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1、 Government Policy and Legislation

Asia-Pacific

Smarter Food Policy Could Boost Health and Economic Recovery of Asian Cities

Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of reliable food systems that provide healthy and affordable diets to all. That is true also in Asia where cities, large and small, contend with a wide range of food-related issues on a daily basis but often lack a dedicated or coherent set of food policies. Arguing that food systems are central to the topmost priorities of Asian cities, from nurturing jobs and businesses that are core to a city's identity to managing waste and congestion, a new World Bank book calls for cities to "get smart to get RICH"—that is, to pursue policies that foster reliable, inclusive, competitive, and healthy ("RICH") food systems that are better aligned with cities' contemporary challenges and aspirations. "RICH Food, Smart City seeks to put food on the menu of urban decision-makers in Asia to generate positive feedback loops between healthy people, a healthy planet, and healthy economies," said Martien van Nieuwkoop, Global Director of Agriculture and Food, World Bank. Based on the first systematic survey of urban food policies in 170 Asian cities in 21 countries, undertaken in partnership with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the study finds that only 8% of surveyed cities are "food-smart"—intervening in the food system in ways that are forward-looking, holistic, and inclusive. Nearly three-fourths are either at an early stage of effective engagement or fully in reactive mode, responding to problems as they emerge. A reactive approach could prove very costly, both in terms of realized risks and missed opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to highlight the essential functions of urban food supply chains and businesses and the vulnerability of urban populations to food insecurity. Even before lockdowns and other responses to the pandemic impacted people's purchasing power and disrupted supply chains, many residents of cities, especially low-income ones, faced challenges accessing safe, affordable, and nutritious food. In 2016, some 23 percent of urban residents in emerging Asia surveyed by the FAO reported being food insecure. Chronic malnutrition is similarly widespread. More than one-quarter of children under five are stunted in urban Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Lao PDR, Nepal, and Pakistan, indicating that shortcomings in urban food systems could curtail the economic prospects of many

Asian cities and their youngest generation. Moving from a reactive approach to a more proactive management of food systems holds considerable promise for urban policy makers wishing to make progress on issues that matter to citizens, from food safety and affordability to good health, job opportunities, freedom from pollution and congestion, prosperity, and livability. Asia's growing middle class and its demand for higher quality, more diverse, and convenient foods also provides enormous business, employment and revenue-raising opportunities for cities.

However, risks associated with urban food systems and changing demand patterns will need to be managed carefully. These include risks related to disease, biosafety, and environmental degradation. In 2017, the proportion of deaths attributed to dietary risks reached 30 percent in East Asia, 22 percent in Southeast Asia, and 19 percent in South Asia, according to the Global Burden of Disease. Overweight and obesity levels are growing nationally, and obesity prevalence tends to be three or four times higher in urban areas than in rural ones. Many cities in emerging Asia are national if not international 'hotspots' for biosecurity and food safety risks, food waste, and the accumulation of plastic packaging waste. The rapid encroachment of cities into natural ecosystems and peri-urban cropland also raises risks to cities' fresh food supply. Well-informed urban leadership is much needed to turn these urban, national, and even broader food system challenges around. RICH Food, Smart City argues that city leaders and planners have a key role to play in molding the future trajectory of food systems and offers many examples of how they might do so. The study addresses cities of different sizes and resource levels, presents a menu of potential solutions, and provides concrete illustrations of the many policies and programs that Asia's cities can learn from and implement to improve food system outcomes.

For example, Measures to protect peri-urban cropland and develop short supply chain marketing channels can sustain a critical source of fresh produce to cities, contributing to urban productivity, resilience, and circular economies. Investments in upgrading community markets that provide fresh food can help ensure more equitable access to nutrition and reduce the incidence of foodborne and chronic illness. Neighborhood food loss and waste partnerships and initiatives can support waste prevention, secondary food use, composting, and the bioeconomy. Institutional food procurement and marketing standards, paired with technical support to food businesses, can exert significant influence over food markets and dietary patterns in ways that support public health and welfare, the environment, and local economies. With their power to influence the uses of space and the built environment, to regulate and stimulate private enterprise, and to shape public service delivery, cities' embrace of food policy can be game-changing, according to the book. "Municipal leaders are uniquely placed to develop and pursue integrated food policies that respond to citizens' needs and boost cities' overall resilience" said Gayatri Acharya, study co-author and Lead Economist, World Bank. "We hope this study will inspire them to seek ambitious solutions for sustainable and healthy food systems that improve the welfare of urban populations."

The Need for Speed: Faster Vaccine Rollout Critical to Stronger Recovery

A global economic recovery is in sight but a faster and more effective vaccination rollout across the world is critical, while respecting necessary health and social distancing measures, according to the OECD's latest Interim Economic Outlook. Activity in many sectors has picked up and adapted to pandemic restrictions over recent months. Vaccine deployment, although uneven, is finally gaining momentum and government fiscal stimulus – particularly in the US – is likely to provide a major boost to economic activity. But the pandemic is widening gaps in economic performance between countries and between sectors, increasing social inequalities, particularly affecting vulnerable groups, and risking long-term damage to job prospects and living standards for many people. The Interim Economic Outlook calls for ramping up vaccination, for swifter, more targeted fiscal stimulus to foster output and confidence, and to maintain income support for people and businesses hard hit by the pandemic while preparing the ground for a sustainable recovery.

“Speed is of the essence,” said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría. “There is no room for complacency. Vaccines must be deployed faster and globally. This will require better international co-operation and co-ordination than we have seen up to now. It is only by doing so that we can focus our attention on building forward better and laying the foundations for a prosperous and lasting recovery for all.” The OECD sees global GDP growth at 5.6% this year, an upward revision of more than 1 percentage point since its projection in December 2020, and 4% in 2022. World output is expected to reach pre-pandemic levels by mid-2021 but the pace and duration of the recovery will depend on the race between vaccines and emerging variants of the virus. The outlook for global growth would be better than currently projected – and approach pre-pandemic projections for activity – if the production and distribution of vaccines accelerates, is better co-ordinated around the world and gets ahead of virus mutations. This would allow containment measures to be relaxed more rapidly. But if vaccination programmes are not fast enough to cut infection rates or if new variants become more widespread and require changes to current vaccines, consumer spending and business confidence would be hit.

In the OECD's central scenario, US growth is projected to be 6.5% in 2021, an upward revision of more than 3 percentage points since December, partly reflecting the large-scale fiscal stimulus now planned with a sustained pace of vaccination. This also helps to lift output around the world. In the euro area, where the level of fiscal stimulus is lower and vaccine rollout slower, the Interim Economic Outlook sees GDP rising 3.9%, a 0.3 percentage point upward revision. Prospects are

brighter in the Asian-Pacific region where several countries have effectively contained the virus and where industrial activity has regained dynamism. In China, GDP growth is projected to be 7.8% this year; in Japan 2.7%; in Korea 3.3%; and in Australia 4.5%. The recovery is likely to be more moderate in the emerging market economies of Latin America and Africa amid a resurgence of the virus, slow vaccine deployment and limited scope for additional policy support. Presenting the Interim Economic Outlook today, OECD Chief Economist Laurence Boone said vaccination programmes and stimulus measures should work hand in hand.

“Widespread vaccination of the adult population is the best economic policy available today to get our economies and employment growing again,” she said. “If we are at war with the virus then we need to put vaccine production on a war footing, provide the necessary resources and speed up deployment across the world.” “If we don’t get enough people vaccinated quickly enough to allow restrictions to be lifted, the recovery will be slower and we will undermine the benefits of fiscal stimulus,” she added. The improved prospects of a global recovery have led to financial market expectations of higher inflation although the Interim Economic Outlook says underlying price pressures generally remain mild in advanced economies. In emerging market economies, inflation could rise further. Public debt levels have risen sharply almost everywhere, but debt-servicing costs in most OECD economies continue to benefit from very low interest rates protecting fiscal sustainability.

The report says the vital support provided by governments to preserve jobs and businesses should remain in place while economies are still fragile and hampered by containment measures. Particular attention needs to be paid to supporting young people and the less skilled to avoid a repeat of the long-term damage caused to the job prospects of these vulnerable groups after the financial crisis of 2008. For the full report and more information, visit the Interim Economic Outlook online. See OECD spotlight on the race to vaccinate. Other OECD policy responses to the pandemic are available on the COVID-19 hub. Media queries should be directed to the OECD Media Office (tel: +33 1 4524 9700). 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.

From <https://www.oecd.org/> 03/09/2021

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First Guide to Help Identify What Works and What Does Not Work in Road Safety

The World Bank’s Global Road Safety Facility (GRSF) launched today the Guide for Road Safety Interventions: Evidence of What Works and What Does Not Work. The guide will help road safety practitioners understand that what sometimes appear to be “common-sense” approaches often not deliver the best road safety outcomes.

Although some interventions provide benefits, others have very limited or even negative impacts, despite being commonly—and mistakenly—recommended and adopted. Road crashes result in an estimated 1.35 million deaths and 50 million injuries worldwide per year, with 93 percent of these occurring in Low-Middle Income Countries (LMICs). The scale of the current response to this continuing crisis does not match the size of the problem. In addition, limited road safety resources are often expended on ineffective interventions. The guide aims to address this. While road safety knowledge has improved over recent decades, there is still a need to enhance decision making when selecting and applying effective evidence-based road safety interventions.

The guide launched today responds to the critical need for effective evidence-based solutions. It offers a range of recommendations with a focus on interventions in LMICs, although the information may also be of relevance to all countries. The contents will be valuable to those working on road safety at policy or practitioner levels, including international development organization technical teams and others who seek to establish, expand, or improve road safety programs in LMICs. The guide sets knowledge on evidence-based interventions within a “Safe System” context, providing advice on each of the Safe System pillars (road safety management, safe roads, safe speeds, safe vehicles, safe road users, and post-crash care) while recognizing that evidence-based solutions must be drawn from across pillars to produce effective road safety outcomes. Equally important, the report also identifies clear examples where interventions are not effective. These include increasing travel speed without improving quality of safety infrastructure, and most forms of post-license driver and rider education and training, which can increase the level of confidence and lead to risk-taking.

The report also guides action: There are effective alternative interventions described in the report to encourage decision-makers to consider and adopt the most effective options. Dr. Soames Job, Head of the GRSF, said: “Funding to deliver road safety outcomes is limited in all countries. Therefore, there is a need to invest in evidence-based solutions that will provide the greatest benefit as quickly and efficiently as possible. In this guide, GRSF has synthesized the substantial but often not readily available body of scientific evidence that exists on what works and what does not. The aim is to encourage and facilitate the adoption of interventions based on rigorous evidence, not a common-sense approach which can be surprisingly misleading in road safety.” With this research, GRSF also wants to emphasize the need to continue building the knowledge base on effective road safety interventions, particularly in LMICs where there are a number of gaps in knowledge. The guide was developed by GRSF with funding support from UK Aid and the World Bank. To view and download the report, please visit: roadsafetyfacility.org/whatworks.

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 03/15/2021

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New Focus on SDGs Needed to Rebuild After COVID-19, Says ADB Report

A renewed focus on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be essential as countries seek to rebuild from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, says ADB's first report showcasing its contributions to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. "Achieving the SDGs will require vast sums of finance to be mobilized from the widest range of sources in support of the agenda at a time when governments face mounting pressure on their budgets and soaring public debt," said ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa. "In 2021, as we map a path to recovery from the pandemic, we must refocus on the SDGs. ADB's investments must meet the highest standards of sustainable development and deliver real results that help countries realize the vision set out in Strategy 2030 and rebuild for the SDGs." The year 2020 was to be the start of a decade of action to accelerate progress on the SDGs, but the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the region's prospects for achieving the goals. Asia and the Pacific were already off track to meet these ambitious goals before the pandemic began. The ensuing crisis is estimated to have pushed 162 million people in the region back into poverty, and economic growth in developing Asia contracted for the first time in 60 years. At the same time, there has been limited progress on SDGs that protect the environment, and the region is at the front lines of the climate change crisis. There is a huge financing gap to make the SDGs a reality. A green, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable recovery from COVID-19 that aligns with the SDGs will be imperative, the report says.

The report explains ADB's institutional approach to integrating the 17 SDGs and their associated targets into its strategies, programs, and financing under its long-term Strategy 2030 through its seven operational priorities. ADB's Corporate Results Framework is fully aligned with the SDGs. ADB is helping countries mobilize the finance necessary to achieve the SDGs, particularly from the private sector, and through stronger domestic resource mobilization. The report also highlights ADB projects and programs that help countries achieve the SDGs. For example, in Indonesia, ADB has helped the government establish institutions to coordinate the SDGs and develop a Road Map for SDG implementation, while also supporting the national infrastructure finance company PT SMI to establish the SDG One fund. In Kazakhstan, ADB helped the government establish platforms for donor coordination in support of national implementation of the SDGs. The ADB Ventures platform established in 2020 deploys venture capital investments and technical assistance to support early-stage technology businesses that address the SDGs. ADB also partners with the United Nations and others to support knowledge and policy dialogue that enables developing member countries to implement the SDGs.

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54th ADB Annual Meeting to Focus on Collaboration for a Resilient and Green Recovery

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will hold its 54th Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors in a virtual format from 3 to 5 May 2021, with a focus on deepening collaboration for a resilient and green recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. “The pandemic has had a significant impact in peoples’ lives throughout the world and in our region. We have worked closely with our developing members to support their response to COVID-19. As the focus shifts to the complex task of shaping the region’s recovery, the Annual Meeting provides an excellent opportunity to develop approaches to balancing response efforts, including vaccine access, and support for a green, resilient, and inclusive recovery,” said ADB Secretary Muhammad Ehsan Khan. “Working together, in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, we will be able to surmount the challenges ahead.” Annual Meeting seminars featuring government, industry, academic, and other leaders will explore a range of topics including shaping Asia’s economic reset; regional cooperation for a resilient future; the road to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26); venture capital and recovery; a woman-focused recovery for a more inclusive future; and the launch of the Asia Pacific Tax Hub, among others. The agenda also feature a set of sessions with civil society organizations.

