introduction of artificial intelligence technologies, Trend reports citing Uzbek media. President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree on

measures to create conditions for the accelerated introduction of artificial intelligence technologies. According to the information, the decree provides for the creation of a domestic ecosystem in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) and the necessary conditions for developers, legal regulation of the sphere. Thus, several pilot projects will be launched in nine areas in 2021-2022, including banks, agriculture, finance, taxes, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, transport, energy, e-government. It was noted that, in 2021-2024, universities will allocate 130 (100 undergraduate and 30 undergraduate) grant places for AI training.

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## Oceania

### AUSTRALIA: House Prices Surpass 2017 Peak

Housing prices rose further in January to surpass their previous 2017 peak, with regional property values growing at twice the pace of capital city markets. The CoreLogic national home value index was up 0.9 per cent in January to stand one per cent higher than its pre-COVID level and 0.7 per cent higher than the previous September 2017 peak. Every capital city recorded a rise over the month, ranging from a 2.3 per cent surge across Darwin to a relatively mild 0.4 per cent increase in Sydney and Melbourne. But while capital city values were collectively 0.7 per cent higher, CoreLogic's combined regions index was up 1.6 per cent over the month. CoreLogic research director Tim Lawless says the divergence between metro and regional housing demand in NSW and Victoria is more substantial than in other states. He says more people are leaving Sydney and Melbourne for regional areas and this trend is further compounded by the demand shock of stalled overseas migration.

"Better housing affordability, an opportunity for a lifestyle upgrade and lower density housing options are other factors that might be contributing to this trend, along with the new found popularity of remote working arrangements," Mr Lawless said. At the same time, housing values continue to outperform those of units. At a national level, house values have risen by 3.5 per cent over the past six months while unit values have been unchanged. "Demand for units has diminished through COVID-19 amidst record low levels of investor participation and changing living preferences," Mr Lawless said. CORELOGIC HOME VALUE INDEX FOR JANUARY National - up 0.9 per cent in January (up 3.0 per cent annually) Sydney - up 0.4 per cent (up 2.0 per cent) Melbourne - up 0.4 per cent (down 2.1 per cent) Brisbane - up 0.9 per cent (up 4.0 per cent) Adelaide - up 0.9 per cent (up 6.5 per cent) Perth - up 1.6 per cent (up 3.4 per cent) Hobart - up 1.6 per cent (up 6.8 per cent) Darwin - up 2.3 per cent (up 11.4 per cent) Canberra - up 1.2 per cent (up 8.5 per cent) Combined capitals - up

0.7 per cent (up 1.7 per cent) Combined regional - up 1.6 per cent (up 7.9 per cent)

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## Federal Opposition Eyes Gig Economy Reform

Delivery drivers and other gig economy workers will be guaranteed minimum wage under a Labor plan to crack down on exploitation. The federal opposition has foreshadowed a policy aimed at challenging the categorisation of gig workers as independent contractors. Opposition industrial relations spokesman Tony Burke said some gig economy staff were being paid below minimum wage. "Right now we have third world working conditions in a first world country - that can't be allowed to go on," he told Sky News on Monday. Mr Burke said delivery drivers, like those employed by Uber Eats and Deliveroo, could not be classed as contractors. "Someone driving their own heavy vehicle, they've got a mortgage over it, they employ someone to do the bookkeeping - there is no doubt that they're an independent contractor," he said. "I just don't accept for a minute that the visa worker with a second-hand bike, racing and running traffic lights trying to make ends meet has that sort of strength, that sort of independence." Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese is expected to unveil new industrial relations policies in a major speech next week.

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## No Local Aust Cases, Arrivals to Jump Soon

Australia has marked another day with no locally acquired cases of COVID-19 as more stranded Aussies prepare to return home when international arrival caps return to higher levels. NSW, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia all on Saturday announced zero local COVID-19 cases in their respective 24-hour reporting windows. Western Australia, which on Saturday exited its five-day lockdown after a hotel quarantine worker picked up the virus, also recorded no local cases. Some 57,000 people in WA have been tested for the virus since Sunday. The Victorian government on Saturday also announced it had changed mask policies for hotel quarantine staff and would review hotel air flow, seeking to avoid a repeat of this week's two suspected COVID-19 leaks. Hotel quarantine staff in Victoria have since Thursday been required to wear a face shield and surgical mask while on the job.

Staff were previously wearing only an N-95 mask. Hotel quarantine organisers from Wednesday also established "buffers" between family groups and other guests, resulting in 140 rooms being taken out of the system, and staggered food delivery times. The moves follow a case of suspected COVID-19 transmission among two separate groups of guests at Melbourne's Park Royal Hotel, and a worker at the

Grand Hyatt testing positive to the coronavirus. Victoria will increase its weekly hotel quarantine capacity to 1310 from February 15 as a month-long national "slowdown" on arrivals concludes. NSW will from February 15 return to a cap of about 3000 people a week, while Queensland is reverting to 1000 and SA to 530. WA will retain its halved cap of 500 until the end of the month. Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the increased caps after a national cabinet meeting with state and territory leaders on Friday.

The return to more arrivals - having been briefly paused due to the emergence of the contagious UK and South African virus strains - will coincide with the commencement of the Australian vaccination program. Hotel quarantine workers, frontline staff and border officials are first in line for the Pfizer coronavirus jab, along with the elderly and most vulnerable. Department of Health head Brendan Murphy says the risk of the virus leaking from hotel quarantine will reduce once its workers have had the jab. State borders could then also be relaxed on a lasting basis. While he was hesitant to give a possible time frame for when Australia's international border restrictions will ease, Professor Murphy said officials would keep a close eye on how well the population was protected after vaccinations. "Progressively over the second half of this year we should see a trajectory towards normality," he told a parliamentary inquiry on Friday. The government hopes most Australians will be vaccinated by late October. Australia has secured more than 150 million doses of various vaccines.

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## **New Register for Business Emissions Goals**

Australians will soon be able to get a clearer picture of how companies are tracking towards their emissions reduction targets. The Clean Energy Regulator has on Friday announced plans to start a Corporate Emissions Reduction Transparency report. It will be underpinned by the rules used by companies which report their emissions to government. "For the first time companies will be able to show clearly how they are tracking towards their emissions reduction commitments," Clean Energy Regulator chair David Parker said. The register will also help companies report their progress towards carbon neutrality to the share market. The Clean Energy Regulator says the move will help support the private sector to be less emissions intensive. Feedback on the draft register is open until March 19. All states and territories have committed to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The federal opposition also supports the policy but the Morrison government has not agreed to it. Prime Minister Scott Morrison says it is his preference for Australia to achieve net zero by 2050, but he faces a fresh round of opposition to the target from within his own government.

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## Wage Outlook Flat Despite Economic Rebound

The rapid economic rebound from last year's deep recession is yet to be felt in people's wage packets. Despite a sharp drop in the unemployment rate to 6.4 per cent last month from a 22-year high of 7.5 per cent last July, economists expect it could be a few years before a decent pay rise is seen. "While the jobs recovery has been faster than expected and unemployment is expected to fall below six per cent by this time next year, we are still a long way from full employment and hence a decent pick up in wages growth," AMP Capital chief economist Shane Oliver says. Wednesday will see the release of key wages figures for the December quarter and are likely to be grim reading. The wage price index - used by the Reserve Bank and Treasury in gauging wage growth - is expected to have risen by just 0.3 per cent in the final three months of 2020.

It will follow the meagre 0.1 per cent rise in the September quarter and leave the annual growth rate at a limp 1.1 per cent. The only upside is that annual inflation is crawling along at 0.9 per cent. Also on Wednesday, quarterly construction work data is released that will feed into the national accounts report for December quarter that is issued on March 3. The national accounts include economic growth figures that are expected to show an extension of the 3.3 per cent rebound seen in the September quarter after the seven per cent slump in the previous three months. What is known so far in the economic growth calculation is that retail spending rose by a healthy 2.5 per cent in the quarter. The construction work figures are expected to show an increase of one per cent for the quarter, helped by strong home building that has been encouraged by low interest rates and government initiatives.

However, business investment figures on Thursday are expected to have remained subdued. Private capital expenditure in the quarter is expected to have declined 0.3 per cent. Still, Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott believes the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine will be hugely important for business confidence. Prime Minister Scott Morrison was one of the first people to get the Pfizer jab on Sunday, a day ahead of the national rollout. "It's hugely important to get that momentum that has built up in the economy to stay and get extra momentum," she told Sky News' Sunday Agenda program. However, enthusiasm surrounding the vaccine rollout has failed to shore up the Australian share market, which extended a hefty sell-off on Friday in after-hours futures trading. Share futures were trading 11 points down at 6721.

On Friday the share market dropped 1.3 per cent, its worst day of losses in more than three weeks, undermined by worries over the performance of the US economy. There was little to turn the tide from an overall flat Wall Street on Friday as investors sold technology shares that had rallied through the pandemic and bought into other stocks that are set to benefit from pent-up demand once the coronavirus pandemic is



subdued. The S&P 500 dropped 0.19 per cent to 3,906.71, the Dow Jones Industrial Average edged up 0.1 per cent to 31,494.32 and the Nasdaq Composite added 0.07 per cent to 13,874.46.

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## **Online Giants Embrace Misinformation Code**

Online giants including Facebook and Google have released a new voluntary code for dealing with disinformation and political advertising. Other tech companies including Twitter, TikTok, Microsoft and Redbubble have signed onto the code of practice. The rules will be overseen by the Australian Communications and Media Authority to combat the spread of disinformation. "We've all seen the damage that online disinformation can cause, particularly among vulnerable groups," Communications Minister Paul Fletcher said on Monday. "This has been especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic." Digital industry representative Sunita Bose said people misleading others or being misinformed were not new problems. "But the digital era means that false information can spread faster and wider than before," Ms Bose said. Mr Fletcher said the government would be watching closely to see whether the voluntary code was effective in providing safeguards against disinformation and misinformation.

The ACMA will report to the government by the end of June on initial compliance with the code. "I look forward to receiving ACMA's feedback, which will guide us on whether further action is needed," Mr Fletcher said. The industry code was developed in response to a digital platforms inquiry and mirrors similar rules in the European Union. It aims to help users make informed choices about digital content, disrupt problematic advertising and improve transparency of online platforms. The code should allow people to know more about the source of content they see online, in both news and factual content, and political advertising. It also contains commitments to tackle fake bots and accounts that actively peddle disinformation. Anna Draffin from the Public Interest Journalism Initiative said the code fell short of what was needed. "The code appears to be little more than a broad industry statement of intent," she said. Ms Draffin said the code provided little detail on governance mechanisms, administrative oversight or complaint handling. She said it was also silent on metrics for reporting and contained no requirements for record keeping.

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## **Australia a Digital Dinosaur Within OECD**

Digital technology is the fastest growing sector of the global economy but it appears to have by-passed many industries in Australia. A new digital performance index has Australia looking a bit of a dinosaur when it comes to new technologies, coming 36th among the 37 members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and topping only Mexico. The new gauge, commissioned by Google Australia and prepared by AlphaBeta, analyses the digitisation performance of 19 industries in Australia and compares them to their global peers. Some of Australia's industries are close to the world's best in digital technologies, including the mining and agriculture industries. But others, such as manufacturing, wholesale, health, and retail are well behind global leaders.

"Australia's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector has had a steadily declining share of the economy for close on 30 years," AlphaBeta director Andrew Charlton says. "Turning this around is critical for creating strong Australian industries and resilient jobs in the future." This lack of digital prowess was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic as consumers, businesses and workers were forced to transition online. The top technologies that Australia is leading in include mobile payments, smart farming and quantum computing. But the five technologies Australia is lagging in are cloud computing, automation, machine learning, big data and blockchain. "The report finds lack of competition, lack of managerial capability, regulation, cost, connectivity issues and cultural resistance are holding back many Australian industries," Dr Charlton said.

"Government has a real and urgent role to play in attracting, educating and skilling talent for a digital world, incentivising digital investment and innovation, continuing to invest in the national digital network infrastructure and ensuring policy and regulation is proactive and agile." Topping the digital index was Ireland, followed by Israel, Sweden and Luxembourg. The UK and US came fifth and sixth, while at the other end of the scale, New Zealand (34th) and Chile (35th) came just ahead of Australia and Mexico.

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## **Wages Ease as Business Investment Jumps**

At first glance, new figures would suggest that while businesses ramped up investment in their operations late in 2020, it didn't extend to their workforce. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows the average annual wage is now just over \$89,000. But at an average weekly rate of \$1712 as of November, this was down 0.1 per cent when compared to May, the first time there has been a fall during a six month period. It followed an unusually large 3.3 per cent increase in the six months to May. ABS head of labour statistics Bjorn Jarvis explained that May saw the greatest impact on the jobs market from the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a

higher share of job losses in lower paid jobs and industries than those with higher earnings - raising the wage average. "The fall in average earnings in November highlights the extent of recovery in low paid jobs, hours and earnings since May," he said releasing the report on Thursday.

In the five years before COVID, the six-monthly increases in average weekly earnings were all between 0.4 per cent and 1.8 per cent. The annual rate of the wage cost index - the preferred measures used by the Reserve Bank of Australia and Treasury in gauging wage growth that was released on Wednesday - remained at a record low 1.4 per cent. Meanwhile, business investment unexpectedly jumped three per cent in the final three months of 2020, a positive result ahead of next week's crucial economic growth figures. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg told parliament this was the largest increase since March 2012, and a "another shot in the arm" for the Australian economy. New private capital expenditure (capex) grew to \$29.4 billion in the December quarter. "The gain was largely driven by equipment and machinery, suggesting that the government's tax incentives are already feeding through to planned expenditure," BIS Oxford Economics chief economist Sarah Hunter said.

However, annual capex was still down 7.5 per cent compared to a year earlier. Looking forward, businesses expect to invest \$121.4 billion in the 2020/21 financial year, a 4.8 per cent increase on a previous estimate. However, the first estimate for 2021/22 of \$105.5 billion was down 3.4 per cent when compared to the first estimate for 2020/21. "This result is unsurprising, given the impact of the pandemic on the economy, ongoing uncertainty, and for some sectors the very different demand environment they now face," Dr Hunter said. "It is likely to reinforce the RBA's view that they will need to provide the economy with an extended period of monetary support, to try and kickstart capital expenditure." The RBA board will hold its monthly meeting on Tuesday where it is expected to keep the cash rate at a record 0.1 per cent.

The ABS figures show equipment, plant and machinery capex surged 5.7 per cent in the December quarter to \$13.9 billion, while buildings and structures rose 0.7 per cent to 15.5 billion. The data feeds into next week's national accounts for the December quarter, which are expected to show an economic growth rate of around two per cent for the quarter, building on the 3.3 per cent rebound in the September quarter. This followed the seven per cent collapse in the June quarter which marked Australia's first recession since the early 1990s.

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## **Youth Detention Numbers Fall: Report**

The number of young people held in youth detention has fallen significantly since 2016, but Indigenous kids still make up more than half of Australia's incarcerated children. The findings are contained in a new report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which crunched youth detention numbers between the June quarters of 2016 and 2020. The average number of young people in detention on an average night in the June quarter of last year was 798, down from 922 in 2016. The vast majority of the detainees were male - 91 per cent. Despite some improvements, more than half of the kids aged 10 to 17 held in detention in the June quarter of 2020 were Indigenous. That proportion - 52 per cent - was down from 61 per cent in the same quarter in 2016 and 57 per cent in 2019. Only six per cent of children aged 10 to 17 in Australia are Indigenous.

The disparity is the worst in Western Australia, where the incarceration rate for Indigenous children was 40 per 10,000 in 2020. That rate was 12 per 10,000 in Victoria, the best-performing state. It's a commitment under the Closing the Gap agreement that Indigenous young people are not over-represented in the criminal justice system. Governments have agreed to reduce the rate of Indigenous children in detention by 30 per cent by 2031. Indigenous people represented just under half of the total youth detention population, which also includes some young adults, in 2020. Forty-eight per cent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, making Indigenous youth 17 times more likely to be in detention on an average night as non-Indigenous youth.

Kids in the Northern Territory are the most likely to be incarcerated. In the June quarter of 2020, the territory had an incarceration rate of 7.9 per 10,000 children aged 10 to 17. In South Australia, that number is just 1.8. The period examined in the study extends into the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, the researches say more data is required before they can establish the impact of the virus on youth detention data.

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## **Funding Boost to Ease Disaster Risk**

A system to automatically locate emergency service vehicles across South Australia during natural disasters, such as major bushfires, has won federal government funding. The system was one of the key recommendations in a review of SA's response to the 2019/20 bushfires which raged through the Adelaide Hills and on Kangaroo Island. It will be rolled out across the Country Fire Service and the State Emergency Service and is among a number of measures included in a \$2 million package to reduce the risks posed by disasters. "The funding will reduce vulnerability and increase community capacity to cope in the face of natural disasters," Emergency Management Minister David Littleproud said in a statement on Sunday.