Finance ministers and central bank governors of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and their counterparts from the People’s Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea are expected to meet virtually on sidelines of the meeting. Annual Meeting registration will open on 5 April. Program details and updates are available [here](#). ADB’s Annual Meetings are attended by ADB Governors, who are mostly finance ministers, central bankers, and other high-ranking ministers of ADB members, as well as participants from the international development community, private sector, civil society, academia, media, and other stakeholders. Follow #ADBAnnualMeeting on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter for regular updates.

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CHINA: How Five-year Plans Catalyze Its Rejuvenation

China on Friday unveiled a draft blueprint for economic and social development over the next five years and clarified the long-range objectives through the year 2035, setting policy priorities for a new development stage that is crucial for the country to achieve socialist modernization. The document, which is being reviewed by the

ongoing annual session of the country's top legislature, listed major social and economic goals for the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) period. The five-year plans are an important mechanism initiated in the 1950s, which has navigated the country through economic ups and downs, as well as changes in the external environment, helping China secure a major increase in the strength of the nation and its social and economic development. Last year, the country's gross domestic product exceeded the threshold of 100 trillion yuan (15.4 trillion U.S. dollars) to reach 101.5986 trillion yuan. The figure was 1,232 times more than that in 1953, when China started implementing its first Five-Year Plan, marking the country's miraculous transformation from an economic backwater to the world's second-largest economy.

Over the years, China's five-year plans have seen their focus evolving with the changing national conditions. Before China initiated its reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, its five-year plans mainly focused on expediting the industrialization of the then agrarian country. At a time when the planned economy was dominant, the five-year plans guided the flow of limited resources to meet the basic needs of disadvantaged groups, said Yan Yilong, deputy dean of the Institute for Contemporary China Studies of Tsinghua University. With the country's gradual transition from the planned economy to a market-oriented socialist market economy, its five-year plans have progressed to include more market-based guidelines instead of obligatory commands and rigid economic targets. Also, the plans are no longer just economy-focused.

More inclusive development philosophies and topics have been enshrined in the plans to guide the country's all-round development, with much attention given to environmental protection and social welfare. For example, the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) put forward the philosophy of innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared development, steering the country's growth onto a more sustainable path. While China's five-year plans adopt a top-down approach during implementation, they entail rounds of bottom-up opinion solicitation before being put into practice. Suggestions from experts, government officials, political advisors and third-party assessment organizations are taken into consideration during the formulation of the plans. Such efforts have been made to guarantee a feasible, consistent, and predictable roadmap, which closely aligns with the country's long-term vision for national rejuvenation.

In contrast to the often flip-flopping administrations in Western countries, where one government's promises and plans are less likely to be carried out by the next, China's five-year plans show a more predictable future, according to analysts. "In many countries, politics play a key role in determining what a country's leaders pledge they will achieve for the next several years, and what politicians say they will do and what they do are often two very different things," said Carl Fey, professor of international business at Aalto University School of Business in Finland. As China

embarks on a new quest to fully build itself into a modern socialist country, the new five-year plan also features fresh missions.

For the first time, phrases such as "brain-like intelligence," "genetic technology" and "future network" feature in a draft five-year plan, highlighting China's determination to make major breakthroughs in science and technology. The country's research and development spending is expected to grow by over 7 percent annually in the next five years, according to the draft outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for national economic and social development and the long-range objectives through the year 2035. Like many other goals listed by the draft outline -- from innovation-driven development, well-being of the people, to ecological conservation -- the indicator is an "anticipated target" rather than an obligatory one. He Lifeng, head of the country's top economic-planning body, said that the goals have taken into account China's ability to achieve them and at the same time left room for the country to counter uncertainties. "The major benchmark indicators are just like peaches on a tree that can only be picked if one jumps hard," he said. "And we have to jump hard."

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China Rolls Out Legal Measure Package to Ensure Constitutional Order in HKSAR: Top Legislator

The National People's Congress (NPC), China's top legislature, will make a decision on improving the electoral system of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) during its ongoing annual session, said top legislator Li Zhanshu. The NPC Standing Committee will make revisions to the relevant law on the basis of the decision as part of a package of legal measures to ensure constitutional order and the rule of law in the HKSAR, Li said on Monday while delivering a work report of the NPC Standing Committee at the session. The NPC will continue to perform its legally mandated duties and provide legal safeguards for ensuring constitutional order in Hong Kong, countering forces seeking "Hong Kong independence," ensuring that patriots administer Hong Kong, and maintaining long-term prosperity and stability in the region, Li said.

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China Amends Laws to Highlight "Whole-Process Democracy"

The National People's Congress (NPC), China's top legislature, Thursday adopted the amendments to two laws that concern its organization and working procedures, with "whole-process democracy" being written into law for the first time in the

country's legislative history. "The NPC and its standing committee shall uphold 'whole-process democracy,' maintain close ties with the people, solicit people's advice and suggestions, fully express the will of the people and safeguard people's rights and interests," according to a provision added to the amendment to the NPC organic law. The "whole-process democracy" is described by Wang Chen, vice chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, as "a hallmark of socialist democracy that distinguishes it from various capitalist democratic systems." Socialist democracy runs through all processes including elections, decision-making, administration and supervision.

All major legislative decision-making is procedure-based and follows democratic deliberations, experts say. The amendments, drafted under the instructions of Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law, fully embody "whole-process democracy" in their revisions based on existing effective practices in legislative processes. The amendment to the NPC procedural rules stipulates that the NPC Standing Committee may make the legislative bills and their explanations public to seek opinions for no less than 30 days before submitting them to NPC sessions for deliberation. It has been decades for the NPC Standing Committee to make legislative bills available for public comments. The codification of the practice has further cemented democracy in the process of legislative decision-making, according to experts. In recent years, legislative outreach offices at local levels have been established across the country, making it more convenient for the public to reach lawmakers both at national and local levels.

Lawmakers also elevated into law several procedures that make NPC sessions more open to the public for better democratic supervision. For example, spokespersons shall be arranged for meetings of NPC sessions, and delegations of NPC deputies may appoint their own spokespersons if necessary, says the amendment to the NPC procedural rules. The plenary meetings of NPC annual sessions may also be broadcast via radio, television and the internet, it says, making the event more accessible to the public. Explaining the draft amendments to fellow lawmakers on the first day of the NPC session, Wang said amending the two laws is an institutional guarantee for upholding "whole-process democracy" and safeguarding the people's role as masters of the country.

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China Unveils Regulation on State Assets of Administrative Institutions

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has signed a State Council decree unveiling a regulation on the management of state assets owned by administrative institutions. The regulation, which will come into effect on April 1, is expected to promote open,

transparent, standardized, and effective management of state assets, increase the efficiency of their use, and preserve and increase their value. The regulation applies to assets obtained or formed by administrative units and public institutions through fiscal funds, acceptance of allocation or transfer, replacement, and donation, among others. It clarifies the responsibilities of governments at all levels and relative government departments in managing the assets. The regulation also includes provisions on the allocation, use, and disposal of state assets owned by administrative institutions. It stipulates that the assets should be allocated in strict accordance with the budget management regulations. It also clarifies the reporting and supervision mechanism and outlines the supervisory duties of the people's congresses, the governments, and state-asset finance and auditing departments of administrative institutions.

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Foreign Investment Security Review Rules Won't Burden Normal Foreign Investors

Rules for foreign investment security reviews will not add unnecessary burdens to normal foreign investors and enterprises, but are conducive to the development of foreign-funded businesses in China in the long term, according to the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) on Thursday. The rules fine-tune China's foreign investment security review system in accordance with the requirements of the foreign investment law and relevant regulations, MOC spokesperson Gao Feng told a regular press conference. Gao said that the rules are a necessary guarantee for the stable and healthy development of China's economy and further opening-up to the outside world. Under the rules, foreign investment in the military industry and relevant sectors pertaining to national security, as well as in surrounding areas of military infrastructure, should be reviewed, Gao said. Foreign investment in nine sectors concerning national security, including vital agricultural products, energy and resources, should also be reviewed when foreign investors have control over the enterprises in which they invest, the spokesperson added. Conducting security reviews on foreign investments is a regular international practice, Gao said. Chinese authorities released rules for foreign investment security reviews at the end of last year. The rules came into effect in January.

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Chinese Premier Signs Decree Unveiling Revised Rule on Medical Equipment Supervision

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has signed a State Council decree unveiling a revised regulation on the supervision and management of medical equipment. The new regulation aims to further promote innovation and better meet people's expectations for high-quality medical equipment amid the rapid development of the industry, the State Council said in a statement. It will come into effect on June 1. A State Council executive meeting on Dec. 21 adopted the draft revision. The new regulation requires the registrants or filing applicants of medical equipment to shoulder the responsibility for the safety and efficacy of medical equipment by setting up and effectively running a quality management system, strengthening the postmarket management of their products, and establishing a traceability and recall system. After the new regulation comes into effect, the punishment for breaking the rules will be more severe while the costs will be higher. The new regulation further improves the country's system of medical equipment supervision. More efforts will go to making the supervision team more professional and specialized while the means of supervision will be enhanced. It also encourages innovation and will streamline the approval process for such innovation.

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China's Development Blueprint to Stabilize Global Economic Recovery

China has mapped out its social and economic development priorities for the coming five years and the decades beyond in a recently released development blueprint, and analysts believe the country's consistency on policy will help stabilize and boost the global market prospects. Instead of focusing on the pace of growth, China is striving to pursue high-quality development. Increasing people's incomes, boosting domestic consumption, seeking to foster a world-class business environment and building an innovation-driven society, among others, are high on the agenda in China's Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035.

MARKET POTENTIAL

Over the next five years, the country will increase the disposable income per capita basically in line with its growth in gross domestic product, and continue expanding its middle-income group and tapping the market potential. According to the plan, the country will boost and upgrade domestic consumption, reduce import tariffs and institutional costs, and expand imports of high-quality consumer goods, advanced technologies, crucial equipment and energy resources. With the burgeoning demand and purchasing power, the country will become a huge market that is increasingly important for global goods. China is a mega economy with long-term potential for high economic growth, said Zhang Liquan, a researcher with the Development Research Center of the State Council. As an essential locomotive for world economic

growth, the Chinese market will help pull the world economy out of difficulties, Zhang said. In the first two months of 2021, China's total goods imports and exports expanded 32.2 percent year on year to 5.44 trillion yuan (about 838.16 billion U.S. dollars), according to the General Administration of Customs (GAC). The country's imports grew 14.5 percent year on year, topping 2.38 trillion yuan during the period, GAC data shows.

BETTER BUSINESS CLIMATE

Besides predictable surging demand, the country also showed prospects for a greater degree of opening-up. It will further improve its business environment to attract and better utilize foreign capital. China will advance the opening of related businesses in the fields of telecommunications, the Internet, education, culture and medical care in an orderly manner, according to the new five-year plan. The latest report from Fitch Ratings shows that China had seen a steady increase in high-tech foreign direct investment over the past decade. It attributes the increase to strong government support, foreign companies' growing interest in China's market sales opportunities, as well as an improving innovation ecosystem. Fitch Ratings expects the research and development activities of the foreign-invested enterprises in China to increase as the country continues emphasizing and promoting innovation and improving intellectual-property protection to drive high-quality economic growth, as outlined in the new five-year plan.

Besides, the plan underlines continuous efforts to further improve the country's business environment that is based on market principles and governed by the law and meets international standards. With an improved and more predictable business environment in the coming five years, foreign-funded enterprises can make full use of the opportunities, explore new fields and achieve high-quality development along with China, said Obara Masamichi, vice president of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China.

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China Issues Guideline to Improve Tax Collection, Management

China will deepen the reform of tax collection and management to better serve market entities, according to a guideline issued by the general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council. By 2022, the country aims to make significant progress in the standardization of tax law enforcement, the convenience of tax and fee services, and the accuracy of tax supervision, while basically building a powerful, smart taxation system by 2025, says the document. Toward this end, the guideline urges efforts to promote the digitalization of tax collection and management, advance the reform of electronic

invoices and strengthen big-data sharing in tax collection. By 2025, China expects to see the deep integration of tax law enforcement, services and regulation, along with intelligent big-data applications and the universal use of electronic invoices.

The country will explore the application of blockchain technology in areas such as the collection of social insurance premiums, real-estate transactions and the registration of immovable properties, while expanding its use in information sharing related to tax and fees, it says. Work will be conducted to improve tax law-enforcement and tax collection services, according to the document. By 2023, tax and fee payers in China will be able to enjoy automatic data collection, calculation and filing services, and confirm and submit all taxation information online. The document also calls for accurate tax supervision and joint efforts to ensure better tax administration, by enhancing cooperation between government departments and social sectors, as well as boosting judicial protection and cross-border collaboration.

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CPC Issues Regulation on Organizational Punishment

The General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee has issued a trial regulation on organizational punishment. The office also issued a circular, made public Sunday, on the implementation of the regulation, noting that organizational punishment is an essential means to educate and administer cadres, as well as a significant measure to ensure full and strict governance over the Party. It also emphasized the importance of improving the execution of regulations and provisions while calling for precise and scientific measures to advance related work. Organizational punishment, targeting cadres who violate regulations, discipline and laws, as well as fail in their duties, lack accountability and self-restraint, includes adjustment of positions and ranks, such as removal and demotion, according to the regulation. The 19-item regulation went into effect on the day of its promulgation.