"We'll never be able to eradicate disasters, but we can always ensure we are better prepared for when they strike."

South Australian Emergency Services Minister Vincent Tarzia said the local projects would play a vital role in helping communities prepare for a range of emergency events. "We must do all that we can to reduce the level of risk that our communities are exposed to and enable them to withstand and adapt to the more frequent and intense natural hazards that we face," Mr Tarzia said. "The partnership approach between all levels of government and the community is helping to build a culture of shared responsibility for dealing with natural disasters." From the funding pool, the vehicle location system will receive \$400,000 while \$232,000 will go towards a project to support culturally and linguistically diverse communities to implement their own locally-led disaster risk reduction activities.

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## **Solid Growth Rebound Set to Continue**

After a week Scott Morrison would want to forget, this week's national accounts will probably give the prime minister something to crow about. At least fleetingly. An accusation of a sexual assault on a former Liberal staffer, an alleged historic rape case by a current government minister and the loss of a backbencher to the crossbench are just some of the headaches endured by the prime minister. But Wednesday's December quarter national accounts, and with them the latest growth figures, are expected to bring good news. Economists' forecasts at this stage centre on a quarterly growth rate of 2.4 per cent. This would build on the huge 3.3 per cent expansion in the September quarter, rebounding from the seven per cent slump in the previous three months which marked Australia's first recession since the early 1990s. However, the remnants of the downturn linger on with the annual growth rate expected to remain in negative territory, down 1.8 per cent.

Strong consumer spending and home building, along with rising business investment and government spending are expected to be the main drivers of the continued recovery, offsetting an expected drag from exports. Economists will finalise their growth forecasts after quarterly company profits and inventories figures on Monday and trade and government spending numbers on Tuesday. The Reserve Bank will also hold its monthly board meeting on Tuesday where it is expected to keep the cash rate and other key policy measures at a record low 0.1 per cent. However, economists expect central bank governor Philip Lowe will comment in his post-meeting statement on the recent steep rise in market interest rates, when the RBA has been buying billions of dollars worth of government bonds trying to keep yields, and in turn borrowing costs, down.

"While it will no doubt welcome the continuing improvement in economic indicators it will likely try and push back against the rise in bond yields by reiterating that the economy still faces uncertainties," AMP capital chief economist Shane Oliver said. There is also a wave of monthly figures during the week, kicking off with February house prices and January home lending figures, as well as February job advertising data on Monday. Tuesday will see January building approvals numbers, while January retail trade and international trade reports are released on Thursday. Meanwhile, Australian shares look set for a positive start to the week, after suffering its biggest fall since early September on Friday as investors switched their sights on the bond market. Australian share futures were 29 points higher, or 4.3 per cent, at 6658. On Friday, the S&P/ASX200 benchmark index had closed 2.35 per cent lower at 6673.3.

On Wall Street, shares fell despite some easing in bond yields as the market prepared for Washington to vote on President Joe Biden's stimulus package. The House of Representatives subsequently approved the \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief bill and it now moves to a less obliging Senate. Among Wall Street's major indices, the S&P 500 was down 0.5 per cent at 3,811.15, the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 1.5 per cent to 30,932.37, but the Nasdaq gained 0.6 per cent to 13,192.34.

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## 5、 Public Finance

### Asia-Pacific

#### **Global Investors Drawn to World Bank's 10-Year US Dollar Sustainable Development Bond**

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) priced a 3.5 billion 10-year Sustainable Development Bond maturing in February 2031. The transaction, in the World Bank's largest funding currency, appealed to investors seeking longer-dated US dollar bonds complemented by a sustainable development purpose that resonates especially with investors integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria in their investment process. The deal attracted over 115 orders totaling more than \$4.8 billion. Investors were globally diverse, with strong demand from central banks and official institutions as well as, pension funds, insurance companies and asset managers seeking high-credit quality assets to match their longer-term liabilities. BofA Securities, Citi,

JP Morgan, RBC Capital Markets 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 +13 basis points and an equivalent annual yield of 1.278%. This equates to a spread vs. the reference US treasury of +18.25 basis points. “We are grateful for investors’ support for this 10-year US dollar benchmark which helps to fund the World Bank’s efforts to help our member countries respond to the immediate crisis and achieve their sustainable development goals,” said Jingdong Hua, Vice President and Treasurer, World Bank. “Access to long-term consistent funding supports a green, inclusive, resilient and sustainable recovery.”

#### Investor Distribution

By Geography		By Investor Type	
Asia	38%	Central Banks/Official Institutions	54%
EMEA	34%	Banks/Bank Treasuries/Corporates	27%
Americas	28%	Asset Managers/Insurance /Pension Funds	19%

#### Joint Lead Manager Quotes

“Another impressive result for the World Bank in executing this \$3.5 billion 10-year benchmark. The transaction was met with strong investor demand, attracting over 100 orders. The combination of growing investor interest following the deal’s announcement and an extremely high quality orderbook allowed them to price at the tightest spread to mid-swaps in this tenor of any Sovereign, Supranational, and Agency (SSA) issuer in the past three years. Congratulations to the World Bank team on this landmark issuance,” said Adrien de Naurois, Head of DCM SSA & EMEA IG Syndicate, BofA Securities. “The World Bank has yet again shown its market leading access to liquidity across the yield curve with a new \$3.5 billion 10-year benchmark to kick-start their fixed-rate US dollar issuance for this calendar year. The precise timing of the transaction, ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday period, enabled broad distribution with the highest quality investors across geographies. It also allowed for the tightest 10-year US dollar SSA print versus mid-swaps in over two years. Citi is delighted to have been involved in this fabulous transaction,” said Philip Brown, Managing Director, Head of SSA DCM, Citi.

“The World Bank impresses once again with a new 10-year Sustainable Development Bond, printing a US dollar 3.5 billion benchmark at mid-swap +13 basis points – the issuer’s second-largest US dollar 10-year deal size to date, and tightest mid-swap spread since 2015 for this tenor. The US dollar 4.8+ billion of demand was

driven by high-quality orders especially from central banks and official institutions, a testament to the World Bank's solid standing among global investors as well as a well-timed transaction from the issuer side. Well done to the World Bank team!" said Keith Price, Head of Frequent Borrower Group, J.P. Morgan. "The World Bank's first US dollar fixed-rate benchmark of 2021 was completed with textbook execution that reinvigorated the SSA market with the tightest 10-year print vs. mid-swaps since late 2018. The World Bank's Sustainable Development Bonds continue to see strong support from investors who flock to the combination of high credit quality and the opportunity to support such a globally important mission," said Jigme Shingsar, Managing Director, RBC Capital Markets.

#### Transaction Summary

Issuer:	World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD)
Issuer rating:	Aaa /AAA
Amount:	USD 3,500,000,000
Settlement date:	February 10, 2021
Maturity date:	February 10, 2031
Issue price:	99.738%
Issue yield:	1.278% semi-annual
Denomination:	USD 1,000
Coupon:	1.250% p.a., payable semi-annually in arrear
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	US459058JR58
Clearing system:	Fedwire, Clearstream, Euroclear
Lead managers:	BofA Securities, Citi, JP Morgan, RBC Capital Markets
Senior co-lead managers:	Barclays, Credit Agricole CIB, Deutsche Bank, National Bank Financial, Wells Fargo

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## **World Bank Launches Sustainable Development Bond for RockCreek and the Equality Fund While Raising Awareness for Gender Equality**

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) issued a CAD 25 million, 5-year Sustainable Development Bond. During its launch, the World Bank raised awareness for the World Bank's strategy, projects and programs that focus on gender equality. RBC Capital Markets is the sole lead manager for the bond. RockCreek serves as the Equality Fund's Outsourced Chief Investment Officer (OCIO) and advised on the transaction. "Engagement with World Bank bond investors around purpose and impact of their investments is key to directing global savings to sustainable use," said Jingdong Hua, World Bank Vice President and Treasurer. "We look forward to continued collaboration with investors as they develop investment strategies to support development sectors such as gender equality and appreciate the support of the Equality Fund and RockCreek for the World Bank's activities." In the area of gender equality, the World Bank has a holistic approach in its work to close gender gaps. World Bank's diagnostic assessments, country strategies, and project design consider gender gaps and solutions in the following four key areas for the greatest impact: (1) reducing gaps in health, education, and social protection; (2) removing constraints for more and better jobs; (3) removing barriers to women's ownership and control of assets; and (4) enhancing women's voice and agency and engaging men and boys in the process. This approach is particularly important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is causing societal and economic disruptions across the globe, including those that threaten to widen gender gaps or dismantle progress made in the past.

"We are in unprecedented times which call for creative solutions so that we can mobilize capital to build a more just, equitable world," said Afsaneh Beschloss, CEO of RockCreek. "With the type of work that the World Bank, Equality Fund, and RockCreek are doing we can address the challenges of inequity globally and show the impact and role that we can play in society and the economy for all." "This collaboration is a powerful example of our determination to use every tool at our disposal to shift power and capital to support gender equality around the world," said Jessica Houssian, Co-CEO of the Equality Fund. "The Equality Fund is a bold step toward that future, and we are grateful to the World Bank for recognizing the central role of gender equality in building a more just and sustainable world." "We are excited to invest in this new bond issued by the World Bank, which will further our strategy to align our investments with our mission to advance gender equality," said Bonnie Foley-Wong, Head of Investment Strategy at the Equality Fund. "We are honored to support the development of innovative financing tools that help support sustainable development and focus on improving gender inequality," said Alifia Doriwala, Co-CIO at RockCreek. "These types of solutions allow institutions to meaningfully invest in impact, generate returns, and scale their mission and will be a

model for future investments.”

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## **World Bank Approves Additional Financing of US\$10 Million to Enhance Jamaica’s Business Environment**

The World Bank’s Board of Executive Directors approved additional financing of US\$10 million for the ongoing Jamaica Foundations for Competitiveness and Growth Project. The additional financing will be used to scale up support for the Government of Jamaica’s business climate reform agenda and contribute to Jamaica’s economic recovery by improving the business environment. "This additional financing will support initiatives that encourage business growth in Jamaica and strengthen the environment for private sector investment. These changes are more critical now than ever, as the private sector has been hit hard by the economic and social impacts of COVID-19. The additional financing will help Jamaica build back better through support for reforms to make it easier to do business, which will benefit local entrepreneurs," said Ozan Sevimli, World Bank Resident Representative for Jamaica and Guyana.

Jamaica is facing significant challenges from the COVID-19 crisis, and the Government has adopted a series of measures to address the deteriorating economic and social situation. This additional financing provides technical assistance to improve the investment climate by updating laws, regulations, and legal frameworks, to support a private sector-led resilient recovery. Reforms focus on trading across borders, enforcing contracts, registering property, getting electricity, and getting credit. The project also includes policies and programs for export competitiveness, attracting foreign direct investment, and supplier linkages. The US\$50 million Jamaica Foundations for Competitiveness and Growth Project was approved in 2014 and has shown encouraging results, supporting 14 new investment climate laws, regulations, and policies that improved Jamaica’s business environment. In addition, nearly 140 small and medium-sized businesses have benefitted from a line of credit program and over 380 businesses received training support through matching grants. The loan comes from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and has a maturity of 25 years, including a grace period of five years.

### **World Bank Group COVID-19 Response**

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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## **Two-Thirds of Poorer Countries Are Cutting Education Budgets Due to COVID-19**

Education budgets are not adjusting proportionately to the challenges brought about by COVID-19, especially in poorer countries. Despite additional funding needs, two-thirds of low- and lower-middle-income countries have, in fact, cut their public education budgets since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the new joint World Bank – UNESCO Education Finance Watch (EFW). In comparison, only one-third of upper-middle and high-income countries have reduced their budgets. These budget cuts have been relatively small thus far, but there is a danger that future cuts will be larger, as the pandemic continues to take its economic toll, and fiscal positions worsen. These differing trends imply a significant widening of the already large spending disparities seen between low- and high-income countries. According to the new report, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2018-19, high-income countries were spending annually the equivalent of US\$8,501 for every child or youth's education compared to US\$48 in low-income countries. COVID-19 is only widening this huge per-capita education spending gap between rich and poor countries.

EFW stresses that the education finance challenge is not only about mobilizing resources, but also about improving the effectiveness of funding. Unfortunately, recent increases in public education spending have been associated with relatively small improvements in education outcomes. Although access to education has improved, the learning poverty rate – the proportion of 10-year-olds unable to read a short, age-appropriate text – was 53 percent in low- and middle-income countries prior to COVID-19, compared to only 9 percent for high-income countries. COVID-19 related school closures are likely to increase this 53 percent share to as much as 63 percent. “This is a critical moment where countries need to recover the learning losses the pandemic is generating, invest in remedial education, and use this window of opportunity to build more effective, equitable, and resilient systems,” said Mamta Murthi, World Bank Vice President for Human Development. “The learning poverty crisis that existed before COVID-19 is becoming even more severe, and we are also concerned about how unequal the impact is. Countries and the international development community must invest more and invest better in education systems and strengthen the link between spending and learning and other human capital outcomes.”

EFW notes that global spending on education has increased over the last 10 years, but the signs are that the pandemic may interrupt this upward trend. Funding for education has grown most rapidly in low- and lower-middle-income countries, where the gaps between the funding needed to achieve the SDGs and current allocations are the widest. The deterioration in government finances over the medium-term suggests that without concerted efforts to prioritize education, the outlook for mobilizing the domestic resources required for education will worsen. Aid for education has increased by 21 percent over the last 10 years. Disbursements had increased rapidly in the 2000s and fell between 2010 and 2014 in the aftermath of the great financial crisis. However, since 2014, aid to education has increased by 30 percent, reaching its highest recorded level of US\$ 15.9 billion in 2019. However, fiscal constraints, other sectoral needs, and changes in student mobility patterns, suggest that external aid for education might fall at a time when it is needed most.

“External financing is key to support the education opportunities of the world’s poorest,” said Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General at UNESCO. “Yet donor countries are likely – and some have already begun – to shift their budget away from aid to domestic priorities. Health and other emergencies are also competing for funds. We foresee a challenging environment for countries reliant on education aid. UNESCO estimates that it may fall by US\$ 2 billion from its peak in 2020 and not return to 2018 levels for another six years.” The EFW is a collaborative effort between the World Bank and the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report team. It will be produced annually following the main release of spending data by UNESCO’s Institute of Statistics. The EFW aims to draw together the best data available on all sources of education funding and monitor efforts to improve information on the levels and use of education funding. However, good quality and timely information on government, household, and aid spending in education is not readily available in all countries. This hinders planning and monitoring at a time when countries cannot afford any missteps.

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## **ADB Issues Inaugural Education Bond**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) on 2 February priced its first education bond to finance a pool of projects related to the sector, including technical and vocational training, in Asia and the Pacific. The A\$75 million (about \$57 million) 10-year bond was purchased entirely by Dai-ichi Life Insurance Company, Limited of Japan and arranged by Credit Agricole CIB. “We are pleased to announce the issuance of ADB’s first education bond which will help support, among others, our assistance to those among our developing members whose education systems have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said ADB Treasurer Pierre Van Peteghem. An estimated 1.7 billion students worldwide have been affected by school

closures due to the coronavirus pandemic. ADB is strengthening its effort to expand access to opportunities for high-quality education, including through greater use of distance and online learning; and wider use of digital technologies for scaling equitable learning, training, and teaching with partnerships for expanding access to affordable and reliable internet connectivity.

In January, ADB published COVID-19 and Education in Asia and the Pacific, which 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. In response to demand from its member countries following COVID-19 and other emerging requirements, ADB's annual commitment to education is expected to double from \$1 billion in 2020 to about \$2 billion during 2021–2023. ADB has ongoing investments of over \$6 billion in education.

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## **ADB Sells \$2 Billion 10-Year Global Benchmark Bond**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) priced a \$2 billion 10-year global bond, proceeds of which will be part of ADB's ordinary capital resources. "We appreciate the strong support of our investors for this new 10-year global bond issue," said ADB Treasurer Pierre Van Peteghem. "This is our second successful outing in the US dollar market this year. The constructive result provides us with more resources to support our developing members in Asia and the Pacific, especially those most affected by the pandemic." The 10-year bond, with a coupon rate of 1.5% per annum payable semi-annually and a maturity date of 4 March 2031, was priced at 99.088% to yield 18.35 basis points over the 1.125% US Treasury notes due February 2031. The transaction was lead-managed by JP Morgan, Nomura, RBC, and TD Securities. A syndicate group was also formed consisting of ANZ, Credit Agricole CIB, ING, Natixis, and Scotiabank. The issue achieved wide primary market distribution with 27% of the bonds placed in Asia; 48% in Europe, Middle East, and Africa; and 25% in the Americas. By investor type, 56% of the bonds went to central banks and official institutions, 30% to banks, and 14% 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: To Advance Green Finance Development - Central Bank**

China will step up efforts to support green industries with innovative financial products and services, the country's central bank said on Tuesday. The People's Bank of China (PBOC) will push the development of green loans, bonds, and insurance, as well as derivatives as part of efforts to support peaking carbon dioxide emissions and achieving carbon neutrality, said Wang Xin, an official with the PBOC, at a press briefing. By the end of last year, the country's outstanding green loans reached nearly 12 trillion yuan (about 1.86 trillion U.S. dollars), topping the world, Wang noted. He added that the bad loan ratio of green loans stood far below the average of the loans issued by commercial banks. To increase green transition support, the central bank will optimize financial institutions' evaluations of their green finance businesses.