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JAPAN: BOJ Gov Kuroda Spotlights Climate Change as Key Theme to Guide Policy

Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda highlighted climate change on Friday as one of the key themes in guiding monetary policy, but kept his distance from the idea of the central bank buying green bonds. The comments underscore the bank's growing focus on climate change, a key topic of debate among central banks, some

of which are stepping up purchases of green bonds used to finance clean energy and environmental projects or are considering doing so. The Bank of Japan must speed up research and deepen debate with other central banks on how climate change affects monetary policy and what risks it poses on financial institutions, Kuroda told parliament. "Climate change is among crucial factors affecting the economy and financial system," he said. "In that context, there are ties to the central bank's mandate."

Christine Lagarde, president of the European Central Bank, has backed "green" debt in corporate bond-buying schemes, while Britain's finance minister has said the country will expand the Bank of England's remit to include environmental sustainability. Kuroda said it was possible for the BOJ to buy green bonds, as long as they met the set requirements of an existing corporate bond-buying program. But there were "many issues" that need to be cleared for the BOJ to target green bonds, he said, such as how doing so would clash with the bank's principle of buying assets in a manner neutral to markets. The BOJ will host a global workshop on March 25 and 26 to scrutinise how climate change risks could affect the banking system.

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Cabinet Approves Bill to Reduce Plastic Waste, Encourage Recycling

A bill aimed at improving Japan's plastic recycling practices and cutting down on waste has been approved by the cabinet. The bill, expected to come into force in April 2022, will promote a series of new measures ranging from recycling a wider range of waste to reducing the use of plastic at restaurants and retail stores. Currently, many local governments only allow certain types of plastic waste to be recycled, like food takeout trays and bottles, and collect them separately. But the bill will urge them to collect a wider range of plastic waste, including stationery and toys, and pick the different types of plastic up from households at one time. Eating and drinking establishments that give customers disposable straws and cutlery will be required to draw up reduction measures by reviewing their serving methods.

Retail stores will also be required to make moves to cut waste, such as charging for packaging, switching plastic packaging to more environmentally-friendly materials, or making it standard practice to ask customers whether they need packaging at all. Businesses that fail to meet the new requirement can be fined up to 500,000 yen. The bill comes after it was made mandatory for stores to charge for plastic shopping bags from July last year, a measure which has been judged as effective and will remain in place. The government will also look to establish a system to certify environmentally friendly products, such as those that use the smallest feasible amount of plastic. Businesses that require large amounts of packaging or building

materials will be urged to strengthen their recycling programs. If they fail to do so or they are judged to have made an inadequate effort, the government can issue advice and orders. More than 8 million tons of plastic waste is generated in Japan annually. Related marine pollution is a serious concern and the government said it is moving to urgently address the problem by introducing its new schemes.

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SOUTH KOREA: Regulator Seeks to Revise E-Commerce Trade Law Amid Non-Contact Trend

South Korea's corporate watchdog said Sunday it plans to revise a law governing e-commerce transactions as an increase in online platform-based trade raised the need to better protect consumers amid a non-contact trend. The Korea Fair Trade Commission (KFTC) said it will seek to revise the Act on Consumer Protection in Electronic Commerce as the law, enacted in 2002, has not properly protected consumers in the fast-changing e-commerce market. The COVID-19 pandemic has boosted the use of delivery apps and other social media platforms as people have refrained from visiting offline shops over concerns of infection risks. Under the plan, the regulator plans to take steps to swiftly block online transactions of defective or hazardous goods. When authorities issue an order for recall, e-commerce operators should cooperate in retrieving and destroying such products. The KFTC will also seek to make online platform providers take due responsibility for consumer damage occurring from online transactions. Currently, online platform operators partly forgo such responsibility using their status as brokers between merchants registered as sellers on the platforms and consumers. In regard to consumer complaints about goods transactions using social media platforms, a delay in delivery or a failure to receive parcels topped the list with 60 percent, according to data by the Korea Consumer Agency.

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S. Korea Calls for Normalization of WTO's Dispute Settlement

South Korea called Monday for the normalization of the World Trade Organization (WTO) during a meeting with a group of countries supporting the multilateral trading regime, dubbed the Ottawa Group. During the virtual ministerial meeting, Trade Minister Yoo Myung-hee and her counterparts of other participating countries called for the prompt normalization of the organization's role in settling trade rows, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. The Ottawa Group refers to a group of 14 members of the WTO seeking to revamp the international trade body,

including South Korea, Canada, Australia, Chile and Britain. The dispute-settlement role of the WTO has been suspended since December 2019 as the Trump administration declined to name new members of the appellate body. The group said the WTO needs to cooperate with the new Biden administration of the United States to promptly normalize its full function. The member countries vowed to minimize the imposition of restrictions on international travel and trade amid the COVID-19 pandemic as well. Trade ministers of the Ottawa Group also shared ideas on the agenda for the upcoming 12th ministerial conference of the WTO, which is slated for November this year.

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Moon Urges Law to Prevent 'Conflict of Interest' Among Public Officials in Response to LH Scandal

President Moon Jae-in stressed the need Monday to introduce legislation on preventing civil servants from seeking private advantage via their positions, citing public fury over alleged speculative land purchases by employees at the state-owned housing enterprise. "On this occasion, we will have to enact a law on preventing the conflict of interest among public officials at any cost," he said during an Anti-Corruption Policy Consultation Council meeting held at Cheong Wa Dae. It marked the first time in nine months for the president to convene the session joined by heads of major ministries and other government agencies with power and authority to handle the anti-corruption issue. It came in response to a snowballing real estate speculation scandal that began with a revelation that some officials at the Korea Land and Housing Corp. (LH) had used undisclosed information for the purchase of undeveloped land around Seoul, where new residential towns would be built.

"We must take the anger and rebuke of the people seriously," Moon said. "Now, we should go back to square one and start anew." He urged all-out efforts for a resolution to the "structural and fundamental" problem of property-related corruption. He said that the government should not consider political gains or disadvantages in pushing for the campaign. The mandatory registration of assets should be expanded to all civil servants in South Korea, he added. The president pointed out that South Korea had a chance to introduce the legislation to prevent public officials' conflict of interest several years ago, when the so-called Kim Young-ran anti-graft law was enacted. Ruling and opposition lawmakers had discussions on it but failed to reach a compromise. "It's apparently because of a lack of our will," he said. "In this opportunity, I would like (the government) to institutionalize the Conflict of Interest Act and fundamentally block any potential sprouts of corruption among public officials." The ruling Democratic Party said it would strive to pass a relevant bill this week, but

the main opposition People Power Party is demanding a prudent approach. Moon also reiterated a plan to set up a special government arm to oversee unfair and illicit real estate transactions.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Extending Micro-Scale Restrictions till April 5

Indonesia has decided to extend the policy on the micro-scale public activity restrictions from March 23 to April 5, 2021, and expanded it to five more provinces, a senior official said. The five more provinces are South Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, West Nusa Tenggara and East Nusa Tenggara, chairman of the National Committee of COVID-19 Handling and Economic Recovery Airlangga Hartarto told a virtual press conference here Friday. Hartarto said the government made the decision as the implementation of the micro-scale public activity restrictions was proven effective to curb the increasing number of active cases of COVID-19. In addition, indicators of the COVID-19 handling, including the bed occupancy rate, the recovery rate and the mortality rate in 10 provinces that implement the micro-scale public activity restrictions showed improvement, he said. Now there are 15 provinces in Indonesia that implement the micro-scale public activity restrictions.

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CAMBODIA: Law on COVID-19 Control Takes Effect

Cambodia's law on the control of COVID-19 and other contagious diseases was signed by Acting Head of State Samdech Say Chhum on Thursday, going into effect immediately, according to a royal decree. Endorsed by Chhum on behalf of King Norodom Sihamoni, who has been in Beijing, capital of China, for a routine medical checkup, the royal decree said the law was promulgated after it had been adopted by the National Assembly on March 5 and the Senate on March 11. Consisted of six chapters and 18 articles, the law aims at preventing the spread of COVID-19 as well as imposing severe penalties, including imprisonment for those who flout the preventive measures and cause disease infections in the community. The Southeast Asian country made the law following the third community outbreak of COVID-19 on Feb. 20, which has seen cases rise to 652 with one confirmed death so far. Under the law, quarantine escapees who lead to the spread of COVID-19 to others will be punishable by six months to three years in prison and a fine of 2,500 U.S. dollars.

Any COVID-19 patients fleeing treatment or a Ministry of Health-designated treatment facility will be imprisoned from one to five years and a fine of 5,000 U.S. dollars, the law said, adding that a jail term will be increased up to 10 years if the act leads to the spread of COVID-19 to others. It said any individuals intentionally spreading the COVID-19 to others will be punishable by imprisonment from five to 10 years, and a prison sentence will be raised up to 20 years if the act is organized by a group or a syndicate. The law also stated that the acts of deliberately disregarding administrative measures or obstructing the enforcement of the measures will be punishable by imprisonment from six months to three years. Since the start of the pandemic in January last year until now, the kingdom has registered a total of 1,163 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with one death and 597 recoveries, the Ministry of Health said.

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MYANMAR: State Administration Council Imposes Martial Law in 2 Townships of Yangon

Myanmar's State Administration Council on Sunday imposed martial law in the Hlaingthaya and Shwe Pyi Thar townships of Yangon region, state-run media reported quoting its announcement. The Council authorized the commander of Yangon region to put the martial law into place, the announcement said. The move came after some factories in the townships were burnt down, according to the report. In Myanmar a one-year state of emergency was declared on Feb. 1 this year and the state power was handed over to the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Sen-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, chair of the newly formed State Administration Council. Protests have been held in the Asian country since early last month, calling for release of the detained leaders.

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PHILIPPINES: To Reimpose Entry Restrictions as COVID-19 Cases Go Up

The Philippines has announced that it will temporarily suspend the entry of foreigners and some citizens as the Southeast Asian country battles a renewed spike in COVID-19 cases. In a statement issued on Tuesday night, the Philippines' coronavirus task force said foreign citizens and returning nationals who had not been working overseas will not be able to enter the country from March 20 until April 19 under the ban. The task force also directed concerned agencies to limit the number of inbound international passengers to 1,500 a day. However, the ban doesn't include foreign government officials, diplomats, and Filipino workers returning from overseas.

"This is in view of the rising COVID-19 cases and the entry of the coronavirus variants in the country," Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said in a video message sent to the media. Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello on Wednesday also welcomed the suspension, saying the limit would help ease the burden on hotel quarantine facilities.

"Truthfully, we are running out of hotels ... We reach as far as Tagaytay, as far as Batangas, in search of hotel for quarantine accommodation. This is a good policy," he said. The Southeast Asian country has just opened its door ajar to allow the entry of some foreigners who already have visas and exemption letters, after having closed its door to foreign travellers for a long time. But the country is now experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases and increasing infections of new variants. The Philippines' Department of Health (DOH) reported on Wednesday 4,387 new COVID-19 infections, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in the Southeast Asian country to 635,698. The death toll climbed to 12,866 after 18 more patients died from the viral disease, the DOH said. Alethea De Guzman of the DOH Epidemiology Bureau told reporters in an online briefing that 10 of the country's 17 regions see positive growth, primarily Metro Manila and a region in the northern Philippines. She said five regions have confirmed local cases with the variant first found in Britain. Three regions have confirmed local cases with the variant identified in South Africa. She said these variants have emerged in 15 of the 16 cities in Metro Manila. "Twenty-seven percent of the cases were detected among the international travelers," she said.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 03/17/2021

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Philippines to Expand COVID-19 Restrictions to Adjacent Provinces Near Capital

The Philippines will expand COVID-19 restrictions to four provinces around capital Manila as infections surge in the country, presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said on Sunday. The provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna, and Rizal, along with the national capital region will be placed under stricter restrictions to curb the surge. The new restrictions will be effective from next Monday till April 4, Roque added. The strict rules came after the Southeast Asian country registered over 7,000 daily infections in the past three days. The Philippines' Department of Health (DOH) Sunday reported 7,757 new cases, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 663,794. On Saturday, the country logged 7,999 new cases, the highest ever daily tally since the outbreak began in January last year. "Only essential travel into and out of (these adjacent provinces) will be allowed," Roque said in a televised press conference.

He said that mass gatherings, including religious congregations, are banned;

face-to-face meetings in these areas are "highly discouraged"; a seven-hour curfew starting 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. will be imposed in all five regions. "We hope that these new restrictions will lower the COVID-19 infections and stop the spread of the new coronavirus variants across the country," Roque said. The DOH urged people living with other persons, including the vulnerable, to wear a mask even inside their homes to avoid household transmission. "Mask at home when not alone," a DOH advisory said, stressing the need to practice preventive measures "at all times and in all settings." "All households must ensure adequate fresh air circulation by opening windows and using fans to allow increased airflow," the advisory read. The DOH also urged the public to stay at home and suspend all non-essential travel "to reduce contact rate with people." The DOH further appealed to the people "to help free up space in hospitals for those who need it the most." "We need to ensure that our hospitals do not get overwhelmed, so everyone must act with extreme vigilance and reduce transmission by consistently adhering to preventive measures," the DOH added.

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SINGAPORE: Easing Preventive Measures Against COVID-19 While Expanding Vaccination

Singapore announced here Wednesday easing a slew of preventive measures against COVID-19 while further expands the local vaccination program. Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) said in a press release that infection of COVID-19 was kept under control with local community cases remaining low at around two per week in the past month. Starting from March 24, local residents aged 45 to 59 years old can register their interest for the vaccination. Once there are vacant slots available for booking, the applicants will be notified. Singapore began vaccinating seniors aged 70 years and above since Feb. 22, which was followed by seniors aged 60 to 69 years-old. As of March 23, more than 799,000 individuals have received at least one dose of the vaccine. In another development, up to 75 percent of local employees can return to their workplace, up from the current 50 percent, which will become effective on April 5. "We will shift from working-from-home as a default to a more flexible and hybrid way of working," the MOH said. Moreover, the current cap on the time an employee spends at the workplace will also be lifted, but employers should continue to stagger start times and implement flexible working hours where possible. From April 24, the limit for marriage solemnisations and wedding receptions will be increased from the current 100 to 250 attendees, in zones or timeslots of up to 50 attendees each. For solemnisation-only events involving more than 100 attendees, pre-event testing will be required for the wedding couple. When there are more than 100 attendees at wedding receptions, pre-event testing for all attendees will be required. Live performances at designated venues will be allowed to have up to 750 attendees if they implement pre-event testing, or to have up to 250 attendees if they

do not implement pre-event testing. Singapore Wednesday reported 15 new COVID-19 cases, all being imported ones.

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THAILAND: Court Conditionally Approves Constitutional Amendment Bids

Thailand's Constitutional Court on Thursday endorsed constitutional amendment bids launched by Members of Parliament on condition that public referendums be held twice. The court delivered the judgment that the legislators in both the House of Representatives and Senate have the authority and duty to amend the constitution. However, the court called for a nationwide referendum to see if most people will endorse varied motions toward the constitutional amendment in the first place and then to see if most people will finally approve an amended charter. Given the first public referendum in favor of the amendment, a Constitution Drafting Committee, consisting of legislators and others, will be set up for the initial tasks of amending the charter. Then, the second public referendum will be conducted to either endorse or reject the amended charter. The Palang Pracharath Party-led coalition government and Pheu Thai Party-led opposition bloc have separately put forward motions to amend the 2017 constitution to the extent that the charter be "more democratic and less complicated." Meanwhile, a royal decree was issued on Wednesday for the opening of extraordinary parliamentary sessions beginning on March 17 so that the constitutional amendment issue will be deliberated.

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Thailand's Constitutional Amendment Bill Aborted by Lawmakers

Thailand's legislation on constitutional amendment was aborted by members of parliament (MP) and senators on Wednesday. Following a nine-hour debate during a joint House and Senate extraordinary session at the parliament, most lawmakers managed to abstain from casting votes, thus aborting the charter amendment bill. In a third reading of the bill, only 208 legislators including two senators, mostly being in the Pheu Thai Party-led opposition bloc, voted for it while at least 369 votes are needed to pass the bill. An overwhelming majority of 520 lawmakers, being government MPs and senators, practically put an end to the long-delayed amendment bill, as they chose either to abstain from casting their vote during a two-hour roll call in the chamber of parliament or to simply avoid the roll call by staying outside the chamber. Last week, the Constitutional Court ruled that the legislative branch has the duty and authority to amend the charter on condition that a public referendum be conducted twice in order to precede and follow the amendment

process. The process would have been otherwise run by a Constitution Drafting Committee, all 200 members of which would have been otherwise elected by constituents nationwide.

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Thailand Extends Tourism Program, Oks Parallel Travel Campaign

Thailand decided on Tuesday to extend the program of "We Travel Together" and approved a parallel tourism campaign in its latest efforts to support the pandemic-hit tourism sector. The cabinet of ministers approved the third-phase extension of the tourism stimulus package until the end of July, which will involve a maximum of 2 million hotel rooms, compared to 1 million hotel rooms provided in the first two phases of the scheme, according to an official at the Government House, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to lack of authority. The "We Travel Together" program was designed and unveiled in 2020 to stimulate domestic travels and consumption in order to revive the COVID-19-affected tourism sector in the Southeast Asian country. Each eligible beneficiary of the scheme is entitled to a maximum of 3,000 baht (about 97 U.S. dollars) for the price of a hotel room at the expenditure of the government. The cabinet also approved a parallel Thailand Travels campaign under which a Thai national, aged 18 years and older, may apply for a maximum of 5,000 baht (about 161 U.S. dollars) from the government in spending on a domestic trip, the official said. However, the fund the government provides for the Thailand Travels campaign will be managed by Thai travel firms for travellers' spending. About 300 travel firms have offered to join the campaign scheduled for July.

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Vietnam: Aiming for GDP Per Capita of \$5,000 by 2025, Developed Country Status by 2045 - 13th Party Congress's Resolution

The Communist Party is aiming for Việt Nam to reach GDP per capita of \$5,000 by 2025 and to be a developed country by 2045. The goals are part of the Resolution of the 13th National Party Congress held from January 25 to February 1, the entirety of which has just been released by the Office of the Party Central Committee. The Resolution noted the highlight of the 12th tenure was the successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in significant economic achievements – including stable macroeconomics, controlled inflation and high GDP growth, while people's living standards were improved. The fight against corruption, loss and waste was intensified, while the socio-political situation remained stable, foreign relations

deepened and Việt Nam's profile on the international stage grew. However, numerous shortcomings – including slow modernisation and industrialisation, shifting in the growth model, limited competitiveness and quality and productivity of the economy, inadequate adaptation to climate change and environment protection demands, drawbacks in Party building and rectification, that science and technology has not been the driving engine of socio-economic growth and the lives of certain groups of people remain difficult – of the 12th tenure have been identified in the Resolution.

The achievements of 35 years of implementation of *đổi mới* (Reform), 30 years of implementing the 1991 Party Platform and in the 10 years of implementing the 2011 Revised Party Platform have proved that the country's path towards socialism is consistent with Việt Nam's practical situation and the times' development trends, with the Party's righteous leadership the leading factor in Việt Nam's revolutionary victories, the Resolution reads. Amid rapidly shifting and complex developments in the global scene, the Party Platform continues to serve as the ideological flag to gather the collective strength of united peoples for the goal of a "prosperous-people, strong-nation, democratic, equitable, and civilised" Việt Nam.

Development vision and orientations

In the coming years, the challenges and opportunities of a complicated world demand the entire Party and Vietnamese people to “unite” and continue to have major changes in mindset and make correct and timely forecasts of the situation to prepare and deal with any circumstance, to “bring the country forward on the path of rapid, sustainable development” and the attainment of many orientations, goals, and tasks. The Resolution lists major guiding orientations of the years forward, including “persistent and innovative” implementation of Marxist-Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh ideology, persistent pursuit of socialism and independence and upholding national interests based on the principles of the United Nations' Charter and international law and the spirit of equal and win-win co-operation, with national defence and security in mind. It also aims to enhance patriotism, the spirit of resilience, national unity and people's aspirations to develop a prosperous and happy nation, promoting socialist democracy, enhancing the quality of human resources and promoting innovation and science and technology – especially the achievements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution – in service of the country's sustainable and rapid development.

In addition, Party building and governance are goals, working towards a streamlined and effective Party system with quality cadres and civil servants. The “general objectives” are identified as improving the Party's leadership and ruling capacity; building a pure, strong and comprehensive Party and political system; consolidating and raising people's confidence in the Party, the State and the socialist regime; fomenting aspirations to develop a prosperous and happy country; promoting the will and strength of national solidarity; promoting comprehensive and synchronous *đổi mới* (reforms), industrialisation, and modernisation; building and firmly defending the

Fatherland, maintaining a peaceful and stable environment; and striving to become a developed country with socialist orientations by the middle of the 21st century. The “particular objectives” are set on Việt Nam becoming a developed nation with a modern industrial base and leaving the ranks of lower-middle-income countries by 2025 - the year marking the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the south and national reunification. By 2030, when the Party celebrates its 100th founding anniversary, Việt Nam is hoped to become a developing country with a modern industrial base and upper-middle incomes. By 2045, the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, now the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam, Việt Nam is hoped to become a developed, industrialised nation with high income.

In 2021-25, the Resolution sets a target for average GDP growth of 6.5-7 per cent, GDP per capita by 2025 reaching \$4,700-5,000, the contributions of total factor productivity (TFP) in economic growth reaching 45 per cent, the labour productivity increase hitting 6.5 per cent a year, urbanisation reaching 45 per cent, the ratio of processing and manufacturing industries in the GDP exceeding 25 per cent, and the digital economy accounting for 20 per cent of the country's GDP. In this time frame, the Resolution aims for agricultural labour ratio staying at 25 per cent, the ratio of trained labour reaching 70 per cent, urban unemployment kept at below 4 per cent, the rate of multidimensional poverty maintaining a decrease of 1-1.5 per cent year-on-year, aiming for 10 doctors and 30 hospital beds for every 10,000 people, striving towards 95 per cent of the Vietnamese population being covered under the State's health insurance, life expectancy reaching 74.5 years, and the ratio of communes obtaining new rural standards reaching at least 80 per cent, including 10 per cent meeting the requirements of exemplary new rural standards.

In terms of environment, by 2025, the goals are to have 95-100 per cent of the urban population and 93-95 per cent of rural population having access to clean and hygienic water, 90 per cent of urban waste properly collected and treated, 92 per cent of active industrial-processing zones outfitted with proper wastewater treatment facilities; 100 per cent of all businesses polluting the environment punished; and upholding the national forest coverage at 42 per cent. The 13th tenure has "six central tasks", with the first being Party building, building rules-based socialist State, with effective, corruption-free governance. The second task is controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring COVID-19 vaccination coverage, while engaging in economic recovery, pursuing the transformation of growth model and economic restructuring, implementing national digital transformation strategy, raising labour productivity and innovation, and third is upholding independence, improving the effectiveness of foreign affairs and international integration, building modern and elite armed forces, and maintaining peaceful and stable environment for development. The fourth central task is inspiring patriotism among the people to develop a prosperous and happy nation, promoting the role of cultural values and the strength of Vietnamese people in nation-building and defence, with detailed policies to

develop the culture of ethnic minority groups, carrying out social policies and ensuring social security for the people, raising living standards and happiness indexes of the Vietnamese people. Fifth is perfecting the legal system, institutions, and policies to promote socialist democracy. The final central task is to strictly manage, reasonably and effectively use land and natural resources, protecting the environment, and implementing adaptation measures to cope with climate change and natural disasters.

Breakthrough strategies

To achieve the goals, the Party sets three major breakthrough strategies – completing development institutions, developing human resources, and building modern infrastructure. Regarding institutions, the Party identifies the need to improve development institutions for a socialist-oriented market economy; reforming State governance towards modernity and competitiveness; improving the legal system and institutions to create a favourable, healthy, and fair business and investment environment for all sectors of the economy where innovation can foster; mobilising, managing and using all resources – especially land, finance, public-private partnership – for development purposes; bolstering reasonable decentralisation, while enhancing inspections and keeping powers in check via the legal system. For human resources, the Party wants a priority on high-quality human resources for leadership and management and key positions, based on “comprehensive and radical transformation of education and training quality in tandem with recruitment and incentive policies”; promoting research, transfer, application and development of science and technology, innovation; promoting the aspirations for national development, people’s sense of unity and national pride in nation-building and defence efforts. The Resolution also states the demand for “modern and synchronous” social and economic infrastructure, with a focus on national key transport projects, climate adaptation projects, and information and communications projects to serve national digital transformation and the development of a digital economy and society.

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

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: 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> 03/01/2021

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Business Urges No Delay on Workplace Laws

An influential employer group has urged the government to forge ahead with controversial workplace reforms despite the industrial relations minister taking leave. Christian Porter, who is also attorney-general, decided to take time off after emphatically denying historical rape allegations. The coalition's industrial relations omnibus bill is before the Senate after passing the lower house last month. But there is speculation the legislation will not be brought on for a vote when parliament resumes next week. Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox called on the government to reject calls for a delay. "There is no reason at all why the bill should be delayed," he said on Monday. "The bill is too important for our economy, workplaces and jobs. The national interest needs to be put ahead of opportunistic calls for delay." The government needs three of five crossbench senators to pass the legislation, which is fiercely opposed by Labor, unions and the Greens.

The coalition has dumped the most contentious part of the bill, which would have given the industrial umpire more scope to allow enterprise agreements that don't meet the better off overall test. But there remain key sticking points including provisions around converting from casual to permanent employment and changes to conditions. Mr Willox said Mr Porter oversaw the drafting of the bill after chairing working groups of industry and union representatives. "The bill is the culmination of nine months of hard work by government, industry and union representatives," he said. "It will make a series of modest but very important amendments to the Fair Work Act that will assist the economic recovery." The Australian Council of Trade

Unions has warned the changes will give big business more power over workers and increase insecure employment. Cabinet minister Michaelia Cash is in charge of Mr Porter's portfolios while he is on leave. A Senate committee is due to hand down a report on the legislation on Friday.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/08/2021

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Labor's City Revival Plan Draws Support

Labor's push to revive Australia's city centres in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has been backed by the Property Council, saying CBDs will be critical to future economic growth. Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese says the recession has made the need for federal engagement in urban policy greater than ever. "We will look to sign new city partnerships that meet the needs of local communities based on local understanding and transparent criteria," Mr Albanese told the Australian Financial Review Business Summit in Sydney on Wednesday. "Secondly, we need a plan to revive our CBDs, not just a generic plea for workers to go back to their desks." He noted that, according to the Grattan Institute, 50 per cent of the new jobs generated in the past decade were in the centres of Sydney and Melbourne. "We need our cities to be at the frontier of dynamism and innovation."