It will also make better use of digital and financial technology in environmental information disclosure and sharing, Wang said. China's policymakers have vowed increased financial support for green development during the key Central Economic Work Conference held in December. In line with the meeting, the central bank has listed improving the policy framework for green finance as one of its main tasks for 2021. The PBOC will channel more financial resources toward green development and promote a carbon emission trading market with reasonable pricing. It will also gradually improve green finance standards and continue promoting international green finance cooperation, the PBOC said during an annual work conference in January.

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## **China Reports Current Account Surplus in 2020**

China reported a current account surplus of 298.9 billion U.S. dollars in 2020 as the economy recovered amid effective epidemic control, official data showed Friday. Trade in goods posted a surplus of 533.8 billion dollars last year, while trade in services saw a deficit of 145.3 billion dollars, according to data released by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange. In the fourth quarter, the country saw a current account surplus of 130.2 billion dollars, with a surplus of 193.6 billion dollars in the goods trade. Trade in services reported a deficit of 28.4 billion dollars in the last quarter of 2020, the data showed.

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## **China's Central Bank Issues 25 Bln Yuan of Bills in Hong Kong**

China's central bank issued 25 billion yuan (about 3.87 billion U.S. dollars) worth of bills in Hong Kong on Friday. Among the total, 10 billion yuan worth of bills will mature in three months, and 15 billion yuan of bills will mature in 12 months, with the respective interest rates standing at 2.7 percent and 2.74 percent, according to the People's Bank of China (PBOC). The issuance was well-received by investors in the offshore markets, with the total bid amount reaching about 76 billion yuan, more than three times the amount in circulation, the PBOC said. This reflects the strong attractiveness of renminbi assets for overseas investors, as well as the confidence of global investors in the Chinese economy, the PBOC said. Since November 2018, the bank has established a standard mechanism for issuing central bank bills in Hong Kong.

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## **China's Loan Prime Rates Remain Unchanged**

China's one-year loan prime rate (LPR), a market-based benchmark lending rate, came in at 3.85 percent on Saturday, unchanged from the previous month. The over-five-year LPR, on which many lenders base their mortgage rates, also remained unchanged from the previous reading of 4.65 percent, according to the National Interbank Funding Center (NIFC). The lending rates have remained steady for 10 consecutive months, matching market expectations, analysts said. On Thursday, the People's Bank of China (PBOC), or the central bank, injected a total of 200 billion yuan (about 31 billion U.S. dollars) into the market via a one-year medium-term lending facility (MLF). The interest rate remained unchanged from the previous injection, at 2.95 percent. The central bank has reiterated that it will prioritize stability in its monetary policy and avoid making sudden shifts.

According to the PBOC's 2020 Q4 monetary policy report, the prudent monetary policy will be more flexible, precise, reasonable and moderate and will strike a balance between economic recovery and risk prevention. While maintaining liquidity at a reasonably ample level, the central bank will also provide more financial support to technological innovation, small and micro-sized businesses and green development, according to the report. Based on bank quotes calculated by adding a few basis points to the interest rate of open market operations (mainly referring to the medium-term lending facility rate), the LPR is calculated by the NIFC to serve as a pricing reference for bank lending. The LPR currently consists of rates with two maturities -- one year and over five years. The quoting banks submit their figures before 9 a.m. on the 20th day of every month. The NIFC calculates and releases the LPR at 9:30 a.m. on the same day or on the next working day.

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## **RMB Gains Larger Share in International Payment: SWIFT**

The Chinese currency renminbi (RMB), or the yuan, has retained its spot as the fifth most attractive currency for global payments by value in January but with a larger share as a global payment currency, said the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), a global provider of financial messaging services. In January, the RMB's share in global payment accounted for 2.42 percent, up from the 2.15-percent share in the same period in 2019, showed a monthly report published by the SWIFT. Value of RMB payments increased by 21.34 percent last month compared with that of December 2020, while in general all payments currencies decreased by 5.86 percent, the report added. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is the largest market for offshore RMB transactions, taking up 75.93 percent, followed by the economies of the United Kingdom, Singapore and the United States, according to the report.

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## **China's Overall Tax on Imported Goods Hits Record Low**

The overall tax rate on imported goods in China was slashed by more than a quarter during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), hitting an all-time low, the General Administration of Customs (GAC) said Thursday. The overall tax rate had dropped from 21.8 percent to 15.8 percent during the period, marking a decline of 27.5 percent, said Jiang Feng, an official with the GAC, adding that the huge decline was due to China significantly reducing its value-added tax (VAT) and tariffs during the period. However, the total amount of customs duties and taxes levied, mainly the VAT and consumption tax, on imported goods, saw an 8.7-percent growth to 8.99 trillion yuan (about 1.39 trillion U.S. dollars) in the last five years, he said. The growth indicates that China has substantially expanded imports during the 13th Five-Year Plan period, Jiang added.

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## **JAPAN: FSA Banks on AI to Bust Money Laundering**

The Financial Services Agency (FSA) plans to roll out an artificial intelligence system that can detect fraudulent money transfers at financial institutions nationwide as early as fiscal 2021 in an effort to strengthen measures against money laundering, The



Yomiuri Shimbun has learned. The move is aimed at preventing the opening of bank accounts by antisocial forces and thwarting the transaction of funds suspected of being tied to criminal organizations. The FSA will particularly encourage that the envisaged system is adopted by those regional banks that have outdated money laundering defenses. The agency has spent several hundred million yen in funding from the New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO) to develop the system and has been conducting trial runs during fiscal 2020 with NEC Corp., the Japanese Bankers Association and KPMG Azsa LLC.

It will compile a report on the tests in March. Discussions will be held in fiscal 2021 onward on the specifics of the system's usage fees and operational structure. In the envisaged system, AI will check financial institutions' transaction data, monitoring newly opened accounts and money transfers. It will detect unusual transactions, such as repeated transfers to a specific account in a short period of time or sudden withdrawals of large amounts of cash. The system could also flag persons suspected of illegal activity and notify relevant financial institutions. According to the National Police Agency, a record 440,492 transactions were reported in 2019 on suspicion of being connected to money laundering and other similar crimes, about 1.5 times more than in 2010. There has been no end to cases of bank accounts being opened with leaked personal information and used for fraud.

Megabanks and other large financial institutions have been stepping up protocols to verify user identification and rushing to create systems that will prevent fraudulent remittances. However, regional and shinkin banks — which tend not to have the same level of resources at their disposal — are thought to have fallen behind the times. Many financial institutions still perform user identification and fraud checks manually. The FSA aims to reduce the burden on financial institutions by sharing access to its planned system. Insufficient anti-money laundering measures pose a real liability to banks. In the past, a U.S. subsidiary of Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group, Inc. was slapped with huge fines and civil penalties by U.S. authorities for inadequate compliance with anti-money laundering laws. In 2008, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a group mainly comprising financial and police authorities from Japan, the United States and Europe, rated Japan's anti-money laundering measures as the lowest among the seven industrialized nations. As the FATF began reviewing Japan again in 2019, the introduction of the new AI system is also intended to improve Japan's credibility on the global stage.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 02/07/2021

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**SOUTH KOREA: To Spend 670 Bln Won on Cyber Security by 2023**

South Korea's ICT ministry said Thursday it will spend 670 billion won (US\$607 million) by 2023 to bolster the country's cyber security capabilities to respond to growing new digital threats. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it will develop infrastructure to quickly respond to cyber security threats, by working with major cloud and data center companies to collect threat information in real time, compared to the current system that relies on individual reports. Such threats will be quickly notified to companies, and the ministry plans to provide security patches by working with security companies. The ministry said it will expand the size of cyber threat information that it gathers to include those from major social networking services, the dark web and virtual services, such as remote education and digital health care.

It added that it will de-identify any personal or sensitive information to address concerns of user information being abused. The ministry said it hopes to reduce the rate of information security violations experienced by local companies to less than 1.5 percent by 2023, compared with 2 percent last year. To accelerate the private sector's adoption of digital services, the ministry said it will also conduct security checks and introduce security solutions to 1,300 small and medium-sized companies every year. South Korea ranked 15th in the global cybersecurity index in 2018 by the International Telecommunication Union, a United Nations agency. The ministry said it hopes to raise its rank to fifth place by 2023.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/18/2021

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## **Moon Says Gov't Open to Special 'Consolatory Money' for Korean People over Coronavirus Damages**

President Moon Jae-in floated the idea Friday of providing South Korean people with special "consolatory money" once the COVID-19 pandemic is overcome, according to his office. It was unveiled during his meeting with leaders of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) at Cheong Wa Dae. The president was responding to the proposal of offering another batch of emergency cash handouts to support people and businesses against the fallout of the pandemic, Cheong Wa Dae spokesman Kang Min-seok said. As the DP chief Lee Nak-yeon and floor leader Kim Tae-nyeong raised the issue of envisioned emergency direct financial support, largely aimed at stimulating the economy, Moon replied that the government can even give the people "consolatory money" to help boost both their "morale" and consumption under as South Korea works to get out of the coronavirus crisis, Kang told reporters. The left-leaning Moon administration and the party have agreed in principle on the necessity of additional cash handouts, which would be the fourth of its kind. The two sides, however, differ over some details, including the scale of relief money, with a massive amount of extra budgets required once again.

Political controversies go on as well over whether universal support is desirable or a

selective, or tailored, approach is better. Speaking at the outset of the meeting with the DP officials, which pool reporters were allowed to cover, Moon called for financial support that would be "as broad and as deep as possible" to minimize the "blind spots" of beneficiaries. He was apparently referring to the vulnerable. The president also asked the party to take the nation's fiscal room into account in setting the amount of relevant budgets. "On the other hand, I would like the party to give consideration to fiscal conditions," he said. Those critical of the Moon government argue that it's again pushing for a budget-gulping scheme for political gains in advance of the April 7 by-elections to pick new mayors of Seoul and Busan. The DP has been pushing to create a supplementary budget in order to offer the fourth batch of emergency relief cash handouts. It marked the first time that the president has invited the whole team of DP leaders to his office since it was elected at a party convention held last August.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/19/2021

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## **BOK Keeps Key Rate at Record Low amid Pandemic, Growth Estimate at 3 Pct This Year**

South Korea's central bank on Thursday held its benchmark policy rate unchanged at a record low of 0.5 percent, as the third wave of the new coronavirus undermined the scope of sustaining an economic recovery. As widely expected, the monetary policy board of the Bank of Korea (BOK) voted to leave the base rate steady in this year's second rate-setting meeting. The Bank of Korea (BOK) also maintained its growth outlook for the year at 3 percent but hinted it may revise up the figure depending on virus development. BOK Gov. Lee Ju-yeol told reporters that the central bank will maintain an easing of the monetary policy to support an economic recovery, citing high uncertainties over a growth track. "It is not appropriate to talk about normalizing the monetary policy for now," Lee said. Although the BOK raised its inflation outlook to 1.3 percent for this year, Lee said a rise in inflation would not lead to a shift in monetary policy.

Globally, commodity prices have significantly risen due to an easing of monetary policies by central banks. "It's a fact that there is an upward inflationary pressure, but we need to watch whether it will have a continuity," Lee said, adding that Thursday's rate-freeze decision was unanimous. In a statement, the BOK said South Korea's economy has continued to recover at a modest pace, supported by exports and facility investment. The BOK noted the fragility of the recovery because of uncertainties over the pandemic and weaker job markets. "The Korean economy has continued to recover modestly. Although private consumption has remained weak as social distancing has been prolonged, exports have sustained their buoyancy led by the IT sector, and facility investment has continued to recover," the BOK said.

"However, uncertainties surrounding the pace of recovery are judged to remain elevated," it said. Last month, the BOK froze the key rate as economic uncertainty heightened amid a flare-up in new coronavirus cases. To bolster the pandemic-hit economy, the BOK slashed the key rate to the all-time low of 0.5 percent in May last year after delivering an emergency rate cut of half a percentage point. Despite signs of a recovery in exports, weaker consumption has weighed on employment and increased pressure on policymakers. South Korea's economy contracted 1 percent last year, marking the worst performance in over two decades, but it appears to have returned to a growth track on the back of a mild recovery in exports. Exports rose 16.7 percent on-year in the first 20 days of February on strong shipments of chips and autos.

The number of employed people reached 25.8 million last month, 982,000 fewer than a year earlier, according to the data compiled by Statistics Korea. It marked the sharpest on-year fall since December 1998, when the country lost 1.28 million jobs in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. The country has reported job losses every month since March last year, when the nation lost about 195,000 jobs, the first on-year job loss since 2009. For all of 2020, the nation shed the largest number of jobs since 1998. Meanwhile, the BOK kept the nation's 2021 growth outlook at 3 percent in its latest update. The nation's economy is expected to grow 2.5 percent in 2022, the BOK said. The BOK also expected inflation to grow 1.3 percent this year, up from its previous forecast of 1 percent. The BOK raised its growth outlook of exports for this year to 7.1 percent from 5.3 percent. Facility investment is expected to grow 5.3 percent this year, up from a previous forecast of 4.3 percent. Private consumption is expected to grow 2 percent this year, down from a previous forecast of 3.1 percent.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/25/2021

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## **S. Korea to Sell 8 Trn Won of Treasury Bills in March.**

South Korea plans to sell 8 trillion won (US\$7.1 billion) worth of Treasury bills next month in a bid to fund its expansionary fiscal policy, the finance ministry said Friday. The bills, which have a maturity of 63 days, will be sold in five separate auctions in March, according to the Ministry of Economy and Finance. With the debt sale, the outstanding amount of Treasury bills is expected to rise to 15 trillion won next month. Treasury bills are usually floated to raise money to cover short-term financial shortfalls and thus are generally sold with a maturity of less than a year. The debts should be repaid within the year of issuance. The ministry said the proceeds from the sales will be used to support major state projects and repay maturing debt.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/26/2021

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## **DP, Government to Allot 19.5 Trn Won for 4th Relief Funds**

The ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the government agreed Sunday to allot 19.5 trillion won (US\$17.3 billion) for the country's fourth round of COVID-19 relief assistance. The agreement was made during a tripartite meeting of the DP, the government and Cheong Wa Dae, attended by DP Chairman Rep. Lee Nak-yeon, Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun and Kim Sang-jo, the presidential chief of staff for policy. The upcoming aid package will be funded by an extra budget bill worth 15 trillion won, with the remaining 4.5 trillion won to be assigned from the 2021 state budget, according to DP spokesman Rep. Huh Young. After pushing the budget bill through a Cabinet meeting on Tuesday, the government is planning to submit it to the National Assembly on Thursday for final approval. For its part, the ruling party is planning to expedite the bill's passage by the National Assembly, so that the new relief funds can be distributed as early as late March, according to the party spokesman.

"Having increased the amount of benefit money, (the fourth round of relief funds) will be provided in a beefier and more extensive manner," DP Chairman Lee noted, adding that 2 million more people may benefit from the upcoming assistance compared with the past. "(I) couldn't help thinking about the level of increase in sovereign debts, which will burden the next generations, but the party and the government agreed that recovering the livelihood of people (of today) needs to be the top priority," Prime Minister Chung noted. According to the DP chairman, the upcoming aid package has been designed to benefit a broader range of small businesses and self-employed people who closed or cut down business operations due to the state's social distancing orders. The party spokesman added that the upcoming extra spending bill has three pillars -- emergency relief assistance to small businesses and other vulnerable people, emergency employment measures and antivirus plans.