Property Council chief executive Ken Morrison welcomed Labor's announcement to improve the policy framework for governing the future of Australia's cities. "While Australia's economic recovery is advancing well ahead of earlier projections, the economic road ahead remains very challenging," Mr Morrison said in a statement. "Improving the productivity of Australia's cities and encouraging the renewal of our CBDs will be critical to future growth." Mr Albanese took a swing at the current federal government, describing its approach to cities policy as "cynical pork-barrelling", saying its urban congestion fund has delivered much more to advertising executives than suburban commuters. "The result: no busting of congestion, no lifting of productivity and no confidence that there's a government on the side of suburban commuters too often battling nightmare commutes," Mr Albanese said.

He said the government has allowed former Liberal prime minister Malcolm Turnbull's city deals with state and local governments to "wither on the vine", with the result that little of value has been achieved. "Labor takes a different approach," he said. "We understand the importance of well-functioning cities for Australia's economy and for the jobs, livelihoods, and quality of life of Australians. This will be one of my priorities as Labor leader."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/10/2021

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Government Goes Ahead with Workplace Bill

The Morrison government will push ahead with workplace law changes next week, despite the minister in charge being on leave. A coalition-led committee on Friday tabled in parliament a report into the bill, recommending it be passed without amendment. However, ahead of the Senate sitting next week, Labor and Greens members of the committee said it should be dumped altogether. Acting Industrial Relations Minister Michaelia Cash said much work had gone into the bill, including talks with unions last year. "The bill addresses known problems within Labor's Fair Work Act that are stifling job creation and holding back wage and productivity growth as Australia recovers from the pandemic recession," Senator Cash said on Friday. "Discussions with crossbench senators and relevant stakeholders are continuing and the government remains committed to advancing the bill in the Senate during the coming sitting week."

Labor senators said the bill was not a pathway to economic growth and recovery. "Labor supports the view that the implementation of this legislation in its current form would see the inevitable further loss of workers' wages and conditions," they said in a dissenting report. "An economic recovery that benefits the nation as a whole, rather than narrow interests, would promote productivity, including through improved job security and rising wages. In contrast this bill simply encourages the growing scourge of insecure work." The peak union body says it is concerned the government has cut it out of the loop in talks on the law changes since the minister Christian Porter went on mental health leave. ACTU secretary Sally McManus, whose organisation took part in three months of talks before the workplace law changes were drafted, said she had written to Senator Cash seeking a meeting but had not heard back.

The government has dumped the most contentious part of the bill, which would have given the industrial umpire more scope to allow enterprise agreements that don't meet the better off overall test. But coalition negotiators face an uphill battle securing the support of crossbench senators. The industrial relations omnibus bill makes changes to enterprise bargaining, wage theft penalties, long-term pay agreements on major projects and awards.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/12/2021

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Policy Reset Needed for Media, Union Warns

Australia's media union has again warned of the need for a policy reset to prevent more closures and job losses. Representatives from the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance have on Friday fronted a Senate inquiry into media diversity. It comes

amid Nine and WIN rejoining forces for regional television, which has resulted in the axing of three bulletins. MEAA boss Paul Murphy said there were fewer than 10,000 journalists in Australia. The number has fallen by about 5000 in the last decade, with most of the job losses in regional areas. He said change to competition law was needed, with the union concerned government policy supports consolidation rather than diversification of the media. The MEAA also reiterated its calls for a new single regulator of media content to ensure quality and reliability.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/12/2021

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Australia Launches \$1 Billion Missile Plan

Australia will produce its own guided missiles under a \$1 billion plan to fast-track a new weapons facility in partnership with a global arms manufacturer. The federal government expects to spend \$100 billion on missiles and other guided weapons over the next two decades, in response to a worsening strategic environment. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said creating sovereign capability was essential. "As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, having the ability for self-reliance, be it vaccine development or the defence of Australia, is vital to meeting our own requirements in a changing global environment," he said. "It's an imperative we now proceed with the creation of a sovereign guided weapons capability as a priority, accelerating this process following the idea first being explored in the force structure plan." The announcement mirrors a commitment made during the Eden-Monaro by-election last year.

Labor supports fast-tracking Australian-made missile guidance systems. "Australia does need to be more resilient when it comes to our defence and this announcement is part of that," Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese said on Wednesday. Companies such as Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems and Kongsberg are considered likely bidders for the work. It would allow Australia to replace missiles shipped in from overseas. The government expects the new facility could generate \$40 billion in local production and export sales over the new 20 years.

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NEW ZEALAND: Buckett Law Launches Article Section on Website

The new feature updates the website's visitors to further information about employment law. Buckett Law created the new article section to stay in contact with their clients and help them find news and advancements in their specific area of expertise. Making it more straightforward for employers to keep up with new laws put

into place by the government is Buckettt Law's goal, and we believe with this new feature, we have achieved that. The article section will be updated regularly with new court decisions about employment law cases to help both employers and employees with their future legal matters. You can visit this new feature at <https://bucketttlaw.co.nz/articles/>. Buckettt Law is a specialist employment law service, who support their clients across the whole of New Zealand. The team has over 60 years of combined experience and is dedicated to achieving the best outcome for their clients. Buckettt Law works with a range of modern technologies to provide a solution in a timely and flexible manner to their customers. If you need employment law support, contact our team to have a 15-minute complimentary consultation, and we can explain how we can help with any issues you might have.

From <https://www.infonews.co.nz> 03/15/2021

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Government Supports New Programme to Lead New Zealand's Plant Protein Sector Development

The Government is partnering with Leaft Foods on a \$20 million research and development programme that could put New Zealand on the map as a leading leaf protein concentrate producer. Through its Sustainable Food & Fibre Futures fund, the Ministry for Primary Industries is contributing \$8 million to the five-year programme to develop technology that extracts edible protein from New Zealand grown green leafy crops. Leaft Foods' technology will be used to produce high-quality protein in the form of gels or powders that can be used in a range of foods in the fast-growing global market for plant proteins. The plant-based protein start-up will also produce an animal feed that is optimised for ruminant nutrition and has the potential to lower nitrogen losses and emissions on-farm. "A growing number of global food manufacturers and consumers are demanding that their proteins come from a sustainable source," said Agriculture Minister Damien O'Connor.

"This could be a game-changer for pastoral enterprises seeking to take environmental leadership, by providing them with a low impact, locally sourced feed, and the opportunity to diversify into low emission farm systems. Leaft Foods' programme aims to build on New Zealand's reputation as a trusted exporter of high-quality protein, while reducing the environmental impact of agricultural systems. It aims to meet the increase in demand for plant proteins in a way that aligns with changing consumer values. Damien O'Connor said that Leaft Foods is building a world-class team of experts to develop the technology. "We're thrilled to be assisting them to expand and progress their successful laboratory and technical proof-of-concept trials." "This programme is a great example of the types of innovation and value-add we're calling for through our food and fibre sector roadmap, Fit for a Better World – Accelerating our economic potential." Leaft Foods was founded by Dr John Leyland Penno and Maury Leyland Penno, and was launched in August 2019. The company is based in Lincoln, Canterbury.

2、 Government System and Civil Services

Asia-Pacific

World Bank Supports Seychelles to Reform Its Social Protection System

The World Bank approved a \$30 million credit for the Government of Seychelles as it endeavors to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of its social protection systems. “This support will help bring the Social Protection System in-line with the country’s challenges, including demographic changes and the post-COVID- 19 recovery, while focusing on the multi-dimensional causes of poverty and exclusion,” noted Erik von Uexkull, World Bank Country Representative for Seychelles. Seychelles has a generous, comprehensive, but fragmented social protection system, with as many as 30 programs ranging from universal pensions and social welfare for the poor, to programs targeting orphans and people with disability. In this context, the Government of Seychelles requested support from the World Bank to improve the efficiency and quality of its social protection system. “The World Bank assistance will support the government’s efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing programs, based on international best practices, so that a higher percentage of social protection spending is allocated toward those in need,” noted Edmundo Murrugarra, Senior World Bank Social Protection Economist and the project’s lead. “There’s a need to improve the social protection system to ensure that it distributes greater resources to those living at the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution and to make it more efficient.” The country spent almost 7 percent of GDP on social protection in 2020, a level higher than the averages observed across Sub Saharan Africa, small-state islands, and upper-middle income countries, even considering the effects of COVID-19. “While the current design of the social protection system is credited for its impact on poverty reduction, it needs to be adapted to the new demographic context,” added Anita M. Schwarz, World Bank Lead Economist and the project’s co- lead. “The current social protection spending is significantly biased toward the old-age population.” Elderly account for nine percent of the population, yet they represent 22 percent of all the beneficiaries of non-contributory programs and receive as much as 42 percent of total benefits.

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 03/25/2021

Senior Officials Expedite Regional Response to COVID-19, Push Recovery Process

Senior officials from 21 APEC member economies are convening virtually to expedite a regional response to the lasting impact of COVID-19 in a bid to boost the recovery process. The two-day Senior Officials' Meeting comes on the heels of intensive discussion about how APEC will carry forward the commitments leaders made in 2020 and the development of a 20-year implementation plan, taking into consideration the challenges and risks exposed by the pandemic. "We are facing quite a serious challenge this year, driven in part by the health catastrophe that we all face across our region, but also the serious economic challenges that now confront our economies as we look to find a way through this crisis," says Vangelis Vitalis, Chair of APEC 2021 Senior Officials. Set against a backdrop of looming uncertainty, wider inequality risk and rising protectionism, Vitalis stresses the importance of capturing and featuring all these challenges as senior officials deliberate policy measures and their concerted regional effort to drive recovery.

"There is rising protectionism across the world, which challenges all of us to re-think the fundamentals of regional economic integration," Vitalis says. "On top of that, the social licence for trade policy and for economic integration is increasingly under strain as we witness the unequal impact of COVID-19 on women, small businesses and indigenous peoples." "As a region, we need to work together to ensure APEC effectively responds, not just to the immediate crisis, but also to the longer-term need to build a sustainable and resilient regional economy that benefits everyone." In this dialogue, senior officials will seek to realize the need for APEC to be more sustainable and inclusive of all people, including women and indigenous people. The focus will be to support their full participation in the region's economy so it can help drive new thinking and unlock new ways to respond to the global pandemic.

Officials will also discuss measures to respond to the pandemic through economic and trade policies that strengthen the recovery year. This includes policies that encourage openness and connectivity, as well as reduce friction at the border, with an aim of reducing barriers and making it easier for companies to trade throughout the APEC region, especially on COVID-19 essential goods. Advancing digital inclusion, infrastructure and green technology will also be a key focus for APEC this year. This includes promoting digitally-enabled business and trade, working toward regulatory coherence and resolving issues concerning data and digital trade tools. "APEC, as a regional forum needs to seize the moment and rise to the occasion by putting together a concrete response that will benefit all," says APEC Secretariat's Executive Director, Dr Rebecca Sta Maria. "We want to see policy that continues to make trade and investment across markets easier, cheaper, faster and more sustainable to avoid undermining the significant progress that has been achieved in the region in these areas."

Vitalis agrees by emphasizing the importance of APEC economies working together to end subsidies on fossil fuels and lowering tariffs on environmental goods and exploring similar work in services. "APEC needs to show leadership in this area, as is expected from the world's most dynamic regional economy," he says. "Trade policy should be inclusive and beneficial for all, and trade an enabler of solutions to some of the most pressing sustainability issues we all face. Identifying environmental goods and services and addressing barriers to their uptake, for instance, can contribute to our collective climate change mitigation efforts." This year will be a significant year for APEC and New Zealand. With the APEC Putrajaya Vision 2040 agreed by leaders last year, member economies will now need to develop a detailed plan of action to implement the new vision, which will expand on the three economic drivers of growth: trade and investment; innovation and digitalization; and strong, balanced, secure, sustainable and inclusive growth. "The key is for APEC to be both responsive to the immediate crisis but also relevant to the challenges we are all going to confront over the next 20 years," explains Vitalis. "We are looking to work together with all APEC member economies to develop this implementation plan in the spirit of what the Putrajaya Vision talks about in terms of the equal partnership. Large or small, we were all equal in this important process," he concludes.

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East Asia

CHINA: Pledging Greater Reforms to Chart Course for Sustainable Growth

China has set a sound growth target for 2021, leaving room for policymakers to carry out arduous reforms to tackle bottlenecks constraining sustainable development. "A target of over 6 percent (of economic growth) will enable all of us to devote full energy to promoting reform, innovation, and high-quality development," Premier Li Keqiang said in the government work report delivered to the national legislature, which began its annual session Friday. The report, along with the draft blueprint setting the country's development priorities for the period up to 2035, both of which are being discussed at the annual "two sessions" of the country's top legislature and political advisory body, outlined key areas where reforms are expected to bring institutional changes and bolster the country's long-term growth.

BUILDING UP TECH STRENGTH

China will raise its capacity for pursuing scientific and technological innovation, leveraging market forces to encourage enterprises to innovate, according to the report. To that end, the country will offer preferential tax policies to encourage research and development (R&D), especially for manufacturing enterprises, the

report said. The draft outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for national economic and social development and the long-range objectives through the year 2035 also identified self-reliance in science and technology as a strategic underpinning for national development. Guo Wei, deputy director of the Research Office of the State Council, said that the building of tech strength is a sustained process that requires efforts from all parties, and market-oriented mechanisms are necessary to incentivize more R&D spending by firms.

Liu Wei, a national political advisor and chairman of Guangzhou-based artificial intelligence (AI) provider PCITECH, said that, while the country already enjoys a competitive edge globally in fields such as AI-powered transport and medical services, the application scenarios for the technology are still limited. He proposed that the government and state-owned enterprises work with private companies to apply AI technology in areas like smart cities and urban rail transit. China's advancement in technology will not only be crucial for its own growth, but offers benefits to the wider world, breaking the technology monopoly by many developed countries and lowering the prices of key technologies, said Li Daokui, an economist with Tsinghua University and a national political advisor.

TAPPING CONSUMPTION POTENTIAL

China will take expanding domestic demand as a strategic move and fully tap the potential of the domestic market, according to the report. The move is in line with the country's prolonged transition from an investment-driven growth model to one that depends more on domestic demand, which is considered more able to withstand external shocks. The reform on expanding domestic demand does not only mean short-term consumption stimulus, but improvements in mechanisms, including integrated urban-rural development and income distribution, analysts said.

Liu Shangxi, head of the Chinese Academy of Fiscal Sciences and a national political advisor, said that both demand-side and supply-side reforms are needed to unleash the country's consumption potential. "It's not enough just to put more money into people's pockets to foster domestic demand. The demand is created only when there is something that people are willing to spend money on," he said. To that end, reforms must be carried out so that resources such as land, labor and data are allocated according to market principles, Liu said. He Lifeng, head of the country's top economic planning body, said that the country will take various measures to increase people's incomes, while at the same time creating more quality products on the supply side.

SPEEDING UP GREEN TRANSITION

A moderate GDP target would also give officials room to push the green transformation of many industries, which is often considered unlikely to generate immediate economic gains. China will stay true to the principle that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets and promote green development, Premier Li

said in the government work report. Pursuing an eco-friendly growth pattern over the years, the country has taken multiple measures to promote the wider use of renewable energy, cut the production capacity of resource-intensive sectors and wage a battle against pollution. Official statistics show that by 2019, carbon emission intensity in China had decreased by 48.1 percent compared with 2005, exceeding the target of reductions in carbon emission intensity by 40 to 45 percent between 2005 and 2020.

In 2021, energy consumption per unit of GDP and carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP will be reduced by 13.5 percent and 18 percent, respectively, according to the report. The government will also draw up an action plan for peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and make efforts to improve its industrial structure and energy mix, the report said. Zhang Ming, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that the country is expected to adopt more stringent targets on energy conservation in the context of peaking carbon emissions and achieving carbon neutrality.

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Chinese Modernity Features High-quality Development

China will focus on promoting high-quality development during its 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) period. The concept is an innovation in humanity's pursuit of modernization. China has targeted economic growth of over 6 percent for 2021. The lower-than-anticipated numerical goal reflects a decision to focus on high-quality and sustainable development, rather than dazzling fast expansion. The target is accompanied by a series of goals on other fronts, such as innovation and employment promotion, showing a holistic approach to development. Being the first year of the 14th Five-Year Plan period, 2021 also marks the starting point of a new journey toward fully building a modern socialist China. To set the stage for this long-term endeavor, it is of vital necessity to pursue high-quality development. China's socialist modernization embodies the general characteristics of modernization in other countries, but it is not a copy or replica of the mode in Western countries. It emphasizes people-oriented development and an upgrade from economic growth alone to comprehensive social progress, with common prosperity for all and the harmonious coexistence of human and nature.

Pursuing high-quality development is necessary to adapt to the changes in the principal contradiction facing Chinese society. The country now faces a contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life, which requires the country to improve the quality and effectiveness of development. It is guided by the country's new development philosophy of pursuing innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared

development. Efforts to achieve this goal will be made in various sectors, including promoting the comprehensive green transformation of social and economic development, strengthening the in-depth integration of digital technologies with the real economy, further shortening the negative lists for foreign investment and developing a strong domestic market. The high-quality development will not only benefit China, but also bring more opportunities to the rest of the world. On a new journey pursuing high-quality development, China will work with other countries to build an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity.

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State Council Distributes Work Priorities to Reinforce Economic Recovery

All key tasks laid out in the government work report must be effectively implemented to sustain steady economic and social development, the State Council's executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang urged on Monday. The report, adopted at the recently concluded fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC), set out the key targets and priorities for the work of the government this year. The meeting called for solid efforts in pursuing high-quality development, consolidating the gains in COVID-19 containment and socio-economic development, and delivering on the government's commitments to the people in a bid to make fresh progress in promoting development and improving people's well-being. The meeting assigned the 44 key tasks in 38 areas as laid out in the report to relevant State Council bodies and subnational authorities, with their respective responsibilities and time-frames for fulfilling the tasks clearly defined.

"The government work report has gone through the legal process of approval by the NPC. It embodies our commitments made to the NPC deputies. The government must take concrete action to fully discharge its responsibilities and ensure sound implementation of all policies," Li said. The meeting underlined the imperative to keep abreast of shifts in the world economic trends and their implications for China. It called for a sound grasp of the dynamics in domestic economic activity, year-on-year and month-on-month, and deep analysis of new developments and new problems. This will help make informed anticipatory adjustments to the policies introduced. It is key to bolster employment and keep prices stable, in a bid to anchor market expectations. Efforts shall be made to prevent and defuse various risks and potential dangers and consolidate the foundation for economic recovery.

"The first two months saw continued economic recovery and a strengthening momentum of development. That said, the recovery remains uneven as the services sector, micro and small firms and some localities still face difficulties in achieving

recovery. We must act promptly to fulfill the annual development targets and tasks set out in the government work report and keep major economic indicators within an appropriate range," Li said. It was emphasized at the meeting that the tax and fee cuts for micro and small enterprises, especially the new structural tax cuts, must be thoroughly implemented. The policy on raising the super tax deduction on the research and development expenses of manufacturing firms shall be enforced as soon as possible, and the settlement period shortened, so that businesses stand to benefit within this year.

The meeting urged keeping the macro leverage ratio generally stable and lowering the government leverage ratio. Financial institutions will be encouraged to promptly introduce specific measures to make financing easier and steadily more affordable for micro and small enterprises. Fiscal, financial and other policies shall work in sync to support job creation. The employment and related services for such key groups as college graduates, ex-service members and rural migrant workers will be promoted. The labor, talent, and casual labor markets will be fully leveraged to widen avenues of employment. "An appropriate range is about job growth, income rise, environmental improvement and price stability, irrespective of the speeds of development on these fronts being a bit faster or slower," Li said.

The meeting called for deepening reform of government functions to advance list-based management for all items requiring administrative approval. Specific measures will be rolled out to reduce the procedures, documents, time and fees required in conducting government review of applications made by enterprises. Funds of central government budgetary investments, transfer payments and local government special-purpose bonds will be delivered and utilized in a timely fashion, and support to areas of weakness such as compulsory education and basic medical care will be beefed up. Policies will be introduced to support training and in-job pursuit of higher education for teachers in counties and townships. Measures will be promptly instituted to promote inter-provincial on-the-spot settlement of outpatient bills through individual accounts for basic medical insurance, and expand the scope of reimbursement of outpatient bills and medical expenses for common disease drugs. Tax breaks and fee exemptions shall be improved to incentivize private actors in providing community-based elderly care, child care and other consumer services.

"The world economy is faced with much great uncertainty, and there are divergent views about how things may go. A strong global economy is good for China. Yet massive quantitative easing will also bring spillover effects, which could affect China and even the entire world," Li said. The meeting urged tighter supervision and inspection of policy implementation. Local authorities and relevant departments must, as required by the government work report, formulate specific implementation plans as soon as possible and complete their tasks sooner rather than later. Inter-agency coordination and cooperation must be stepped up on cross-regional and cross-sectoral matters. "The macro fiscal, monetary and employment policies must

be promptly implemented. The expanded, directly allocated fiscal funds must be delivered to prefecture- and county-level governments as soon as possible with focus on supporting employment, people's essential needs and market entities. Governments at all levels shall continue to live on a tight budget to ensure smooth functioning of primary-level governments," Li said.

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Sci-tech Experts Work to Spur Rural Economy Under Xi's Leadership

Tucked away in the tranquil ravines of the Wuyi Mountains in east China's Fujian Province, Yang Wenchun's tea farm is colored by a sea of golden rapeseed flowers as swarms of bees and butterflies hop from one flower to the next. The flowers, which blossom among lines of tea bushes, were not planted for their aesthetic appeal, nor for their oil-yielding seeds, but as a source of green manure and natural insect repellent, said Yang, owner of the 21-hectare tea farm. The ecological tea farm is part of the polyculture project of Liao Hong, an agronomist at Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University and a sci-tech expert sent to spearhead innovation in rural areas by the local government. Liao has provided technical support for the tea farm since 2018. Her team has trained thousands of agricultural technicians and farmers in different places in Fujian. President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, inspected Yang's tea farm on Monday.

Xi was delighted to learn that the quality of tea has improved and farmers' incomes have increased as ecologically friendly methods are used in the farm over the years under the guidance of technical professionals. "We should sum up the experience and system of sending sci-tech experts to rural areas, and continue to improve, consolidate and adhere to it," said Xi. China's mechanism of sending sci-tech experts to rural areas aims to popularize agricultural science and technology, spearhead sci-tech innovation and entrepreneurship there, and help lead villages out of poverty and promote rural vitalization. The practice was initiated in 1999 when the local government in the city of Nanping, Fujian, sought to upgrade its unproductive rural economy. For a start, a total of 225 sci-tech experts were sent to the rural areas of Nanping to offer guidance for farmers in their daily work. In 2002, Xi, then governor of Fujian Province, appreciated the measure of Nanping in an article, saying it was a useful exploration in innovating rural work.

In the same year, the measure of sending sci-tech experts to rural areas was piloted in several other provinces and regions. It was promoted nationwide in 2009 and has gained bigger institutional support from the central authorities since 2012. In his important instructions made on the 20th anniversary of the system of sending

sci-tech experts to rural areas in 2019, President Xi encouraged sci-tech experts working in rural areas to uphold their original aspiration and make new and greater contributions to poverty alleviation and rural vitalization. As a grape growing expert in the agricultural bureau of Nanping, Xie Fuxin used to ride a bicycle to grape greenhouses in the countryside of Nanping to offer technical instruction, carrying a bag that was loaded with a lunchbox and shears to prune and graft vines. Xie was nicknamed the "grape wizard" by local farmers, for he was adept at explaining sophisticated terms in simple language, and more importantly, his growing techniques were quite effective.

Over the past 20 years, Xie has trained over 10,000 grape farmers and helped expand the planting acreage of the fruit to over 4,200 hectares across Nanping, which generates 600 million yuan (about 92 million U.S. dollars) every year and has lifted thousands of local farmers out of poverty. China has sent nearly 300,000 sci-tech experts to rural areas in poverty alleviation efforts since 2012, according to the Ministry of Science and Technology. China has made rural vitalization a priority to promote growth in the countryside over the next five years. Initiatives in science and technology are being introduced in rural areas to promote modern agriculture. "I am proud that my work has helped many farmers increase their incomes. I just want to contribute more to farmers and the rural economy," Xie said.

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Top Political Advisor Commends Achievements of Democratic Supervision on Poverty Alleviation

China's top political advisor Wang Yang on Wednesday commended the contribution of non-Communist parties in conducting democratic supervision on poverty alleviation. Wang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, made the remarks at a symposium held in Beijing, which was attended by leaders from non-Communist parties. In the past five years, non-Communist parties had attached great importance to supervising poverty alleviation work, pooled efforts to conduct the supervision and voiced their practical suggestions in the process, thus contributing greatly to China's victory in the war on poverty, said Wang when addressing the symposium. Wang also noted that the supervision has been an enlightening attempt in exploring new ways for non-Communist parties to perform their duties of democratic supervision. Wang called on all non-Communist parties to learn from the last five years' practices and improve the effectiveness and quality of democratic supervision.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 03/24/2021

All Roads Lead to Better Human Rights

A myth has long persisted that there is a best way to protect and promote human rights, and it is the West's way. This is simply not the truth. Different countries have different histories, cultures and national conditions. Thus it is natural for them to have different approaches and set various priorities in their quest for a safe, free and happy life to their fellow citizens. Take China as an example. With hundreds of millions struggling with poverty and starvation when the People's Republic of China was founded, the most pressing task was to grow the economy and to ensure that the Chinese people have enough access to life essentials such as water, food and clothes. As the country develops, China is in a better position to meet people's needs for a better life, offering quality education and health care, and higher-paying jobs and ensuring more friendly environment and enhanced social fairness and justice. When the deadly coronavirus broke out, China spares no efforts to protect people's rights to life and health -- the most fundamental part of human rights.

However, China's people-centered human rights philosophy has been under relentless and groundless attacks by some self-righteous and hypocritical Western countries. As a matter of fact, those Western countries are merely seeking to abuse the human rights issue as a geopolitical tool to interfere in others' domestic affairs. While those self-styled Western "judges" are trying to lecture China and others on human rights, their own human rights records are deplorable. The tragic death of George Floyd last year and the recent killings of six Asian women in Atlanta are a constant reminder of the serious racial discrimination and festering hate crimes in the United States, a country that always tries to brand itself as a human rights defender. What an irony! Amid the raging pandemic, people's rights to life and health in those countries were recklessly disregarded and deprived.

Nearly 550,000 lives in the United States have perished, a death toll heavier than those from the two world wars and the Vietnam war combined. In Britain, over 120,000 lives have been taken by the virus. The staggering loss of human lives and the seemingly never-ending debate over mask-wearing and restriction measures also shed a light on a dilemma confronting some Western societies -- individual liberties or the security of collective human rights. In fact, such debates in the West have long predated the pandemic. In the early 1900s, a female cook named Mary Mallon was identified as the source of typhoid outbreaks in several New York families. To contain the virus, the woman, an asymptomatic carrier of disease, was forcibly quarantined for a total of 26 years. She spent the rest of her life and died alone in a small hospital with poor hygiene. Her tragic story represents a classic example of the conflict between an individual's liberty and the health safety of a whole society.