The relief assistance, in particular, will newly include micro businesses with five or more employees as its beneficiaries as well as businesses with annual sales of less than 1 billion won, an increase from the previous cap of 400 million won, according to Huh. Under the package, small business owners or self-employed people will also be given up to a 50 percent discount in electric charges for three months, the spokesman said. The costs for the national COVID-19 vaccination program, including those for vaccine purchases, will be covered by the upcoming extra spending bill, Huh added. Through the previous three rounds of COVID-19 relief funds, South Korea has distributed a total of 31.4 trillion won to small businesses and other vulnerable people hit by the brunt of the pandemic. This also included a total of 14.3 trillion won worth of stimulus checks given to all households in May.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/28/2021

## South-East Asia

### **INDONESIA: Records Trade Surplus of 1.96 Bln USD in January**

Indonesia recorded in January a trade surplus of 1.96 billion U.S. dollars, according to Indonesia's Agency of Statistics on Monday. The agency's head Suhariyanto said that the surplus was obtained from the non-oil and non-gas sector of 2.63 billion U.S. dollars, while the oil and gas sector underwent a deficit of 0.67 billion U.S. dollars. "The surplus came from the difference between exports of 15.30 billion U.S. dollars and imports of 13.34 billion U.S. dollars," Suhariyanto added. The values of Indonesia's exports and imports in January decreased compared to those in December. The export value was recorded at 15.30 billion U.S. dollars, down by 7.48 percent compared to that in December, but up by 12.24 percent than that in January last year. Meanwhile, the import value was recorded at 13.34 billion U.S. dollars in January, down by 7.59 percent compared to that in December, and dropped by 6.49 percent than that in January last year.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/15/2021

### **Indonesia's Money Supply Grows to over 480 Bln USD in January**

Indonesia's economic liquidity or money supply (M2) in January 2021 amounted to 6,761.0 trillion rupiahs (about 480.2 billion U.S. dollars), up 11.8 percent year-on-year, an official said. Based on its component, the M2 growth was driven by quasi money, which grew by 9.7 percent year-on-year, lower than the 10.5-percent growth in December last year, particularly for time deposits, Erwin Haryono, executive director of the Communication Department at the Bank Indonesia, said in a statement on Tuesday. The money supply in the narrow sense (M1) grew by 18.7 percent year-on-year in January 2021, up from 18.5 percent in the previous month, Haryono said. Based on its affecting factors, the slowdown in M2 growth in January 2021 was influenced by a slowdown in net claims to the central government, he explained. In January 2021, the growth in net receivables to the government was 54.8 percent year-on-year, down from the previous month's achievement of 66.9 percent, he added. Meanwhile, the credit growth in January 2021 improved, he said, adding that this improvement was reflected in credit growth which contracted by 2.1 percent year-on-year, easing from the contraction of 2.7 percent in December. He also pointed out that the growth in net foreign assets in January 2021 was 14.9 percent, higher than that in December 2020 of 13.6 percent.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/23/2021

## **MALAYSIA: International Reserves Stand at 108.6 Bln USD**

Malaysia's central bank, Bank Negara Malaysia, said on Monday that its international reserves stood at 108.6 billion U.S. dollars as of Jan. 29. The central bank said in a statement that the reserves position is sufficient to finance 8.6 months of retained imports and is 1.2 times total short-term external debt. The international reserves consist of 100.4 billion U.S. dollars in foreign currency reserves, 1.4 billion U.S. dollars in International Monetary Fund Reserves Position, 1.2 billion U.S. dollars in Special Drawing Rights, 2.4 billion U.S. dollars in gold and 3.2 billion U.S. dollars in other reserves assets.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/08/2021

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## **PHILIPPINES: Remittances Reach over 33 Bln USD in 2020**

Personal remittances from overseas Filipinos reached 33.194 billion U.S. dollars in 2020, lower by 0.8 percent than the 33.467 billion U.S. dollars recorded in 2019, the Philippine central bank said on Monday. Nonetheless, the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said that personal remittances remained a major source of the country's foreign exchange inflows, with the 2020 level representing 9.2 percent of the gross domestic product and 8.5 percent of the gross national income. The BSP said personal remittances from overseas Filipinos fell slightly by 0.3 percent year-on-year to 3.205 billion U.S. dollars in December 2020 from 3.216 billion U.S. dollars in December 2019. The BSP attributed the slight decrease to the 0.7 percent decrease in remittances from land-based workers with work contracts of one year or more to 2.494 billion U.S. dollars from 2.512 billion U.S. dollars recorded in December 2019. Meanwhile, the BSP said remittances from sea-based workers and land-based workers with work contracts of less than one year rose slightly by 0.8 percent to 647 million U.S. dollars in December 2020 from 642 million U.S. dollars in December 2019. An estimated 12 million Filipinos are working abroad, according to the Philippine government data.

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## **SINGAPORE: To Set Aside 8.3 Bln USD for COVID-19 Resilience Package in Budget 2021**

Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat announced on Tuesday while delivering Singapore's Financial Year 2021 Budget Statement that he will set aside 11 billion Singapore dollars (about 8.3 billion U.S. dollars) for a COVID-19 Resilience Package. Heng, who is also the Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies and



Minister for Finance, said the package is to address Singapore's immediate needs to safeguard public health and re-open safely, to support workers and businesses where needed, and to target support for sectors that are still under stress. According to the documents released by the Ministry of Finance (MOF), this includes 4.8 billion dollars dedicated towards public health and safe re-opening measures, 5 billion dollars dedicated towards support for workers and businesses, and 1.2 billion dollars dedicated towards support for specific sectors, such as aviation, tourism and land transport. The deputy prime minister also said that 24 billion dollars will be allocated over the next three years, to enable Singapore's firms and workers to emerge stronger. The MOF documents showed that the new budget sets out the Singaporean government's plans to continue to tackle the immediate challenges, and build a stronger Singapore that is economically vibrant, socially cohesive, with a sustainable home for all. The government will commit a total of 107 billion dollars in Financial Year 2021 to support these plans. Heng said the overall budget deficit for Financial Year 2020 is the largest since Singapore's independence, at 64.9 billion dollars, or 13.9 percent of GDP, driven by lower revenues due to dampened economic activity, and the significant expenditures needed to mount a decisive response to COVID-19. "For Financial Year 2021, Singapore's budget position remains expansionary as we continue to tide Singaporeans and our businesses over this crisis with the COVID-19 Resilience Package," he said, adding that an overall deficit of 11 billion dollars, or 2.2 percent of GDP, is expected for the new financial year. (1 U.S. dollar equals 1.32 Singapore dollars)

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/16/2021

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## **VIETNAM: Remittances to HCM City Hit All-Time High in 2020 - US\$6.1 Billion**

Remittances transferred to HCM City last year reached a record US\$6.1 billion, an increase of 12 per cent year on year. According to the deputy director of the HCM City branch of the State Bank of Việt Nam, Nguyễn Hoàng Minh, the figure was much higher than expected US\$5.5 billion, especially considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remittance companies said the amount increased as the Tết (Lunar New Year) holiday approached. Since many Vietnamese overseas could not return for the holiday, they chose to send remittances. The deputy general director of Đông Á Remittance Company, Vũ Thành Trung, said the remittance rate in January reached over US\$150 million. The main overseas remittance markets of Việt Nam remain the US, Australia and Canada. Some remittances also come from labour export markets such as Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia and South Korea. Representatives of some remittance companies said that several countries have recently tightened control of money transfer abroad, making it challenging for the companies to attract remittances to Việt Nam.



Customers familiar with remittances prefer to continue to receive cash in foreign currencies. However, due to the pandemic, it is now more convenient to receive money via bank accounts, and customers are thus encouraged to use this method. Recently, MoneyGram International, Inc., a global company focusing on cross-border remittance transfers and peer-to-peer (P2P) payments, began working with Visa, an electronic payment technology company, to deploy fast P2P money transfer in Việt Nam. Customers now can use the MoneyGram website or mobile applications to immediately transfer money to Visa cardholders in Việt Nam. Visa requires banks that help pay remittances to process the transaction within a maximum of 30 minutes after accepting the transaction. Customers can transfer up to \$2,500 per transaction and \$10,000 per day. From now until the end of June 30, customers can make international transactions from abroad to domestic Visa debit cards free of charge. According to the World Bank, the total amount of global remittances last year fell by 7 per cent. Of the total, remittances to Việt Nam were estimated at about \$15.7 billion. Việt Nam was listed among the top 10 countries receiving the most remittances.

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## **Hậu Giang Plans \$99.5m Spending on Industrial, Logistics Development in 2021**

Setting up an industrial park and a logistics centre this year is part of a development plan for 2021-25 that Hậu Giang Province in the Cửu Long (Mekong) Delta has just unveiled. The plan seeks to maximise the province's potential and available resources and develop manufacturing, logistics, trading, and, especially, agricultural and aquatic processing. The plan is focused on building comprehensive infrastructure for industrial parks and clusters, and soliciting investment in environmental treatment projects, projects that use advanced and environment-friendly technologies, processing vegetables and fruits, manufacturing, and energy. It envisages establishing an industrial park and making zoning plans for industrial parks for completing procedures for setting them up, including for the establishment of two new industrial clusters and expanding one, all this year. It also aims to efficiently implement national and local trade promotion programmes simultaneously. A number of renewable energy projects and projects in industrial parks and clusters are expected to start construction this year. With respect to logistics, the province plans to complete waterway and road transport infrastructure with high connectivity to meet cargo transportation needs and focus on developing supply chains for certain products, making them a driving force for socio-economic development. It will build a logistics centre and spend the entire amount earmarked for waterway and road transport development projects this year. The plan is expected to cost VNĐ2.29 trillion (US\$99.5 million) this year, with the central and local governments providing VNĐ 353.1 billion and VNĐ 58.4 billion, and enterprises the rest.

## **Tax Deadline Should Be Delayed for Businesses, Says MoF**

Businesses may have several additional months before they have to pay income tax and land-use fees, per a proposal from the Ministry of Finance (MoF) to the Government. The ministry proposed a five-month extension for business VAT tax, a three-month extension for income tax (for certain businesses only) and land-use fees, which may result in a more than US\$5 billion reduction in the State's budget collection during the first half of 2021. The proposal also included household and private businesses in sectors eligible for support as well as their income tax. The MoF said the State budget would still even out as taxpayers were expected to make full payments by the end of the fiscal year while citing numerous difficulties faced by the business community in dealing with the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as grounds for the proposal. The ministry stressed the importance of allowing businesses to hold on to their cash as it's essential to the country's economic recovery. This is the third proposal made by the ministry in support of the business sector.

Last year, tax offices issued extensions for nearly 185,000 businesses with a total tax payable of \$3.8 billion with the main benefits being 14 domestic car manufactures to the tune of \$870 million. Economist Đinh Trọng Thịnh said the Government must do more to support the business community, saying it is an important factor in maintaining social and economic security. Thịnh, however, added inspection and oversight of support policies must be thorough to prevent waste and corruption. Head of the General Department of Taxation Cao Anh Tuấn said reviews had been conducted by his department to gauge the damage caused by the pandemic to the business sector and local tax offices have been instructed to submit reports on if and how the pandemic has affected businesses under their jurisdiction. The department has also established online channels to answer tax-related questions, carried out administrative reforms and simplified the inspection process to support businesses.

## **Revenues from Forest Environmental Services Could Reach \$121m in 2021**

The Việt Nam Administration of Forestry (VNFOREST) aims to collect VNĐ2.8 trillion (US\$121.7 million) from forest environmental services this year. Under this policy, forest service users like tourism businesses or hydropower plants will have to pay

according to their use of forest resources to forest owners, who are local individuals, households, organisations or communities. According to VNFOREST Deputy Director Phạm Văn Điền, forest carbon sequestration and emission reduction services, a new feature of 2021, will add between VNĐ300 to 500 billion to the sector's annual income from environmental services. Last year, the revenue from those services stood at VNĐ2.56 trillion, meeting 91 per cent of the yearly target. The number fell short of expectations due largely to severe water shortages at large hydropower reservoirs in the north like Hoà Bình, Sơn La, and Lai Châu between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020, said the Việt Nam Forest Protection and Development Fund (VNFF). The shortage affected the performance of hydropower companies.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the production and operations of businesses employing these services. The fund said revenues from forest environment services supported 226 forest management boards and 138,000 forest owners, while creating incomes for 81 forestry companies and livelihoods for more than 172,000 families in mountainous areas, helping lift their living standards. Revenues from forest environmental services have become a sustainable source of finance that helps to increase the value of the forestry sector as well as contributes to GDP growth, according to the fund. Điền said the revenues come from exploiting the forests so the collection of the revenues should be re-invested into the protection and development of forestlands. Some of the revenues are used in efforts to improve forest management, preserve biodiversity, create jobs, sustainable livelihoods and raise public awareness. He said the current amount still does not reflect the true benefits the forests have brought about. According to Điền, forest environmental services income is now mainly sourced from hydropower plants and firms producing clean water. Experts recommended collecting environment service fees from other sources like ecotourism businesses, industrial production establishments, and aquaculture facilities.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 02/26/2021

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## South Asia

### **INDIA: Centre Launches Union Budget 2021 Mobile App for MPs & People to Access Budget Docs**

In a historic move by the Government of India, the Union Budget 2021 that is set to be presented today on February 1, 2021, is going to be paperless. The Centre has launched a dedicated Union Budget Mobile App for Android and iOS smartphones. This will provide the Members of Parliament (MPs) and the general public hassle-free access to the budget documents. Such a move is seen for the first time in the history of independent India wherein the Union Finance Minister Nirmala

Sitharama will present the budget through a tablet. As per the statement from the Union Ministry of Finance, All the 14 Union Budget documents including the Annual Financial Statement (popularly known as the Budget), Demand for Grants (DG), Finance Bill, and more will be available on the mobile application. The application has been developed by the National Informatics Centre (NIC) under the guidance of the Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), the statement added. To download the mobile application, the iOS users access it from the Apple App Store whereas, for the Android users, the app will be available on the Google Play Store. Also, the Centre has made the download link available on the Union Budget web portal [www.indiabudget.gov.in](http://www.indiabudget.gov.in). The users can download the app by clicking on the link to Download Mobile App, which in turn directs to the Google Play Store or Apple App store.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 02/01/2021

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## **Union Budget 2021-22| Industry Leaders' Perspectives on the Union Budget**

With the release of the Union Budget 2021-22 by the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman today, here are a few reactions from the industry leaders on the budget. Rajan Navani, Vice Chairman & Managing Director, JetSynthesys, said, "I'm happy to see the Union Budget 2021 is a forward-looking one, with massive spend commitment by the government across many sectors combined with large divestment and monetisation, along with the privatisation of two public banks and one insurance company. I'm particularly excited about the government's commitment to set aside an outlay of Rs 50,000 crore for the National Research Foundation, the setting up of a new Fintech hub, and an allocation to incentivise digital payments. Also, the move to exempt senior citizens over 75 years from filing tax returns if they are only on pension is a great tribute to their contribution to India. The extension of the tax holiday and exemption of capital gains will also enable businesses and startups to focus on growing their business. Most importantly, the proposed use of data analytics, AI and Machine Learning, optimising the Ministry of Corporate Affairs and tax portals, is indicative of the New India of 2022." Gurpreet Singh, Managing Director, Arrow PC Network Pvt. Ltd. (Titanium Partner – Dell Technologies) said, "Regressive rules had certainly affected the ease of doing business for many organizations and start-ups. However, the government's announcement of establishing a separate administrative structure especially for ease of doing business will help many organizations benefit in the future. Revision of the definition of small companies by raising the capital base to Rs 2 crore from the current limit of Rs 50 lakh will give a big boost to companies affecting their monetary status. The move to make changes in tax evasion has instilled confidence in common man that they would not be facing tax harassment. Earmarking Rs 1,500 crore for promoting digital payments and changing the tax audit limit from Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore will benefit

many and will allow transparency. Hiking of FDI from 49 per cent to 74 per cent is a good move. The announcement that the forthcoming census would be digital shows the government's initiative to practice what is being preached. On the other end, the emphasis on education, power and infrastructure sector will support the overall development of the nation.”

Shibu Paul, Vice President – International Sales at Array Networks, said, “The fiscal deficit for 2020-21 was estimated at 9.5 per cent of GDP, the government's aim is to bring it down by 5 per cent of the GDP by 2025-26 which is ambitious and certainly a welcoming initiative. The highlight in this budget is the announcement of the Asset Reconstruction Company and Asset Management Company to help banks tackle bad loans which have been a call by economists for many years. The government's proposal to use data analytics, AI, machine learning for the Ministry of Corporate Affairs' database is a boost to the digitalization where the Version 3.0 of MCA-21 includes additional modules for e-scrutiny, e-adjudication, e-consultation and compliance management. Connecting more than 1,000 mandis into E-NAM is an excellent move. Setting up a separate administrative structure for ease of doing business would help many organizations from various sectors. The faceless dispute resolution panel would help the citizens by keeping them safe from tax harassment. The importance to the healthcare sector, the stress made in green energy projects like keeping aside Rs 1,000 crore for solar energy and Rs 1,500 crore for renewable energy along with voluntary scrapping policy and the weightage given to education has made this budget wholesome.” S Sriram, Chief Strategy Officer, iValue InfoSolutions, said, “Budget 2021 was positive given the challenge around higher fiscal deficit due to low income. The key highlights of the budget include an additional allocation to health and wellbeing in a COVID ravaged year with Rs 35,000 crore allocation to COVID vaccination with four Indian vaccines shortly. It is also great to see 35 per cent enhancement of capital expenditure at Rs 5.54 lakh crore to revive economy around Road, Rail and Metro infra. It is encouraging to see focus around disinvestment with two PSU banks and an Insurance company being planned for the year with Rs 1.75 lakh crore target. FDI in insurance enhancement from 49 per cent to 74 per cent augers well for a country with very low penetration. The voluntary vehicle scrapping policy is set to help the auto sector and address the pollution challenges. While Rs 20,000 crore PSU bank recapitalisation looks on the lower side, reopening of IT assessment cases period reduction from six to three years should give comfort to the tax payers on documentation. Planned LIC IPO should set the mood right on disinvestment. The government could have put more money in the hands of people to sustain the recovery along with sops to Business on CapEx investments.”