Like it or not, people of all countries are closely related to each other like never before in today's super-interconnected world. Too much emphasis on individual liberties, like refusing to wear a mask in a raging pandemic, is likely to put the rights of many others into grave danger. Over the centuries, Western countries have formed their own human rights values that are fitted to their particular historical circumstances and social systems, and yet those values are neither perfect nor universal. All members of the international community, especially the Western world, need to refrain from lecturing others about human rights, learn to respect others' choices, and make further practical contributions to the international human rights cause.

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Xi Stresses More Efforts to Serve, Integrate into New Development Paradigm

Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed more efforts to serve and integrate into the new development paradigm in fully building a modern socialist country. Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks during his inspection trip to east China's Fujian Province from Monday to Thursday. Xi also called on Fujian to make greater progress in developing a modernized economy, take bigger strides in exploring a new way of integrated development on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, and achieve greater breakthroughs in creating a high-quality life. The inspection trip took Xi to the cities of Nanping, Sanming and Fuzhou. He researched local efforts in implementing the guiding principles of the fifth plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, facilitating a good start in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), and coordinating regular epidemic control and economic and social development.

On Monday afternoon, Xi visited the Wuyishan National Park, one of the pioneers in piloting the national park system. The aim to build a nature reserves system centering on national parks is to keep the ecosystem intact and protect biodiversity, Xi said. Visiting a tea farm, Xi called for coordinated efforts to promote tea culture, the development of the tea industry and the use of technology in the sector. He also stressed more efforts in implementing the arrangements to dispatch technical professionals to rural areas to help with local development. After the tea farm, Xi visited a park dedicated to Zhu Xi, a renowned Chinese philosopher of the 12th century. The president called for innovative efforts to transform and develop fine traditional Chinese culture. While visiting Shaxian District of Sanming on Tuesday, Xi made his first stop at Shaxian General Hospital where he learned about the reform of local medical and healthcare system and emphasized that people's health is a hallmark of socialist modernization.

Xi also called for deepening reform of the medicine and healthcare system, balanced distribution of high-quality medical resources and improved infrastructure at the primary level. In the afternoon, Xi paid a visit to Yubang Village of Xiamao Township, an old revolutionary base, where he underlined that the key to rural vitalization lies in developing industries that suit local conditions and benefit local people. Visiting a rural property rights transaction center in Shaxian, Xi urged innovating the collective forest tenure system in an active yet prudent manner while working hard to make new breakthroughs. While inspecting the provincial capital of Fuzhou on Wednesday, Xi called for continuous efforts to make the city a better place and deliver more benefits to the people. Xi went to the historical and cultural block of Sanfangqixiang (Three Lanes and Seven Alleys) in the city.

He said the protection of historical blocks, ancient architecture and cultural relics is equivalent to the preservation of the city's history and heritage. During his visit to RICOM, an optical lens company, Xi underscored the importance of independent innovation. "We can only be in the front rank in scientific and technological development through making innovations, while following others will not work," he said. "We must accelerate our pace to achieve self-reliance in science and technology." On Thursday morning, Xi inspected Fuzhou-based Minjiang University. At a square on the campus, Xi said young Chinese bear the responsibility of realizing national rejuvenation, calling on students to actively devote themselves to building a modern socialist China.

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Xi's Inspection Accentuates China's High-quality Development Commitment

The latest footprints of Chinese President Xi Jinping have revealed the country's unwavering determination to pursue high-quality growth, which is key to its modernization drive. In his first inspection trip outside Beijing following the conclusion of this year's annual "two sessions", Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, visited east China's Fujian Province. His tour to the Chinese province, where he previously worked for about 17 years, came as China reaffirmed its commitment to people-centered high-quality development as it enters a new development stage. Fujian is one of the key places where Xi's thought on ecological civilization was conceived and put into practice. The thought, exemplified by the Chinese leader's well-known remarks "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets," profoundly reveals the general laws of economic development and environmental protection in the development of humanity.

Xi's latest green footprints echoed China's green ambition which has been fully illustrated in the country's newly approved development blueprint for the next five to 15 years to guide the country's march toward modernization. The document set the goal of significantly lowering China's energy consumption per unit of GDP and its carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP. Having taken notes from the West, China will not choose a development path that consumes a large quantity of non-renewable natural resources in the process of its modernization. When underscoring the importance of independent innovation, Xi called for accelerating the pace to achieve self-reliance in science and technology. It has been a consensus in China that innovation is the primary driving force behind development and China must pursue innovation-driven growth and make breakthroughs in key technologies to achieve high-quality development.

China's high-quality development also entails development of the people and for the people. In Fujian, Xi talked about people's health which the leader called a hallmark of socialist modernization. He also underlined promoting rural vitalization, preserving history and heritage as well as deepening education reforms to ensure the sector's non-profit and public-welfare nature. In China's modernization vision, there is not only a drastic increase in economic production capacity but also comprehensive social progress. China seeks a people-centered modernization that is different from the Western model in which capital is the primary driver and dominant logic. The Chinese leader's latest inspection has unequivocally sent a message that high-quality development is a path leading to China's socialist modernization. Efforts must be made to ensure high-quality development and meet people's aspirations for a better life.

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Chinese Premier Stresses Deepening Reform, Opening Up

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has urged efforts to deepen reform and opening up, enhance innovation capacities and development momentum, improve people's well-being, and promote high-quality development. Li, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks during an inspection tour in east China's Jiangsu Province from Thursday to Friday. When visiting Hengli Hydraulic Co., Ltd. in Changzhou, Li called on the company to consistently innovate through opening up and cooperation. During exchanges with executives of local manufacturing enterprises, the premier highlighted the country's commitment to market-based inclusive policies to stimulate the corporate sector's innovation power. Li also paid a visit to a residential community in Changzhou, where he learnt about services including elderly care and nursery and lauded local authorities' practice of

introducing non-governmental resources to promote development of elderly care. The premier also urged local authorities to do their utmost in creating conditions for flexible employment of the people. Li was briefed on the reform and development of the Jiangsu pilot free trade zone (FTZ), and urged local authorities to advance institutional innovations, pool talent, and give full play to the role of the FTZ in pioneering reform and opening up. When visiting Nanjing University, Li encouraged researchers to strengthen cross-disciplinary cooperation and promote integration of innovations.

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JAPAN: New System to Help Local Governments Keep Track of Vaccination Progress

The government's new tracking system for COVID-19 vaccinations is expected to allow local governments to track people's vaccination status even if they move and change their place of residence between receiving the first and second shots of vaccines that require two doses, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned. Furthermore, the government will conduct research on supporting mass vaccinations in workplaces. The system is expected to be in operation from April 12, when vaccinations for the elderly are slated to begin. The government will ask municipalities to pre-register by April 5 the personal information of people who are expected to be vaccinated. At vaccination sites, customized tablets will register these people by scanning bar codes that link to personal information on vaccination vouchers. Combined with the pre-registered information, the system is expected to be able to track inoculation progress down to the individual level. For the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine currently used in Japan, people need to have two doses injected a few weeks apart.

As vaccination records will be able to be reviewed across multiple municipalities, it will be easier for a municipality to send out vouchers for a second shot to people who have moved to their jurisdiction after the first injection. Even if someone loses their voucher, municipalities should be able to respond smoothly. The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry is also examining the possibility of conducting mass vaccinations at workplaces. Currently, inoculations are performed at sites close to a person's residence in principle, but the government believes that if workplaces are utilized, vaccinations could be achieved more quickly. In the future, it is expected that some countries will require Japanese visitors to have proof of COVID-19 vaccination. Since it takes two to three months to update the records in a conventional vaccination ledger, the government will also look at practical measures available within the digital system. The government has subcontracted the development of the system to Milabo, an emerging tech company based in Tokyo, at a cost of about ¥385 million. The government has secured 41,000 tablets to be used at vaccination sites and

plans to distribute them nationwide in late March.

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Japan Health Ministry Calls for Two-Stage Medical Care System

The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry has asked prefectural governments and other entities to establish a two-stage medical care system to prepare for another surge in infections with the novel coronavirus. The ministry on Wednesday asked them to establish health care systems to handle both normal times and emergencies, and to temporarily switch to the latter and secure hospital beds by restricting general medical care in the event of a sharp increase in infections, such as when the number of infected people doubled at the peak of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The request calls for plans to be drawn up by the end of April to secure hospital beds during an emergency, particularly with the spread of variants believed to be highly infectious in mind. The ministry says general medical care can be restricted by temporarily postponing nonurgent surgeries and hospitalization, for example, in the event that the number of beds for COVID-19 patients needs to be increased significantly.

The ministry asked that the health monitoring system for home care patients be strengthened, to prepare for situations where people at risk of becoming seriously ill cannot be hospitalized. Providing staff support to prefectures and public health centers working to coordinate hospitalization and hospital transfers will also be considered. The operational system for normal times will also be reviewed by May. The ministry will study the division of roles among medical institutions in each region to provide general medical care while further increasing the number of beds for COVID-19 patients. There have been cases where local governments and medical institutions did not cooperate well, failing to effectively utilize hospital beds during the third wave of the pandemic. To avoid this, the number of patients waiting to be hospitalized or transferred to other hospitals will be checked regularly to prevent coronavirus treatment from “clogging up.” To quickly switch to the emergency system, the maximum number of infected people under which the normal medical care system can be maintained will be calculated in advance. The ministry will consider when to transfer to the emergency system by regularly estimating the number of people likely to be infected two weeks into the future.

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SOUTH KOREA: To Invest 206 Bln Won in Civil-Military Partnership

South Korea said Thursday it plans to inject 206 billion won (US\$182 million) this year to bolster the civil-military ties, carrying out more than 200 projects centering on harnessing state-of-the-art technologies. The budget marked a 15 percent on-year increase from 178 billion won allocated last year, surpassing 200 billion won for the first time, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. Of the budget, 164.3 billion won will be spent on carrying out joint projects among the military and private companies, while 32.5 billion won will be allocated in the transfer of technologies. Under the plan, South Korea will launch projects seeking to apply augmented and virtual reality technologies in the maintenance of vessels, while developing training and education programs for soldiers as well. The country will utilize 3-D printing technology to produce equipment and weapon parts needed in the military, and plans to set up guidelines and standards to reduce the defect rate. Around 22.6 billion won will be spent on so-called fast-track projects, which refers to programs that can potentially be utilized in a short-term period. The amount marks a fivefold growth from the previous year. South Korea will also seek to build test beds for military robots and drones in the second half of 2021. To induce more small and medium-sized firms to participate in the state-run military projects, South Korea plans to lower barriers by easing minimum financial capability requirements.

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S. Korea to Launch Public Service to Provide Satellite-Backed Air Quality Data

South Korea will begin providing real-time air quality videos and data for the Korean Peninsula and neighboring areas to the public, using data from its environmental satellite launched last year. The Ministry of Science and ICT, the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Oceans Fisheries announced the plan on Sunday. The new public service will be provided from Monday on the homepage (<https://nesc.nier.go.kr>) of the environmental satellite center of the National Institute of Environmental Research. The ministries said that the service will provide data of seven types of air pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide, ozone and aerosol optical depth. Additional data on sulfur dioxide levels during natural disasters will also be provided. The service will be supplied based on data sent from the Chollian-2B satellite, launched in February last year.

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South-East Asia

CAMBODIA: Forming Ad-Hoc Committee for COVID-19

Vaccination

The Cambodian government on Wednesday established an ad-hoc committee for COVID-19 vaccination, according to a decision signed by Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen. In the decision, Hun Sen appointed Ministry of Health Secretary of State Or Vandine as the committee's chairperson and 46 other officials from relevant ministries and institutions as the committee's deputy chairpersons and members. "The committee has roles and duties to manage and lead the vaccination process across the country," the prime minister said. He said the committee also has obligations to train medical staff for vaccination process and allocate vaccines to inoculation sites nationwide. The Southeast Asian nation has launched a COVID-19 vaccination campaign with vaccines from China's Sinopharm and Indian-made AstraZeneca. As of Tuesday, 255,817 people in the priority groups had been inoculated with the Sinopharm vaccine, and 41,768 with the AstraZeneca vaccine, according to a government report. In a voice message posted on his official Facebook page on Tuesday, Hun Sen said Cambodia has planned to vaccinate at least 10 million of its 16 million population.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com/> 03/17/2021

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THAILAND: MP's Duties Suspended over Corruption Charges

A Thai lawmaker, who stands accused of serious ethical misconduct in a land encroachment case, was on Thursday ordered by a court to immediately stop performing as a member of parliament (MP). The Supreme Court delivered the order for the suspension of the legislative duties for Palang Pracharath Party MP Pareena Kraikupt until a final court verdict over the case has been delivered. Court trials are scheduled to begin on April 30. The National Anti-Corruption Commission has lodged the case of a severe breach of the legislators' code of ethics against the MP in which she had allegedly managed to illegally occupy 282 acres of a forest reserve in her constituency of Ratchaburi province. Pareena, daughter of former deputy minister Thawee Kraikupt, has privately run a chicken-raising farm in Chom Bueng district, part of her own constituency, and alleged by the Department of Forestry to have encroached on protected land.