Prashanth GJ, CEO, TechnoBind, said, “Increased spend on Healthcare and Infra are welcoming moves – as this will have a cascading effect on the economy in the medium term. Whether it is Highways or Railways the enhanced allocation is very encouraging. Also interesting is the 'Bad Bank' which will help address the stressed

assets through an ARC model. This will help keep the Banking system insulated from the spike of bad loans that are expected now – thereby allowing them to do business as usual by giving the much-needed support of credit in the system. The MSME allocation has been doubled – this too will help SME businesses in general which is a big market for us in the country. Support for furthering the idea of Digital India is also seen and it is very welcome – encouraging digital payments and the use of AI/ML in governance is exciting. Emphasis on Digital Payment is very good as this will go a long way in bringing in financial inclusion. Provisions in the GST and customs duty rationalization is something we look forward to.” Dr Ajay Data, Founder and CEO, VideoMeet, said, “The announcement by the Honorable Finance Minister regarding the startups was much required at the moment and will help the fledgeling startups with meagre resources to continue with their business operations without worrying about the compliance with complex taxes. The announcement comes soon after the PM announced the setting up of Rs 10,000 crore fund for seed funding of startups. These moves by the government make the intent of government clear that it wants to promote entrepreneurship and help the enthusiastic young entrepreneurs in the country. The setting up of separate administration structure to promote ease of doing business is a laudable move by the Finance Minister. Also, as predicted startups were given importance under this budget and the industry is poised to be greatly benefited with the Tax holiday extended by another year till 31 March 2022.”

Rajendra Chitale, CFO, Crayon Software Experts India, said, “It is a welcoming move that the government is emphasizing on the implementation of data analytics, AI, machine learning for the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA)’ database. We also welcome the digitization process and the introduction of e-scrutiny, e-adjudication, e-consultation and compliance management in MCA 3.0. After the adversities of 2020, tax holiday for another year to startups is a commendable move for the government. Again, the tax audit bar raised to Rs 10 cr for those transacting 95 per cent digitally shows the government’s commitment towards bringing in greater transparency. Apart from that the government’s promise on removing GST anomalies and the amount of Rs 1,500 crore earmarked for a scheme to boost digital payments are other welcoming moves for a stronger digitized India. Lalit Mehta, Co-founder & CEO, Decimal Technologies, said, “The promise on CAPEX should help in generating employment and also solve for long-term growth objectives. Some of the items that would see effect faster than others would be the FDI cap increase for Insurance, which will surely lead to a better-capitalized Insurance sector and better reach of Insurance to the masses. Privatization of PSBs is a welcoming move. This should lead to a few acquisitions of PSBs by private lenders. Hopefully, this will increase the reach of the private sector to rural markets and will enable these markets with new products and a digital ecosystem. The fintech hub in the GIFT city is a great step towards enabling the fintech industry and shows the government’s recognition of FinTech as a significant play in the financial sector. This should set the road for the creation of the required regulations and frameworks for FinTech to work with conventional lenders and banks. Fiscal deficit and achievement of divestment

targets is something that needs to be under close watch. Any slippage on any of these can put a spanner in some other initiatives. Overall a positive budget that tries to balance between long term and immediate needs.”

Ashraf Rizvi, Founder & CEO, Digital Swiss Gold & Gilded said, “The Sensex witnessing a rise of over 4.5 per cent signals the positive sentiment towards the Union Budget 2021. The gold and silver market received good news with a rationalization of import tariffs. The reduction in import duty on gold and other precious metals from 12.5 per cent to 10 per cent, will make jewellery cheaper in the domestic market for the buyer, as India continues to be the second-largest buyer of gold in the world. Moreover, the announcement of SEBI as the regulator for gold exchanges in India is also a welcome move as it hints at deeper regulation of digital transactions of the yellow metal, which is critical to earning consumer trust. Overall, a very positive shot in the arm for the Indian economy that looks to help India and its citizens recover in 2021 after a very difficult 2020. We at Digital Swiss Gold and Gilded will continue to ensure savings to our customers so that more investors consider gold as a critical asset in their investment portfolio.”

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## **Union Budget 2021-22 Key Takeaways from Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharama’s Budget Announcements**

For the first time ever in the history of independent India, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the annual Union Budget 2021-22 in a paperless manner reading her speech from a tablet. The Finance Minister commenced her budget address with a brief on the year 2020 and how unprecedented conditions caused due to COVID-19 pandemic have impacted the economy. She said, “The three Aatmanirbhar Bharat packages and the PMGKY package were a type of mini budgets that were released in the year 2020 to aid the people affected from the COVID crisis.” Union Budget 2021-22 Considering the economic condition of the country and a dire need to uplift the healthcare sector to overcome the pandemic, the latest Budget brought in various reforms and benefits for different sectors. Highlights of the Union Budget 2021-22: Addressing about Health sector, the FM said, “The total budget outlay for the Healthcare sector is Rs 2.23 lakh crore. This is 137 per cent more than the last year’s budget.” Moreover, the supplementary programme and the ‘poshan abhiyan’ will be merged and Poshan Abhiyan 2.0 will be launched to enhance nutrition to children, especially those from the poor sects of the society. In a major announcement for the health sector, the FM said, “Rs 64,180 crore will be invested over 6 years to improve primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare in addition to the National Health Mission.”

Further, she announced, “We will introduce a bill to set up a developmental Financial

Institution with a budget of Rs 20,000 crore.” Also, she proposed a sharp increase in capital expenditure at Rs 5.54 lakh crore in 2022 from Rs 4.39 lakh crore in 2021. Speaking on the development of roads and highways, the FM said, “The Centre aims to complete 11,000 km of national highways infrastructure in 2021. Moreover, major highway projects will be taken up in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal and Assam.” Addressing the Railways she announced, “I am allocating a record sum of Rs 1.10 lakh crore outlay for Railways, of which Rs 1.7 lakh crore is for capital expenditure only.” Further, she mentioned about Hydrogen Energy Mission that the Government of India would be taking up under which hydrogen gas will be generated from eco-friendly or green-powered sources. Adding to her address to the renewable energy sector, she informed that a sum of Rs 1,000 crore has been earmarked for solar energy corporation and Rs 1,500 crore for the renewable energy development agency. She announced, “Gas pipeline project will be taken up in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.” Besides this, 100 more cities will be added in the next three years to the gas distribution network, the FM added. Addressing the finance sector, the FM stated, “A further infusion of Rs 20,000 crore will be provided for the public sector banks.” Additionally, she said, “We propose to take up two PSU banks & a public sector insurance company for disinvestment... The Government’s disinvestment revenue target of 2022 is Rs 1.75 lakh crore.”

Speaking on the much-awaited Agriculture sector, the FM pointed out, “Over Rs 75,000 crore had been paid to wheat farmers in 2020-21 and 43.36 lakh farmers have benefited from this.” With this, she announced a proposal to increase the agriculture credit target to Rs 16.5 lakh crore. In another historic announcement the FM stated, “For the first time, social security benefits will be extended to gig and platform workers.” Also, the forthcoming census in 2021 would be the first-ever digital census of India, she added. Speaking on the Education sector, she informed, “We will be qualitatively strengthening over 15,000 schools under the National Education Policy.” Talking about fiscal deficit she said, “In RE 2020-21, the fiscal deficit pegged at 9.5 per cent of the GDP whereas the fiscal deficit in BE 2021-22 was at 6.8 per cent of the GDP. Our aim is to bring the fiscal deficit below five per cent of the GDP by 2025-26.” The FM also tabled a proposal to increase the contingency fund to Rs 30,000 crore during her budget presentation. Announcing further relief to MSMEs, she increased the capital expenditure for MSMEs to Rs 15.17 thousand crores which is the double of the expenditure proposed last year.

Speaking on tax exemptions she announced, “We shall reduce the compliance burden on senior citizens. Therefore, for senior citizens who only have a pension and interest income, I propose exemption of filing of income tax returns.” Apart from this, she announced an increase in tax audit limit from Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore. Also, the FM tabled a proposal to make dividend payments to Real Estate Investment Trusts (REIT) and Infrastructure Investment Trusts (Invits) free of TDS. Additionally, the FM also increased the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the insurance sector from 49 per cent to 74 per cent. To ease the filing of Income Tax returns, the FM announced



that the details of capital gains and interests from banks, post offices, etc. will be pre-filled. While concluding her speech she threw light on changes in the customs duties. She announced, "Customs duty on solar lanterns has been reduced to five per cent. Moreover, customs duty on cotton and auto parts has been increased to 10 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. However, the customs duty on copper scrap has been reduced to 2.5 per cent."

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## **Union Budget 2021: FM Sitharaman Announces Jal Jeevan Mission (Urban) to Benefit 28.6 mn Households**

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, while presenting the Union Budget 2021-22 on February 1, announced Jal Jeevan Mission (Urban) that will aim to provide drinking water to 28.6 million urban households. The FM earmarked a sum of Rs 2.87 lakh crore for implementation of the mission in due course of five years. In her budget presentation, the Minister said, "The Jal Jeevan Mission (Urban) aims at a universal water supply in all 4378 urban local bodies. With an outlay of Rs 2.87 lakh crore, around 28.6 million households will get tap connections and 500 AMRUT cities will get liquid waste management." Considering the budget share of the Jal Shakti Ministry, the Finance Minister had allocated a sum of Rs 60,030 crore for drinking water and sanitation. However, of this allotted sum, Rs 9,022.57 crore had been earmarked for the Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. Sitharaman had allocated a sum of Rs 50,000 crore for Jal Jeevan Mission in the budget. The previously launched Jal Jeevan Mission (Rural) in 2019, has provided nearly 30 million rural households with drinking water supply. The mission aims to provide drinking water to every rural household by 2024. This means that the rural mission has to cover a lot still as there are 189 million rural households in India, as per the official data.

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## **Union Budget 2021: Green Mobility & Augmented Public Transport in Focus**

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, while presenting the Union Budget 2021-22, announced green mobility schemes and augmentation of public buses running in various cities across the country. During her speech, she announced a Scheme to induct over 20,000 city buses in five lakh plus cities including Hill cities, Union Territories, North East States' capital cities, and more. The scheme aims to strengthen organized city bus services, improve urban mobility and ease of living. Moreover, the scheme components include procurement for city operations of all

types of new buses with clean fuel (excluding hybrid/ battery -based or electric buses that are already covered under the FAME scheme of the Department of Heavy Industries (DHI)). Also, associated infrastructure and support for a period of five years after procurement have also been included in the scheme. The FM had earmarked an outlay of about Rs 15,000 crore for this scheme. As per the government, it will boost the automobile industry, generate direct/ indirect employment and facilitate the cities to adhere to the Covid-19 guidelines including social distancing in public transport. The scheme will promote public transport, help in reducing congestion, pollution and accidents and promote clean air in these cities. Addressing on green mobility, Sitharaman stated that this scheme intends to provide impetus to green and clean urban mobility projects. It is a step in the direction of meeting climate change mitigation and sustainability goals. The scheme will focus on improving Non-Motorised Transport (NMT) infrastructure, promote innovative urban transit modes, strengthen Intelligent Transport System (ITS) facilities, retrofitting buses & other modes for energy efficiency/ clean fuel, and other technological and innovative measures for green urban transport. The Minister had set aside a sum of Rs 3,000 crore under this scheme for projects, which will be selected through the Green Urban Mobility Challenge. This will help in reducing pollution levels by inducing positive changes in travelling practices, improvement of urban mobility infrastructure and services such as pedestrian/ cycling pathways, last-mile connectivity, enhance IT applications and adopt innovations in implementation and financing of urban mobility projects.

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## **UP Govt to Present Paperless Budget 2021 Today**

Taking the eco-friendly and tech-centric move of the Government of India forward, the Yogi Adityanath-led Government of Uttar Pradesh is all set to present paperless Budget 2021 today for the first time in the history of the state. The budget to be presented today will be the fifth budget of the present government in Uttar Pradesh. Suresh Khanna, Finance Minister, Uttar Pradesh will table the budget in the Legislative Assembly at 11 am today. For the convenience of all the members of the State Legislature, iPads have been provided to view the budget highlights which will also be displayed on two big screens put up in the House. Anandiben Patel, Governor, Uttar Pradesh, had commenced the Budget Session on February 18 to a joint sitting of both houses. The session is scheduled to continue till March 10. On February 16, all the MLAs and MLCs have been tested for COVID-19 to ensure safety and security.

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## **SRI LANKA: 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/> 02/10/2021*

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**SLT Group's Operating Profit for 4Q 2020 Grew by 27-pct, Revenue Recorded at Rs. 24Bn**

Sri Lanka Telecom PLC (SLT) Group concluded financial year 2020 on a high note, with a significant 25% YoY growth in profit after tax to Rs. 7.9 Bn, despite many challenges faced by the Group arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Group revenue climbed to Rs. 91.1 Bn for the year with a 6% YoY growth, strongly underpinned by higher broadband revenue propelled by the accelerated fibre expansion programme and growth in mobile broadband services. Revenue for PEOTV and carrier services also advanced during the year. SLT Group increased EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Tax, Depreciation and Amortisation) by 16% YoY to Rs. 34.7 Bn in FY 2020, leading to a higher EBITDA margin of 38% compared to 35% in the previous year, mainly achieved through successful cost management measures. Group revenue for Q4 2020, rose by 4% QoQ to Rs. 24.0 Bn, recording the highest quarterly revenue achieved for FY 2020. The operating profit for the quarter increased by 27% compared to the same quarter of the previous year reaching Rs. 1.9 Bn, a decline of 33% compared to 3Q 2020. The Group profit after tax for the quarter reported at Rs. 1.1 Bn, a drop of 48% QoQ, mainly due to the higher operating costs and adverse impact from fluctuation in foreign currencies. Mobitel (Pvt) Ltd, the mobile arm of the SLT Group managed to grow its revenue despite adverse macroeconomic conditions prevalent in 2020. Mobitel reported a strong profitable growth due to simultaneous growth in revenue and reduction in operational expenditure. Mobitel revenue for FY 2020 stood at Rs. 43.2 Bn, up by 8% compared to FY 2019. Backed by the growth in revenue and aptly supported by operational efficiencies, Mobitel was able to record significant growth in all key profitability indicators. The Company recorded Rs. 3.1 Bn improvement in EBITDA, an increase of 23% YoY. EBIT increased by Rs. 2.6 Bn in FY 2020 which is an increase by 50% compared to FY 2019. Mobitel recorded its highest ever profit after tax of Rs. 4.9 Bn in FY 2020, an increase by 54% YoY. The Group paid a total amount of Rs. 17.1 Bn as direct and indirect taxes including levies to the Government in FY 2020.

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## Central-West Asia

### **AZERBAIJAN: May Increase Excise Rates on Several Goods**

Excise rates on several goods in Azerbaijan were proposed to be increased, Trend reports on Feb. 12 referring to the Azerbaijani parliament. This issue has been outlined in the changes to the Tax Code, discussed at a meeting of the Azerbaijani parliament on Feb. 12. In accordance with the offered changes, the excise rates on 1,000 cigarillos (thin cigars) may be increased from 31 manat (\$18.2) to 43 manat (\$25.3), on 1,000 pieces of tobacco and tobacco substitutes - from 31 manat to 35 manat (\$20.6), and on liquid for electronic cigarettes - from 20 manat (\$11.7) to 220

manat (\$129.4) per liter. Following the discussions, the amendments were put to a vote and were adopted on the second reading.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 02/12/2021

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## **Azerbaijani Banks' Foreign Currency Demand Down**

The Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) sold \$46.9 million to the local banks at the foreign exchange auction held with the participation of the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ) on February 18, 2021, Trend reports citing the country's CBA. The demand from banks at the auction was fully met despite decreasing by 14.7 percent compared to the previous indicator. At the end of the auction, the weighted average rate of the manat to the US dollar amounted to 1.7 AZN / USD. The first foreign exchange auction for a long time was held with the participation of SOFAZ on March 10, 2020, during which Azerbaijani banks purchased \$323.2 million. The CBA began to conduct currency auctions through a one-way sale of currency in a competitive environment from mid-January 2017. A decision was made in March 2020 to hold extraordinary currency auctions due to the increased demand of the population for foreign currency amid the failure of the OPEC + deal, which led to a sharp drop in oil prices.

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## **Azerbaijan Deposit Insurance Fund Discloses Amount of Compensations to Depositors of Closed Banks**

The compensation on insured deposits worth over 623.3 million manat (\$366.6 million) was paid to the depositors of the closed AtaBank, Amrahbank, NBC Bank and AGBank in accordance with the report of the Azerbaijan Deposit Insurance Fund (ADIF), Trend reports citing ADIF. Some 9,755 AtaBank depositors received compensation in the amount of 242.9 million manat (\$142.9 million); 5,794 Amrahbank depositors - about 140 million manat (\$82.3 million); 4,670 AGBank depositors - over 111 million manat (\$65.3 million) and about 4,200 NBC Bank depositors received compensation in the amount of over 129.2 million manat (\$76 million). The compensations have been paid to depositors of AtaBank and Amrahbank since June 1, 2020 in non-cash form through debit cards of Kapital Bank OJSC. The International Bank of Azerbaijan OJSC (IBA) is the agent bank through 20 branches for issuance of compensations on insured deposits in AGBank OJSC and NBC Bank OJSC. The compensations have been paid to the customers of these banks since June 16, 2020. Earlier, the Central Bank of Azerbaijan made a decision to cancel the licenses of four banks, namely, AtaBank, Amrahbank, AGBank and NBC Bank, all of them were declared bankrupt.

## **TURKMENISTAN: State Committee on Television to Switch to Self-Financing**

The State Committee of Turkmenistan for Television, Radio Broadcasting and Cinematography will gradually switch to self-financing, Trend reports with reference to Turkmenistan's State News Agency. The corresponding order on the modernization of the material and technical base of the state committee was given by President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov. Among the main tasks, the head of the state pointed out the importance of broad coverage in the world of the achievements and transformations of Turkmenistan during the years of independence, the preparation of video presentations, feature films, television and documentaries. It is also necessary to continue working to improve the quality of programs broadcast on TV and radio channels, to train qualified personnel, and to organize methodological seminars for them, ordered the president. Earlier, all laboratories and departments of Turkmenistan's Institute of Chemistry of the Academy of Sciences have switched to full self-financing since 2021. The Institute of Chemistry of the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan is the first scientific research institution, whose expenses are financed from its own funds. The institution switched to self-financing a year earlier than planned due to adaptation to market conditions. Thus, the transformation of the organizational form of the institute into a self-supporting one was carried out for several years and, in accordance with the decree of President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, is to be completed in 2022.

## **Oceania**

### **AUSTRALIA: Mortgages Soar as House Prices Hit Record**

Home loans continue to grow at a record pace, driven by enthusiastic demand from first-time buyers even as housing prices hit new highs in the first weeks of 2021. The risk of an overheating housing market may raise concerns for the Reserve Bank down the track. But economists do not expect it will be making any short-term changes to monetary policy when its board meets for the first this year on Tuesday. The Australian Bureau of Statistics said the value of new owner-occupier home loan commitments surged 8.7 per cent to \$19.9 billion in December, 38.9 per cent higher than a year earlier. The number of owner-occupier first home buyer loans rose 9.3 per cent, a 56.6 per cent rise since December 2019. "Federal and state government

measures, such as HomeBuilder, and historically low interest rates are supporting ongoing growth in housing loan commitments," ABS head of finance and wealth Amanda Seneviratne said.

Demand for mortgages from first home buyers are now at their highest level since June 2009, when similar rapid growth was triggered by the temporary tripling of a first home owner grant to help combat the global financial crisis. Separate figures show house prices across the nation rose by a further 0.9 per cent in January and now stand 0.7 per cent above the previous September 2017 peak. Regional property values grew at twice the pace of capital city housing markets, with the divergence more notable in Sydney and Melbourne, which are suffering from the lack of overseas migration. "Better housing affordability, an opportunity for a lifestyle upgrade and lower density housing options are other factors that might be contributing to this trend, along with the new found popularity of remote working arrangements," CoreLogic research director Tim Lawless says.

AMP Capital chief economist Shane Oliver believes the Reserve Bank may start feeling a bit uneasy about the pace of the rebound in lending commitments and house prices. "At the very least it would make sense for home borrower incentives to be wound back in the months ahead and not extended," Dr Oliver said. "It will likely remain premature for the RBA to start raising interest rates ... given continuing uncertainty and spare capacity regarding the wider economy." Still, Monday's data releases are another sign of Australia's rapid recovery from last year's recession. "The economy is already on the way back and betters the experience of most advanced nations in the world today," Prime Minister Scott Morrison told the National Press Club in Canberra. "Australians are now voting with their feet to join the economic recovery," he added, referring to the unexpected drop in the jobless rate to 6.6 per cent.

But shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers said the prime minister missed the opportunity to set out what he would do for the two million Australians who cannot find a job or find sufficient hours of work. New job advertising figures suggest further employment gains in the first half of 2021 are likely. The ANZ jobs ads series rose 2.3 per cent in January, the eighth consecutive monthly increase and are now at their highest level since April 2019. At the same time, manufacturers have used the usually quiet year-end holiday period to make up for the business lost over 2020 during the recession. The Australian Industry Group performance of manufacturing index increased by 3.2 points over the past two months to 55.3 points, indicating the sector is expanding.

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**Aust Mines Produce \$27bn Record Gold Haul**



Australian gold mines produced a record amount of gold in 2020, as the price of the precious metal reached all-time highs. The national gold mine output reached 327 tonnes, worth roughly \$27 billion, according to independent industry consultants Surbiton Associates. The price of gold reached an all-time high of \$2,868 per ounce in August last year. Investors fled to the gold markets in droves due to 2020's market volatility, and Surbiton managing director Sandra Close says the precious metal's role as a safe haven is set to continue. "It is likely gold will still be seen as a safe store of value, as it is tangible and you can hold in your hand," she said. Australia is the world's second-largest gold producer, and much of the precious metal is exported. Dr Close says the peak prices mean miners are processing more lower-grade rock.

"Although Australian gold production is remaining near record levels, we are seeing a significant overall drop in the grade of ore being treated," she said. Newcrest Mining's Cadia East operation in NSW produced the most gold in 2020, with 822,478 ounces, followed by Newmont Corp's Boddington in Western Australia at 670,000 ounces. The overall gold haul for 2020 was 1.5 tonnes more than in 2019, though down slightly on the 12 months to June 2020. There are several new or recommissioned operations that are expected to enter production in 2021, including Hillgrove in NSW, Kaiser Reef Ltd in Victoria, as well as Banda Mining and Novo Resources in WA.

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## **Carbon Capture Projects Receive \$50m**

The federal government is providing \$50 million in targeted support to a wide array of opportunities in carbon capture and storage. Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor will launch the Carbon Capture, Use and Storage Fund on Monday, one of the five priority areas for investment under the government's technology investment roadmap. Mr Taylor said carbon capture technologies would be critical to achieving net zero emissions from power generation, natural gas and hydrogen production as well as process emissions from heavy industries like cement and fertiliser production. "Australia has the potential to be a world leader in geosequestration," Mr Taylor said in a statement. "We have the right geology and storage basins." The fund will provide targeted support to a wide array of opportunities, including carbon recycling. Resources, Water and Northern Australia Minister Keith Pitt said the fund will support the ongoing use of Australia's abundant natural resources. "Technology like this will be the key to further reducing emissions and ensure our premium quality coal will play an important role in Australia and the world's energy needs for decades to come," Mr Pitt said. The fund is part of the government's \$1.9 billion new energy technologies package in the 2020/21 budget. Mr Taylor will launch the fund at the University of Newcastle's institute for energy and



resources on Monday.

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## 6、 Private Sector

### Asia-Pacific

#### **Credit to Small Firms to Boost Economic Recovery**

The Lao PDR Ministry of Industry and Commerce today launched a \$40 million emergency finance support project, backed by the World Bank, to help small and medium-sized businesses recover from the economic slowdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was approved by the World Bank Board of Directors in October 2020 and signed by the government in November. Mme Khemmani Pholsena, Minister for Industry and Commerce, declared the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise (MSME) Access to Finance Emergency Support and Recovery Project operational, enabling local banks and financial institutions to provide loans to small businesses that have been affected by closed borders and reduced trade over the past year. According to the Lao Statistics Bureau, over 94% of all Lao enterprises are microbusinesses.

Three banks — Lao-China, Maruhan, and Sacom — have been selected to participate in the project to lend funds to small companies that apply for loans through Line of Credit. The project is providing technical support to the Bank of the Lao PDR, which is managing a credit guarantee facility, and technical assistance to strengthen the capacity of participating businesses. More financial institutions are expected to join the project once negotiations on terms of lending are complete. “This initiative will reinforce the stability of small businesses, which are vital to the Lao economy”, said World Bank Lao PDR Operations Manager Viengsamay Srithirath. “By making it easier for small firms to access credit, the government and banks are removing one of the top three obstacles to business in Laos”. Ms Viengsamay congratulated the Ministry of Industry and Commerce for the speedy preparation of the project during a time of economic difficulty, and said its execution would build on the success of the World Bank’s Small and Medium Enterprise Access to Finance Project, which closed at the end of 2020 after disbursing around 180 loans to small Lao companies.

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## **Financing Asian Development with ADB's Vice President for Private Sector Operations and PPPs**

COVID-19 continues to shine a harsh light on the world's infrastructure deficits. As a result, the role of multilateral development organizations, as well as the private sector, is more important than ever to help stimulate economies. As part of the ADB's response, its vice-president for private sector operations and Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), Ashok Lavasa, is deeply engaged in Asia's economic and social recovery. Mr. Lavasa brings a wealth of experience to Asia's fight to meet its development challenges. He shared some of his experiences and vision with the PPP industry publication, Partnerships Bulletin. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the annual infrastructure gap in the Asia-Pacific region was a staggering \$1.7 trillion. ADB's seeks to achieve \$2.50 of long-term co-financing for every \$1 of private sector financing by 2030. In the post-COVID-19 'new normal' world (once the crisis phase is over), PPPs will become even more relevant and useful.

1. In your new role, what will be the key priorities under your leadership?

My priority is to see that the bank's strategy is implemented in a manner that [allows] the bank to continue to play its role as a development partner of its member countries. The Asian Development Bank has very clear objectives and strategies for its private sector and PPP operations. These include, among others, catalyzing and mobilizing financial resources for private sector and PPP operations. Our objectives include achieving \$2.50 of long-term co-financing for every \$1 of ADB's private sector financing by 2030; strategic use of public-private partnerships to achieve specific infrastructure objectives; and improving the business environment in our developing members. While pursuing these objectives, we are committed to significantly enhancing our gender focus, achieving increased climate finance targets and expanding our private sector and PPP operations in more frontier economies, including member countries which are small island developing states or are experiencing fragile and conflict affected situations.

2. ADB is set to play a crucial role in the economic recovery of the region. How do you see PPPs fitting into this? Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the annual infrastructure gap in the Asia-Pacific region was a staggering \$1.7 trillion. As we know, many governments are already struggling under significantly higher expenses for social care and health services due to COVID-19, so the funding gap for key infrastructure could increase further. In response to the crisis, we see governments increasing their focus on PPP policies and laws and regulations. We also see governments reaching out to ADB to go beyond projects and provide them with more comprehensive portfolio and programmatic solutions. In the post-COVID-19 'new normal' world (once the crisis phase is over), PPPs will become even more relevant and useful. Governments that are unable to spend upfront capital expenditure on building infrastructure and services may consider structuring PPPs using an availability payment model.

3. From a wider perspective, what do you see for the next five years for the Asian PPP market?

Institutionally, we will soon be working on a PPP Directional Paper for ADB to cover the period up to 2030, which will update our current operational plan prepared in 2012. That will set out our strategic directions for PPP in line with Strategy 2030. In the near-term, we see that investments in healthcare and services will increase. Over the medium- to long-term, the need for 'hard' infrastructure would remain. In some cases, demand for technology solutions supporting distance education has also been growing. In areas with significant migrant worker populations, we have already started preparing projects that would attract private sector investment and operations and maintenance in housing estates for industrial workers and other vulnerable people. We also need to be cognizant that PPPs are still a nascent product in many parts of Asia. The next two or three years of recovery will provide the private sector with an increased understanding of the risks of infrastructure. The private sector also will need to revisit infrastructure PPPs to make sure their bids are not guided by irrational exuberance. In the longer term, with some fine-tuning both from the public sector and private sector, we can expect PPPs to continue to play a bigger role in closing the infrastructure gap.

4. As someone who has a deep understanding of the public sector, how can governments and authorities best leverage the support of the ADB and private capital? We are extending our active support to client governments across the region in developing sector masterplans, identifying innovative delivery methods and financing structures, and identifying essential infrastructure projects for private sector participation, and these would be supported through our existing project preparation facilities. To better leverage private capital, governments in our developing member countries will need to substantially improve their project identification, selection, and structuring process to make sure that the projects they bring to tender offer value for money for the government, and are bankable for the private sector. We see an increasing demand for PPPs in various urban sectors, but the capacity of cities to prepare and leverage PPPs needs strengthening. ADB has started an initiative for cities to increase their capacity, improve their resilience and "build back better" following COVID-19. The initiative is providing early-stage assistance to cities to improve the quality of the pipeline of municipal PPPs, and pair this with increased resource mobilization to enhance cities' resilience to such shocks in the future.

*From <https://www.adb.org/> 02/03/2021*

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## East Asia

### CHINA: To Further Promote Recovery of Civil Aviation Industry

China will further promote the recovery of the civil aviation industry in 2021 with comprehensive measures, according to civil aviation authorities. The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) proposed the target of promoting the industry to further recover from the impact of COVID-19 and boost more balanced and coordinated development in the sector. The CAAC will endeavor to sustain the industry to realize 590 million air passenger trips in 2021, 90 percent of the level seen before the outbreak of COVID-19, and an air freight volume of 7.53 million tonnes in 2021, nearly at the pre-COVID-19 level. Based on the strategy of expanding domestic demand, the CAAC will make moves to explore market potential and stimulate market vitality, according to the CAAC. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the global economy hard in 2020. Thanks to effective control measures, China's economy has rebounded and domestic air travel was quickly re-established.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/05/2021

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## **Private Chinese Company Launches Smart Suborbital Rocket**

A new smart suborbital rocket developed by a private Chinese company was successfully launched from a site in northwest China on Friday, according to the company. The "Chongqing Liangjiang Star" OS-X6B, with a length of 9.4 meters, was launched at 5:05 p.m. It completed a flight time of about 580 seconds, reaching a maximum altitude of about 300 km, said OneSpace Technology Group Co. The launch marks the first time that a private Chinese rocket company has realized controlled re-entry flight, human-in-the-loop space flight control, and (upper stage) redundant fault-tolerant control, according to OneSpace. It also completed the verification of a number of key technologies and obtained a large amount of real flight environment data. Established in 2015, the Beijing-based OneSpace is China's first private company with a license to develop carrier rockets, with a manufacturing base in southwestern Chongqing Municipality.

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## **Chinese Private Sector Encouraged to Ensure Employment**

Gao Yunlong, chairman of the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC), on Monday encouraged private businesses to ensure full and high-quality employment and enhance people's well-being. Gao made the remarks at a video gathering in Beijing to award private enterprises and entrepreneurs for their outstanding performance in creating jobs and caring for employees. Praising the private sector in supporting employment last year, Gao called on private enterprises to make new and greater contributions to fully building a modern socialist country.

The meeting awarded honorary titles to 32 entrepreneurs in recognition of the care they have shown to employees, while 32 people were awarded for their contributions to enterprises. The gathering was jointly held by the ACFIC, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/08/2021

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## **Old Chinese Industrial Base Sees Surging Number of Tech Firms**

Heilongjiang Province, part of the country's old northeastern industrial base, saw its number of high-tech enterprises jump by 54 percent year on year amid transformation efforts. The total number of high-tech companies in the province reached 1,932 last year, according to the provincial statistics bureau. About 12,000 tech companies were registered in the province last year, and its accumulative number of tech companies now exceeds 40,000, thanks to a three-year action plan to develop tech enterprises. Investment in high-tech manufacturing increased by 13.7 percent year on year in the province. Heilongjiang, also an agricultural base in China, reported year-on-year economic growth of 1 percent in 2020, with its GDP hitting 1.37 trillion yuan (212.7 billion U.S. dollars).

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/11/2021

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## **China's Steel Base Hebei Makes Progress in Cutting Overcapacity**

Hebei Province, China's leading producer of iron and steel, has made remarkable progress in reducing overcapacity amid an ongoing industrial upgrading, according to a work report from the provincial government. From 2016 to 2020, Hebei reduced its crude steel production capacity by over 82 million tonnes, said the report delivered at the annual session of the provincial legislature, which opened on Friday. During the period, the province also saw the number of national-level high-tech enterprises increase nearly five-fold from 1,628 to 9,400. Hebei is shifting its energy and industry structures from coal and steel to emerging and high-end industries, in an effort to achieve high-quality development and reduce pollution. In the next five years, the province will accelerate its efforts to boost innovation, aiming to nurture 100 leading tech firms with global competitiveness, according to the report.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 02/20/2021

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## **China's Machinery Industry Posts Steady Growth**

China's machinery industry posted steady performance in 2020, with revenues and profits beating expectations, according to the China Machinery Industry Federation. The added value of the machinery sector rose 6 percent year on year, compared with the 3.4-percent increase seen by the country's manufacturing industry. The better-than-expected performance of the sector was partly due to China's positive fiscal policies, said Chen Bin, executive vice president of the federation. The added value of the industry is expected to rise around 5.5 percent year on year in 2021, and its revenues and profits will likely grow by 4 percent, Chen said. The country will also strive to strike a balance between machinery imports and exports this year, he said.

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## **JAPAN: Subsidy Applications for Small, Midsize Firms to Go Fully Digital**

The Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry plans to fully digitize applications for subsidies and benefits for small and midsize companies by fiscal 2023, according to sources. The move is aimed at encouraging small and midsize firms to speed up steps toward digitization. More than 100 procedures are expected to be covered under the plan. The ministry will, in principle, only accept applications through the existing government system and will stop accepting applications at regional Bureaus of the Economy, Trade and Industry or by mail. To reduce the administrative burden on companies when applying for subsidies, the ministry plans to establish a system to store financial information and past records of subsidies, with an eye on using cloud services to manage information on the internet. This will eliminate the need for companies to enter such information for each application.

Only about 60% of small companies use cloud services. The ministry aims to raise the rate to about 80%, matching the level where large companies are at. Support for companies unfamiliar with electronic procedures will be provided through the dispatch of support staff to chambers of commerce and industry. The ministry has, so far, dealt with digitization through procedures such as subsidies to support the purchase of tech equipment. In fiscal 2021, it will start preparations to shift to electronic applications for subsidies to support the expansion of sales channels. The ministry plans to expand the scope of the electronic system in the future, with an eye on digitizing all application procedures except for those related to local governments, such as subsidies provided to cope with natural disasters.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 02/05/2021

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## **Japanese Companies Shun Blanket Wage Hikes amid Coronavirus Pain**

Nearly three quarters of Japanese firms have no plan to offer blanket base pay hikes at this year's shunto labor talks, with two thirds keeping wages flat or cutting them as the coronavirus pandemic hits earnings hard, a Reuters poll found. In a sign labor costs are straining profits, three in five firms will keep the number of employees flat in the coming financial year, while a quarter intend to raise the head counts and 17% plans to cut them, the Corporate Survey showed. Many firms in the Feb 2-12 poll dismissed uniform base pay hikes as out of the question due to slumping profits and future uncertainty amid the pandemic. And those who abide by pay rises will do so to retain young and skilled workers. "We won't raise base pay so that we can avoid increasing cost factors at a time when we cannot even foresee the future," a manager of a steel maker wrote in the survey.

A paper and pulp maker manager wrote: "We'll carry it out to secure new employees and keep young workers from changing jobs." The prospects for tough labor negotiations will likely prompt labor unions to prioritize job security over wage hikes, weakening momentum towards boosting private consumption that makes up more than half of the economy. The Corporate Survey, conducted for Reuters by Nikkei Research, canvassed 482 large and medium non-financial Japanese corporations on condition of anonymity because they can express opinions more freely. Managers from roughly 220 firms responded. Government data out last week showed wages fell 1.2% in 2020, with overtime pay tumbling 12%, as a state of coronavirus emergency and curbs on economic activity forced bars and restaurants to shut or cut hours to prevent the virus spread.

Japan's biggest business lobby Keidanren has shrugged off labor demand for blanket pay rises as "unrealistic" for the pandemic-hit companies, while labor groups led by Rengo, an umbrella union confederation, have called for uniform base pay hikes of 2%. Major firms offered pay hikes of 2% or more each spring for seven straight years through last year as the government pressured businesses to boost pay to defeat the deflation that has dogged Japan for two decades. However, the coronavirus-impact may have changed all that. Japanese firms have recently begun to take a more varied approach on remuneration, with more and more companies shifting to merit-based wages rather than seniority-oriented pay so as to lure young, skilled workers. The ongoing shift marks structural changes in Japan's labor market, with about 40% of workers being lower-paid part-time staff and contract workers - double the proportion seen in 1990.

From <https://japantoday.com> 02/20/2021

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**SOUTH KOREA: Moon Vows Speedier Deregulation for AI Sector**

President Moon Jae-in said Thursday his government will accelerate its drive for the introduction of legislation and deregulatory measures to foster the artificial intelligence (AI) sector. He was speaking in his video message for a ceremony held in Gwangju, 330 kilometers south of Seoul, to kick off a major project to create a "national AI complex." A total of 620 billion won (US\$550 million) will be spent over the coming four years, with more than 1,200 jobs expected to be created. NHN Corp., South Korea's leading game and internet company, plans to pour 210 billion won to establish a top-notch AI data center there. "As a key hub of South Korea's artificial intelligence (field), it would serve as an advance base to make the country's dream come true to become an AI powerhouse, beyond an IT power, in the post-coronavirus era," the president said. He said the government will speed up efforts for legislation on data and AI use as well as for related deregulatory steps.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/04/2021

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## **IoT Subscriptions Top 10 Mln in S. Korea Last Year Data**

South Korea's internet-of-things (IoT) device subscriptions hit over 10 million last year on the back of growing use of connected cars and remote control services. As of the end of last year, the number of mobile connections to such devices stood at 10.05 million, up around 2 million from the previous year, according to data from the Ministry of Science and ICT. IoT devices range from connected vehicles to home appliances that exchange data with other devices over the internet, and they can provide remote control services. Subscriptions to remote vehicle control services grew by 1.17 million on-year to reach 3.64 million last year. Such connected car services allow remote control over a vehicle's engine, infotainment and air conditioning system. The country's total IoT subscriptions are set to grow further this year as the government encourages wider use of IoT devices. Last year, the ICT ministry eased radio wave assessment processes for IoT devices to spur the adoption of connected services. The ICT ministry plans to invest 12.6 billion won (US\$11.4 million) this year for projects to strengthen the wider ecosystem of IoT services and products. The country's major mobile carriers have also set out to boost IoT subscriptions based on their 5G networks. SK Telecom Co., the country's largest wireless carrier, has restructured its mobile business to place IoT services as one of its nine core business divisions.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/15/2021

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## **Targeted Support to Pandemic-Hit Sectors Is Desirable for S. Korea OECD Chief**



The head of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recommended Wednesday that South Korea provide targeted support to the sectors hit hard by the pandemic in light of growing pressure on public finances. Angel Gurría, secretary-general of the OECD, said that providing selective support will help boost private consumption, compared with universal assistance to all families. "It is important to ensure that public money is spent efficiently, all the more so as Korea is the world's fastest ageing country, which implies considerable upward pressure on public spending going forward," Gurría said in an email interview with local media. His remarks came as South Korea is seeking to draw up an extra budget to provide another round of emergency relief handouts to small merchants and shop owners stung by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A controversy has heated up in South Korea over whether the country should offer targeted support or universal stimulus checks to cope with the economic fallout of the pandemic. The country's finance minister has opposed providing across-the-board support amid mounting government debt. Since last year, South Korea has provided three rounds of pandemic emergency handouts totaling 31.4 trillion won (US\$28.4 billion), including the 14.3 trillion won stimulus checks doled out to all households in May. Gurría said providing targeted support measures to the pandemic-hit sectors will have "greater multiplier effects, imparting a greater boost to private consumption," compared with universal support to all families. "The challenge, as always, is to agree on who exactly should be targeted and how much help is called for, but clearly some degree of targeting is warranted," he said. On deepening inequality caused by the pandemic, known as a "K-shaped recovery," Gurría said the Korean government should adopt specific policies for under-represented and disadvantaged groups to prop up the labor market.

"These include measures such as facilitating women's return to work after an absence from the labor market, continuing efforts to diversify vocational education options to attract more young people, and expanding training opportunities for low-skilled older workers," he said. Gurría said South Korea needs to carry out "smart" tax reforms in the face of mounting fiscal pressures from rapid aging and falling tax revenue. "Tax reforms that increase labor market participation, in particular for women, should be put high on the tax policy agenda, he said. "Strengthening the role of environmentally-related taxes to fight climate change will be another reform priority." The OECD chief added that introducing carbon pricing will be a "highly effective" policy for helping the country meet the goal of going carbon neutral by 2050. "By increasing the price of high-carbon energy, carbon prices reduce demand for carbon-intensive fuels," he noted. The interview was conducted on the occasion of a conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Korea Development Institute, a state-run think tank.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 02/17/2021

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## **Bill Aims to Compensate SMEs for Losses from Virus Restrictions, Starting in July**

Small businesses and microenterprises that have suffered due to COVID-19 and the accompanying restrictions could be eligible for government subsidies as early as July, as the legislative process is underway. According to officials with the ruling Democratic Party of Korea and the government on Sunday, their representatives were currently fine-tuning the legal framework to offer compensation to microenterprises that had been ordered to close or scale back their operations as part of the national social distancing rules. To prevent the spread of the new coronavirus, the South Korean government has imposed strict social distancing measures. Private gatherings of more than five people were banned, and high-risk businesses such as restaurants, cafes and gyms were ordered to close or reduce their operating hours. A bill to revise the Act on the Protection of and Support for Micro Enterprises, initiated by Democratic Party Rep. Song Gap-seok, is currently pending at the National Assembly. If successful, it would systemize the compensation process in law. While the bill excludes businesses that were not affected the government restrictions, there is still room for discussion on who should be eligible for compensation and how much they should receive. It was left to the deliberation committee to decide those details.

There are also concerns that the relief program will increase the burden on the country's fiscal soundness. Yet the ruling camp is pushing to pass the bill through the parliament in March so that struggling small businesses can receive subsidies in July at the earliest. If Rep. Song's bill becomes law, it will take effect three months after it is proclaimed to the public. Businesses that are found to have violated the COVID-19 restrictions or neglected their disinfection duties, however, would be excluded from compensation and could be fined as much as 3 million won (\$2,667). In a meeting with the Korea Federation of Micro Enterprise on Friday, SMEs and Startups Minister Kwon Chil-seung vowed to come up with measures to support small-business owners. "I appreciate the efforts and sacrifices made by the small enterprises as they follow the government's social distancing measures," Kwon said. "I feel the need to legalize the compensation processes for microenterprises and to offer the fourth (round of) COVID-19 relief funds to more people." Amid the ongoing pandemic and social distancing, hundreds of small enterprises, including cafes and restaurants, have filed legal action against the government seeking compensation.

*From <http://www.koreaherald.com> 02/28/2021*

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**South-East Asia**

## **PHILIPPINES: Major Telecom Player DITO Set for Commercial Launch**

DITO Telecommunity Corp., one of the major telecom players in the Philippines, is all set for commercial rollout on March 8, the company said on Tuesday. DITO Chief Administrative Officer Adel Tamano announced the commercial launch a day after the company passed the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) first network audit. On Monday, the NTC confirmed that DITO has met its initial population coverage and minimum average internet speed commitments to the Philippine government. DITO said the company, which is owned by Davao-based businessman Dennis Uy and China Telecom, will offer its services first in the country's southern Mindanao region and central Visayas region. Tamano said the commercial rollout will be done "in waves," opening first in 17 cities and municipalities, including Davao City and Cebu City. DITO currently covers about 45 percent of the Philippine population and is committed to covering 84 percent in five years. "It's a phased launch. We are going to first start in Mindanao. There's a sentimental reason for that. If you recall, before DITO became DITO, we were the Mindanao Islamic Telephone Company. It was actually set up to serve the underserved areas in Mindanao. We thought it fitting to start the initial offer there," Tamano said. Tamano said DITO will start selling SIM cards in about 20 stores in the Visayas and Mindanao regions. Online distribution will follow "a few weeks after," he added. Tamano said DITO is also talking with its Chinese partners to bring in 5G-enabled handsets, required for 5G connectivity. Chief Technology Officer Rodolfo Santiago said DITO is on track with its target for the second technical audit scheduled for July. DITO won a government-led bidding in 2018 to introduce new competition in a market where industry incumbents PLDT Inc. and Globe Telecom are two main players.

*From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 02/23/2021*

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## **VIETNAM: Programme Rolled Out to Back SMEs' Digital Transformation**

HÀ NỘI — The Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) officially rolled out a programme supporting the digital transformation of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), called SMEdx, in Hà Nội late last week. It is part of a series of projects to support SMEs via "Make in Việt Nam" platforms, carried out by MIC in partnership with the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Việt Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), and the Việt Nam Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (Vinasme) this year. Speaking at the launch ceremony, Deputy Minister of Information and Communications Nguyễn Huy Dũng said the SMEdx programme provides an opportunity for the SME community to explore and experience different digital platforms in order to select one that best fits their needs. The programme will

also seek new digital transformation solutions for SMEs by sector in the future, he added. Việt Nam is home to about 800,000 enterprises, 98 per cent of which are SMEs. The COVID-19 crisis has taken a toll on more than 90 per cent of SMEs, with their total revenue plunging more than 50 per cent last year. About 24 per cent suspended operations and the number of new SMEs was down 15 per cent. Some 47 per cent of surveyed SMEs said they believe digital transformation will be vital for their success. Enterprises can visit <https://smedx.vn> to learn more about digital transformation and suitable ways to approach digital transformation and to explore digital platforms that fit their needs. Consultation and support are also available.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 02/01/2021

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## Central City to Develop Hi-Tech Supportive Industries

Plans are in the pipeline to build an industrial park in Đà Nẵng dedicated to supportive industries. It is part of the Government's master plan of industrial park development from 2030-2045. It will be built on the edge of the Đà Nẵng Hi-Tech Park. Head of the city's Hi-Tech park and the Industrial Zones Authority (DHPIZA), Phạm Trường Sơn said the decision was signed by Deputy Prime Minister Trịnh Đình Dũng, and the 58.5ha supportive industries park will offer investment for domestic and foreign businesses. Sơn said the supportive industry park, which is sandwiched between the Hi-Tech Park and Đà Nẵng Information Technology Park in Hòa Vang District, has completed 85 per cent of infrastructure since 2016. He said Đà Nẵng has yet developed supportive industries – one of the disadvantage factors of the city in luring investment from domestic and foreign investors. Sơn said the city wants to boost the development of supportive industries over the next decade. The city has been building a development plan on three new industrial zones – Hòa Cầm, Hòa Nhơn and Hòa Ninh on total 880ha – for approval by the Prime Minister.

According to DHPIZA, the construction of the three new IZs would be soon commenced in 2021. The city has called for investment for infrastructure works on the three new IZs in 2020-23 with an estimated investment capital of VNĐ13.8 trillion (US\$604 million). The new IZs have been designed as 'green' and 'clean', and hopes to attract hi-tech and environmentally-friendly industries. The Đà Nẵng-based Sunshine Aerospace components manufacturer plant, which was invested by the Universal Alloy Corporation from the US worth \$170 million, began operation after one year of construction in March of 2020. Đà Nẵng's industrial infrastructure projects offer advantage location for investors as it boosts connection of key traffic routes including the Đà Nẵng-Quảng Ngãi Expressway, the Chân Mây Economic Zone in Thừa Thiên-Huế, the Chu Lai Economic Open Zone in Quảng Nam and Dung Quất Economic Zone in Quảng Ngãi Province. The Hi-tech Park and IZs would be a magnet for global industrial firms and producers, offering flexible land rent, land clearance, income tax and import tax policies. Investors with projects valued at more

than \$133 million will enjoy a 10 per cent tax rate for 30 years, according to DHPIZA.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 02/10/2021

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## Logistics Sector to Step Up Digital Transformation

Logistics, considered a backbone of Việt Nam's economy, is among eight sectors prioritised by the national programme for digital transformation until 2025. According to the Vietnam Logistics Business Association (VLA), the sector has grown 14-16 per cent annually over recent years. It now gathers together some 3,000 domestic firms and 30 others offering transnational services. Of those, 89 per cent are domestic businesses and 10 per cent are joint ventures while the number of foreign-funded companies represents just 1 per cent of the total. The VLA said the cost of logistics in the country as a proportion of GDP is 18 per cent, compared to 9-14 percent in developed countries. The high cost is attributable to limited seaport infrastructure and weak cost reduction efforts. Together with fierce competition, the digital economic boom, and pressure from the COVID-19 pandemic, these have made digitisation in the sector a must. Vietnamese logistics companies offer between two and 17 services, mostly in transport, warehousing, and fast delivery. About half apply technology in their operations.

Nguyễn Tường, VLA Deputy General Secretary, said investment shortages from the very beginning, difficulties in choosing suitable technological applications, a sense of distrust in technology, and a fear of change are hindering the sector from pressing ahead with digital transformation. Trần Thanh Hải, Deputy Director of the Agency of Foreign Trade at the Ministry of Industry and Trade, said transformation in this core sector would trigger a similar process in other parts of the supply chain. Experts have said that smart logistics involve master plans and strategies with the involvement of cloud computing technology, adding that it will be conducive to improving customer services, information flows, and automation. To reduce logistics costs, Nguyễn Hoàng Long, Deputy General Director of the Viettel Post Joint Stock Corporation, said the engagement of both the Government and enterprises is needed. While the Government should offer planning and assistance for the building of national logistics centres, as well as preferential land and port taxes, enterprises need to invest in better management and boosting connectivity within the sector, he said. Administration reform and capital support are also necessary for logistics firms undertaking digital transformation, insiders have said.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 02/17/2021

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## Investor Begins Building ICT Service Chain in Đà Nẵng

Trung Nam Group has started construction of five factories at the Information Technology and Communication (ICT) Service Zone in Đà Nẵng to host the moves of global supply chains. The general director of Trung Nam Group, Nguyễn Tâm Tiến said the factory chain would be built on 9.3ha at Đà Nẵng Information Technology Park with an investment of VNĐ1.5 trillion (US\$65.2 million). The group would also develop an apartment and villa zone for expert and engineers and an eco-park project on 26ha with a total of VNĐ2.1 trillion (\$91.3 million) for accommodation facilities for investors and their families in the near future, he said. Tiến said the group planned to build 23 more ICT factories and R&D zones to meet increasing demand from global partners. “We debuted the first surface-mount technology (SMT) factory with a capacity of 6.2 million electronic products per year at the Đà Nẵng Hi-tech Park last year after three months of research,” he said. A corner of an eco park at Đà Nẵng Information Technology Park. The park will be developed as the first Silicon Valley'.in Việt Nam. Photo courtesy of Trung Nam Group. He said the operation of the SMT factories chain will be a key step in building the Đà Nẵng IT Park as central Việt Nam's 'Silicon Valley', and call for investors from Silicon Valley and the US to invest in high-tech industries, artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation.

Trung Nam completed the first investment phase on 131ha at Đà Nẵng IT Park with an investment of \$47 million. It plans to develop the second phase on another 210ha with estimated funds of \$74 million. Universal Alloy Corporation – a leading global manufacturer of aircraft components for aerospace companies – from the US launched its factory for aircraft components worth \$170 million, at the city's Hi-Tech Park last March. Alton Industry from the US also plans to build a robot manufacturing project in the city's Hi-tech Park. In 2019, two of the first Silicon Valley-based businesses – Meritronics AMT Inc and Ai20X Silicon Valley – agreed with Trung Nam Group to develop the Đà Nẵng IT Park. Last year, South Korea's LG Electronics and Trung Nam Land JSC inked an agreement with a vision to transform Đà Nẵng into the centre of technology and R&D in Việt Nam.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn/> 02/22/2021

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## South Asia

### **INDIA: GST Collections Reach Record-High Rs 1.2 lakh crore in Jan 2021**

Displaying positive trends of growth for the fifth month in a row after September 2020, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Collection, in January 2021, touched an all-time high at around Rs 1.12 lakh crore. This came in as good news for the Government of India prior to the announcement of the Union Budget 2021 on February 1. In accordance with the official data released on the night of January 31, the GST collection in the month of January this year beat the previous record collection of

December 2020 that saw a collection of Rs 1.15 lakh crore. The record-high collection of taxes signifies the complete revival of the economy with the help of the stimulus packages released to provide aid amidst the COVID pandemic. Moreover, the total number of monthly returns filed in the month of January 2021 recorded a growth of 3.45 per cent when compared to the previous month's returns filed. In December 2020, around 8.7 million returns were filed which rose to 9 million in the month of January 2021, according to the official data released. As reported by a national daily, an official source said, "Another significant reason for the massive collection of taxes is improved tax administration through systematic changes that aided in keeping a check on tax evasion. Also, the ministry is putting Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics to use to catch hold of anomalies. Also, action in sync with other arms of the government has brought in positive results." Generally, the data of GST collection in a month is released on the first of the following month by the Union Finance Minister. However, due to the release of the annual budget of 2021 on February 1, 2021, the GST collection data for January month was released on January 31.

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## **Centre Invites Applications from Private Sector for Joint Secretary & Director Posts Through Lateral Entry**

In an attempt to strengthen the administration, the Government of India has taken a decision to recruit more private sector specialists into different government departments at Joint Secretary and Director levels. According to a statement issued by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), Government of India, Centre invites talented and motivated Indian nationals willing to contribute towards nation-building to join the government at the level of Joint Secretary on contract basis in various ministries including the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare. Further, those private sector individuals interested in joining the government as Directors on contract basis in various ministries including the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Department of Financial Services, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Ministry of Law & Justice, Department of School Education & Literacy, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Ministry of Road Transport & Highways, Ministry of Jal Shakti, Ministry of Civil Aviation and in the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, are also invited to apply, the statement added. A detailed advertisement on the positions open along with requisite instructions to the candidates will be uploaded on the Union Public Service Commission's (UPSC) official website from February 6. Interested candidates must note that the online applications for the same opens from February 6, today, and the last day to apply is March 22, as per the DoPT's statement. Shortlisting of the



candidates will be done on the basis of the information provided by the candidates. These selected candidates will be appointed through the lateral entry mode, which relates to the appointment of specialists from the private sector in government organisations.

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## Central-West Asia

### **AZERBAIJAN: ULTRA Technologies Automates Some Technical Solutions for Business Sectors**

Despite the objective difficulties of 2020, ULTRA Technologies was able to quickly rebuild its business strategy and adapt to new changes, Ruslan Romanenko, a consultant for innovative solutions at ULTRA Technologies, told Trend on Feb. 10. "ULTRA did not miss the opportunity to remain in the leading positions in the Azerbaijani IT market," Romanenko added. "Through our activity, we have tried to help our customers to pass all the tests that 2020 brought us all with minimal damage," the consultant added. Romanenko stressed that their company will continue to work on the implementation of the electronic document management project in a number of state agencies. "To date, we have successfully completed the development of the core of the mandatory health insurance system, automated and renewed the business-critical systems of several banks, spent time during social isolation period to improve the knowledge of our employees and establish partnerships with leading developers of systems relevant in the new world formation," Romanenko added. While speaking about participation in the restoration of the liberated territories of Azerbaijan, the consultant said that ULTRA Technologies is ready to provide a number of technical solutions free of charge. "At the very beginning of the second Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh war, we announced that after the completion of the process of demining and demilitarization of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, the company will provide each library to be built there with our ALISA (Automated Library Information System of Azerbaijan) solution absolutely free," the consultant stressed. "Moreover, when opening branches of Azerbaijani universities in this zone, ULTRA company promised to install the "Eduman" platform for managing the education process in the first three of them free of charge," the consultant said.

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### **Azerbaijan Privatizes Several District Public Properties Via Auctions**



The State Service on Property Issues under the Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy held a new auction, Trend reports on Feb.25 referring to a source in the service. According to the source, during the auction, 4 public property facilities (small-sized enterprises) located in Azerbaijan's Beylagan and Siyazan districts had been privatized. Besides, the state owned blocks of 'Azerkandtikinti' and "Mingachevir Qum Chingil' JSCs' shares were also privatized. The service said that those wishing to participate in such auctions can not only place an electronic order for the selected object of the service but also join the online auction. Interested participants can visit the Space for the provision of property services of the State Property Service of Azerbaijan on the day of the auction, as well as observe it without registration online. All those wishing to partake in the auction on the official website of the service (emlak.gov.az) or on the privatization.az portal must, after registering, pay a deposit of 10 percent of the initial auction price of the object, thereby obtaining the status of the customer. On the day of the auction, bidding can be joined by selecting the section 'Electronic auction' on the e-services portal (e-emdk.gov.az).

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## **Azerbaijan Jointly with Turkey to Improve Gaming Industry - Game Tech**

For the first time, a regional conference called Game Dev will be held in the gaming sector in Azerbaijan on March 6, 2021, Fidan Rustamli, Founder of Game Tech Azerbaijan, told Trend. She said that the conference was organized by Game Tech and the largest game acceleration and incubation center in Turkey Game Factory. "The conference is based on creating the future of the gaming industry in our countries, as well as solving the problems of this industry," Rustamli noted. "Apart from the development of the gaming sector, we will review a number of issues for our further cooperation in the exchange of experience and opinions, the introduction of technical and innovative solutions with foreign regional players in this area," the Game Tech founder said. Rustamli noted that the event will be attended by speakers from such giant companies as Google, Oculus, Microsoft, Ubisoft, and a number of others. "Along with technical innovations, we will consider the investment opportunities and development potential of the gaming sector in Azerbaijan," said the founder of Game Tech.

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## **Oceania**

### **AUSTRALIA: Mining Pivotal but Changes Needed - Report**

Australia's mining industry has again proved to be one of the top performing sectors during a crisis. But a new analysis by consultants Deloitte urges the industry to examine itself in areas where it needs to improve, including its image among investors and local communities. "Mining has been pivotal to the Australian economic position during the pandemic," Deloitte Australia mining & metals leader Ian Sanders says. "But recent conversations with miners show they are not resting on their laurels." Releasing Deloitte's annual mining and metals report, Mr Sanders believes it is a critical moment for the industry as it charts a path out of the pandemic. He says the impact of the pandemic has varied greatly depending on what commodity is mined and where the company is located. "Miners need to rebuild trust among stakeholders, including investors, the workforce, and the local communities, as success in the future will be based on factors beyond just financial performance," he said.

Among the report's to-do list, it says mining companies are under strong pressure from investors, regulators and local communities to execute their fully developed decarbonisation agendas. It notes companies are making net-zero commitments in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement and starting to shift to execution. The report says miners must prepare to meet demand for critical minerals as the world converts to renewable energy sources and adopts electric vehicles. It says demand for some commodities will rise, with candidates including copper, nickel, lithium and cobalt. "But no one is certain which ones will eventually see the most demand, and there is a scramble to lock in supply," the report says. The pandemic has also raised concerns over supply chains, and Deloitte urges companies to mitigate these risks by reconsidering their inventory strategies. "Geopolitics, the rise of nationalism, and cross-border supply challenges will also reshape global supply chains," it notes.

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## **Agriculture Needs Major Investment to Grow**

Australian agriculture will need an injection of \$87 billion in new investment over the next decade to meet the sector's ambitious 2030 farm gate production target. The National Farmers' Federation has set a government-endorsed goal of boosting production to \$100 billion by 2030 from about \$61 billion this financial year. But a new AgriFutures report released on Monday warns capital investment in agriculture has fallen behind over the past 10 years. The Natural Capital Economics paper estimates \$8.7 billion a year in new investment will be needed over the next decade to achieve the growth. Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that average annual net investment in the sector has been about \$1.2 billion over the past 30 years. "This gap is a significant problem for agriculture, fisheries and forestry industries as capital investment is key to lifting productivity and is needed at every stage of production," the report says.

"Having access to efficient capital is the driving factor behind sustaining strong sector growth over the short, medium and longer term." The research found under existing investment levels, farm gate returns would not reach \$100 billion until 2054, about a quarter of a century slower than planned. NFF chief executive Tony Mahar said the report was an important wake-up call for the industry. "Agriculture's capital drought was identified in the NFF's 2030 Roadmap as a major handbrake on the sector's prosperity," he said. "If changes are not made to make investment in agriculture more attractive and fit-for-purpose, farmers will be hamstrung in their ability to grow." The AgriFutures paper cites inadequate benchmarking data, lack of scale, risk and liquidity thresholds as key barriers. It also calls for a better understanding of foreign investment rules and highlights emerging opportunities in environmental finance products. Mr Mahar said the data compiled by the federal government's agriculture statistics agency, ABARES, needed to be improved. "Australian agriculture is poised for continual growth. To supercharge this growth, agriculture needs to attract investment from sources other than debt and equity finance," he said.

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## **Company Threatened over Virus Jab Bungle**

One of the companies responsible for Australia's coronavirus vaccine rollout could have its contract torn up after two aged care residents were given excessive doses by a doctor who had not completed mandatory training. Healthcare Australia's chief executive Jason Cartwright has stood aside from his role while the company undertakes an internal review. "We apologise unreservedly to the patients and their families involved for the distress this has caused and assure the community that the error was isolated and will not be repeated," company chairman Daren McKennay said in a statement. An interim CEO will be chosen as the company tries to mend its relationship with the federal government. The doctor in question gave two Brisbane aged care residents a larger dose of the Pfizer vaccine this week. Healthcare Australia initially told the federal government it had seen proof the doctor had completed mandatory virus jab training, before later admitting he had not done it.

"They have been put on notice of potential termination for any significant further breaches," Health Minister Greg Hunt told reporters in Canberra on Thursday. "It is a company with a long history of medical provision across Australia, and a long history through COVID of medical provision, but frankly we have thrown the book at them." Residents at about 70 aged care homes have received the vaccine, with the government initially expecting that figure to be 240 by the end of the week. Mr Hunt has defended the delay, insisting the rollout would be on track. The federal government concedes public confidence in the vaccine rollout has been affected by the excess dose bungle. The elderly pair have shown no signs of an adverse

reaction after being given what is believed to be four times the intended dose. One of the vaccine recipients, an 88-year-old man, was admitted to hospital for observation and is staying there for an unrelated elective surgery.

A 94-year-old woman is returning to the aged care home. Healthcare Australia has the federal contract for the vaccination workforce in NSW and Queensland, and Aspen Medical is responsible for the other states and territories. Another provider will be brought in to help Healthcare Australia in NSW and Queensland. Healthcare Australia has also brought in more senior management and former chief nursing officer Debra Thoms will be part of the company's program at the government's request. Queensland has asked for a national cabinet meeting due to be held next week to be brought forward to discuss issues with the vaccination program. Healthcare workers administering the jabs will now have to prove they have completed the mandatory training modules. Deputy Chief Medical Officer Michael Kidd conducted an inquiry into what happened at the Brisbane aged care home, finding Healthcare Australia did not adhere to its contract with the government. "Safety remains our paramount concern for the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination program," he told reporters in Canberra. "This breach of quality and safety has been unacceptable." Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese said the government needed to get the rollout right. "Vaccines save lives," he told reporters in Canberra. More than 17,500 vaccinations have been given so far across the nation.

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## **Facebook Restores News Pages to Australia**

News has returned to Facebook in Australia with the social media behemoth dropping its ban after reaching a deal with the federal government. Facebook pages for News Corp and Nine newspapers, TV networks, ABC and SBS were restored on Friday morning, less than a day after the news media bargaining code passed parliament. The government agreed to change the code after the tech giant banned Australian users from accessing news. Google struck deals worth millions of dollars with news organisations before the code comes into force. Facebook on Friday announced it had signed letters of intent with smaller publishers Private Media, Schwartz Media and Solstice Media. Seven West Media has a similar arrangement, while Facebook is in negotiations with other outlets. Under the code, the treasurer can designate platforms which would then be forced to pay for news content after arbitration.

Facebook last week pulled news in Australia before a tense stand-off with the government ended on Wednesday. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said he was pleased with the outcome despite having to make changes to the original bill. "What's clear to us is that what has transpired in recent weeks in Australia has very much been a

proxy battle for the world with major global ramifications," he told Sky News. "If this was so easy other countries would have done it long ago." Prime Minister Scott Morrison discussed the issue with his Japanese counterpart Yoshihide Suga overnight.

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## **Retailers, Unions Find Part-Time Jobs Deal**

Retailers and unions have struck a deal to increase hours for part-time workers, that allows flexibility for businesses and certainty for their staff. Retail union SDA and the Master Grocers Association are submitting the improved retail award to the Fair Work Commission, which if approved, will cover 1.2 million workers. The improvements are supported by the ACTU and the Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA), believing it provides a decent and fair response to the challenges faced by the retail sector in the pandemic. COSBOA CEO Peter Strong said small businesses need to be able to adapt to changing conditions, as well as strong consumer confidence. "These new arrangements deliver both by ensuring certainty for working hours but also creating flexibility for businesses to grow permanent jobs as the economy recovers," Mr Strong said in a joint statement with the ACTU.

"Genuine agreement between unions and employers has always been possible, but not in a process which has been hijacked by ideologues." ACTU secretary Sally McManus said underemployment is a major problem in the economy with the risk the jobs in hard hit sectors become entirely casualised with no chance of permanent jobs with permanent rights. "These new rights will mean greater certainty and protection for working people," she said. "More hours when you want, and when the business recovers, with secure pay and the guarantee of ongoing work with regular hours and will not leave workers worse off." In contrast, she said the federal government's industrial relations omnibus bill will hurt people and the economic recovery. "Flexibility and fairness can only be achieved by working together, the omnibus bill imposes solutions that undermine fairness," she said. "The new system requires that any change in hours is done by written agreement between workers and employers and includes a provision that would ensure that any sustained increase in hours can be reviewed and incorporated into workers' contracted hours.

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