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VIETNAM: Government to Go Digital by 2025

Minister of Information and Communications Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng said on Wednesday that the Government within the first quarter or early in the second quarter of this year would approve a strategy to develop e-government as part of

efforts to form a digital Government by 2025. The building and deployment of the e-government architecture and government services platforms achieved significant results in recent years, Deputy Minister of Information and Communications Nguyễn Huy Dũng said. For example, 100 per cent of ministries, ministerial-level agencies, provinces and cities under the central Government deployed the local/national government service platforms(LGSP) by the end of 2020, from just 3.2 per cent or three ministries and localities in 2018. Dũng added that the national database about business registration also created significant reforms, which helped save time and costs. With around 700,000 firms operating in Việt Nam with millions of administrative procedures handled per day, the system helped save significant sums.

By the end of 2020, all ministries and localities had portals to provide online public services. More than 55 per cent of public services were provided online at level 3 or level 4 which allowed citizens to submit documents online and pay online, respectively. The percentage of public services at level 4 increased from 1.42 per cent in 2016 to 30.86 in 2020. Most ministries and localities implemented the electronic single-window system to computerise the administrative procedure handling process, which also helped improve efficiency and transparency. According to Hùng, to build e-government, it was important to apply the latest technologies to accelerate the progress. Hùng added that Việt Nam needed breakthrough solutions to move faster. He added that a stable budget was needed for the development of e-government which could be about 1 per cent of the annual budget of ministries and localities – the average level of the world.

Under the strategy of e-government towards digital Government which was expected to be approved within this quarter or in early the second quarter, digital Government would be formed by 2025. This meant all administrative management agencies would operate in the digital environment for more efficiency, adding that the digital Government would lead the process of the national digital transformation and also promote the development of digital technology companies, Hùng said. Accordingly, e-government would be basically completed in 2021 with the goal all public services would be provided at level 4 then digital Government would be formed in 2025 which would allow the automatic provision of Government services around the clock. Hùng said the strategy would focus on completing the legal framework for digital transformation, developing the national digital infrastructure and platforms, developing national databases and ensuring national network security.

Big tech firms ready

Big tech firms said that they were willing to contribute to the development of e-government and accelerate the national digital transformation. According to Phạm Đức Long, chairman of the Việt Nam Posts and Telecommunications Group, Vietnamese firms were capable of solving problems in national digital transformation, resources and technologies. Long said tech firms should not only provide what they have but must pay attention to solving problems that localities were facing. Nguyễn

Đình Chiến, deputy director of military-run telecommunications group Viettel said it was important to hasten the development of the legal framework for digital Government, digital economy and digital society and develop mechanisms for capable firms to deploy the digital database to create new values. Trương Gia Bình, chairman of FPT Group, said a clean financial mechanism should be raised to accelerate the development of digital Government.

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National Assembly to Elect New Leaders

Việt Nam will elect a new Chair, President and Prime Minister between March 24 and April 8, according to the General Secretary of the National Assembly (NA) Standing Committee Nguyễn Hạnh Phúc. The election will take place during the coming session of the 14th National Assembly, which will last 12 days from March 24 until April 8. The NA will dismiss incumbent National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân and incumbent State President Nguyễn Phú Trọng in the same period. The NA will hold a secret ballot to allow incumbent Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc to step down. The 13th Communist Party Central Committee last January re-elected Trọng, 77, for a third term as Party General Secretary. At the coming session, parliament members will dismiss and elect some other key appointments in the State apparatus, including vice president, chief justice of the Supreme People's Court, head of the Supreme People's Procuracy, some vice chairmen of the National Assembly, members of the NA Standing Committee, secretary general of the National Assembly and deputy prime ministers and other members of the Government.

Performance of the 14th NA

Despite facing a lot of challenges, the 14th National Assembly (NA) has always upheld its sense of responsibility and made utmost efforts to fulfil the tasks entrusted in it by the Party, voters and people, said NA General Secretary Nguyễn Hạnh Phúc. He made the statement while presenting a draft report on the performance of the 14th NA and the NA Standing Committee at the 54th session of the 14th NA Standing Committee on Monday. The 14th legislature inherited experience from previous tenures to perform well in its five-year tenure amid great changes in the world and the region, while the country's position and strength have been greatly enhanced after 35 years of Đổi Mới (renewal), he said. Under the leadership of the Party, the supervision of the voters and with its role as the highest representative organ of the people, the 14th NA has shown creativity, innovative in operation as well as flexibility and prudence, he said. The decisions of the National Assembly come from the will and aspirations of the people, from the interests of the nation and the requirements of the country, creating positive changes in socio-economic life, national defence, security and external affairs. It contributes to promoting the renovation, construction

and defence of the country.

The 14th NA has improved the quality of legislative work, forming a comprehensive legal basis for the country's development. In the past 10 sessions during the tenure, the NA has passed 72 laws, two ordinances, and many resolutions containing legal norms. Many resolutions bore breakthrough significance, creating the needed legal corridor for reforming the organisation of apparatus, stimulating socio-economic development and addressing shortcomings and obstacles. Important trade agreements, international conventions and treaties have been ratified, contributing to finalising the legal framework, meeting the needs of integration, Phúc said. During the 14th tenure, the legislature's supervision work received due attention, producing high effectiveness that was appreciated by voters and the public. Through supervision work, the NA has affirmed the correctness of policies and laws, continuing to promote good deeds, detecting shortcomings and proposing supplements to improve policies and laws as a basis for deciding important issues. It helped ensure discipline and helped agencies better perform their tasks as well as improve the efficiency of State management.

"Foreign activities of the National Assembly were implemented effectively, making an important contribution to the success of the external affairs of the Party and State, contributing to maintaining a peaceful and stable environment for national construction, defence and development of the country, raising the position of Việt Nam in the international arena," he said. The draft report also noted the 14th NA had a suitable model of organisation and continuously reformed its operational methods while ensuring the Party's leadership and close bonds with voters as well as effective co-ordination with other agencies, which are factors helping it leave behind deep imprints. Committee members agreed that the 14th tenure was a success, with missions assigned by the Party, voters and people excellently completed. Also at the meeting, a draft report on the NA Standing Committee's work in the 14th tenure and preparations for the NA's 11th session were tabled for discussion.

The 11th session is slated to open on March 24 and end on April 8, Phúc said. Personnel matters will remain high on the agenda at the session. Speaking at the opening of the 54th session of the NASC, NA Chairwoman Nguyễn Thị Kim Ngân said the one-day meeting was to finalise preparations for the upcoming 11th meeting of the 14th legislature and collect opinions on the draft reports on working performance of the 14th NA and the NA Standing Committee and personnel work. The outcomes of monitoring the settlement of voters' suggestions sent to the NA's 10th meeting and public opinions sent to the NA's 11th meeting would also be mulled over. She asked lawmakers to consider personnel work in a thorough and cautious manner, ensuring a high consensus will be reached at the 11th meeting regarding positions in the State apparatus. The draft reports on the working performance of the 14th NA and the NA Standing Committee had earlier been sent to NA's committees, the NA's Ethnic Council and delegations of NA deputies for feedback.

Vietnam's Top Legislature to Cast Ballots on New State Leaders

A Vietnamese parliamentary official on Tuesday confirmed that the replacement of the country's top leadership positions, including the President, the Prime Minister and chairperson of the National Assembly (NA), will take place at the 11th session of the 14th NA. Nguyen Hanh Phuc, secretary-general of the NA, made the remarks at a press briefing held in the Vietnamese capital Hanoi on the upcoming session, which is scheduled from March 24 to April 8. At the session, the final sitting of the 14th NA, the country's top legislative body will spend seven days on personnel issues, including casting ballots on the replacement of about 25 leadership positions in total, Phuc said. He stressed that the session is very important as it takes place right after the successful 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and when the country is preparing for the general election, which is expected to be held in May to elect deputies to the 15th NA and the People's Councils at all levels. The session will also feature significant oversight work, such as reviewing the performance of the 14th NA, the state president and the government over the past five years, according to Phuc. In early March, the second plenary session of the 13th CPV Central Committee voted on the nomination of candidates to the posts including state president, prime minister and NA chairperson. According to Vietnamese legal regulations, the working tenure of the President and the Prime Minister is coincident with the NA's tenure.

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Nomination of Candidates for Upcoming Elections Completed: Official

The nomination of candidates for the upcoming elections of deputies to the 15th National Assembly (NA) and all-level People's Councils for the 2021-2026 tenure has been completed, Chief of the National Election Council (NEC)'s Office Nguyễn Hạnh Phúc told the 14th NA's 11th session in Hà Nội on Thursday. Since it was founded at the NA's 9th session, the NEC has been preparing for the organisation of the legislative elections and providing instructions on the elections of deputies to People's Councils at all levels for the 2021-2026 term, in order to ensure they are conducted on schedule and in line with regulations of the existing laws, said Phúc, who is also Secretary General of the NA and Chairman of the NA's Office. The 21-member NEC has a chairperson and four vice chairpersons. The NEC adopted a resolution specifying the number and list of constituencies and the number of legislators to be elected in each constituency of provinces and cities, he noted,

adding that the selection of candidates proceeded with caution and was in accordance with regulations.

At related consultative conferences, attention was paid to increasing the number of female, young, non-Party, and ethnic minority candidates and those with excellent professional backgrounds, he noted. Held on March 19, the second consultative conference reached an agreement on a preliminary list of candidates nominated for the upcoming elections, which are scheduled to take place in May. The number of candidates running for seats in the legislature now stands at 1,084, which is 2.17 times higher than the number of deputies to be elected. They include 205 candidates nominated by central agencies, 803 by local organisations and units, and 76 who were self-nominated. A third consultative conference will be held to provide a shortlist of eligible candidates for the elections of deputies to the 15th NA and all-level People's Councils.

Court performance

The same day, lawmakers heard reports of the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuracy for the 2016-21 tenure and a report examining them. Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court Nguyễn Hoà Bình said during the tenure, courts handled over 2.43 million cases, over 2.36 million of them were dealt with, reaching 97.6 per cent, with the quality of hearings improved. Up to 99.5 per cent of criminal cases were brought to court, without any wrong punishments. The judgement of corruption and economic cases has been appreciated by the Party, State and people. As directed by the Central Steering Committee on Corruption Prevention and Control, courts dealt with 7,463 serious economic and corruption cases with over 14,500 defendants. They held trials in the spirit of judicial reform and publicised sentences on the electronic portal. Procurator Director of the Supreme People's Procuracy Lê Minh Trí said he directed the sector seriously and effectively follow the Party policies on judicial reform, corruption prevention and control; and the Party and NA's requirements regarding the fight against crimes and legal violations.

The sector also took synchronous and effective measures to prevent wrong punishments. Important targets assigned by the legislature were also met and surpassed. According to Trí, nearly VNĐ80 trillion (US\$3.33 billion) in corruption cases were reclaimed. He proposed the NA pay further attention to building mechanisms and measures to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the sector's right to prosecution and control of judicial activities, as well as provide support for its officers. The legislators also listened to a report reviewing the performance of the State Audit Office of Việt Nam during the 2016-21 tenure, a report summarising opinions and petitions sent by voters and people to the NA's 11th session, and another report on the results of supervising the settlement of voters' suggestions sent to the 10th session. Later the same day, lawmakers discussed in groups the draft report on performance of the 14th NA, the NA Standing Committee, the NA Ethnic Council and the NA committees, as well as working reports of the State President

and Government for the 2016-2021 tenure.

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City Sets Up Teams to Help Foreign Firms amid Pandemic

The chairman of the HCM City People's Committee has pledged to improve the business climate for foreign investors by setting up two working teams to assist in their investments. Speaking at a conference with city leaders and Korean firms on Thursday, Nguyễn Thành Phong said: "The city is committed to a better business climate by issuing more special incentives and policies to attract foreign investors, including those from South Korea." The city has set up two "interdisciplinary working groups" in charge of promoting foreign investment and international cooperation with the aim of removing challenges facing foreign investors and promoting international cooperation. "The working groups will increase exchanges with Korean businesses to remove problems facing them in a timely manner," Phong said. The Department of Foreign Affairs will be the focal point between Korean businesses and concerned agencies, receiving comments and inquiries from Korean firms to forward to agencies, according to Phong. Most Korean firms said they wanted to resolve problems related to credit support, registration procedures for new business, and renewal of licences in Việt Nam.

Kim Heung Soo, chairman of the Korean Business Association (KOCHAM), recommended that calculation of tax be based on the total tax in the previous year or on the actual sales of the previous quarters in the year, instead of relying on tax agency predictions. He said that administrative procedures for FDI projects, the establishment of additional legal entities, entity conversion permits, and land transfer procedures for foreign projects remained complicated and should be further simplified or eliminated. South Korea is one of Việt Nam's major economic partners with more than 5,600 Korean companies investing and doing business in the country. It ranks third among 110 countries and territories investing in HCM City with a two-way trade turnover of US\$66 billion last year. Despite the impact of the pandemic, South Korea was the city's 5th largest export market with exports worth \$1.8 billion last year, accounting for 4.5 per cent of the city's total exports and 9.5 per cent of the country's total exports to South Korea. "The potential for cooperation between the two sides is great," said Phong. The city's exports to South Korea were worth more than \$366 million in the first two months of 2021, up 30.3 per cent over the same period last year, according to Phong.

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INDIA: Former CS of Kerala Vishwas Mehta IAS Takes Charge as Chief Information Commissioner

In accordance with the orders from the Government of Kerala, the Former Chief Secretary of the state Vishwas Mehta, a senior IAS officer of 1986-Batch, assumed the post of Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) of the State Information Commission on March 1, 2021. Mehta retired from his mainstream bureaucratic career on February 28, 2021.

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NSDL, NSE, MCX, India INX and CDSL Sign MOU for Setting Up Market Infrastructure Institutions at GIFT City

National Stock Exchange of India Limited (NSE), the Multi Commodity Exchange of India Limited (MCX), India INX International Exchange Ltd (India INX), National Securities Depository Limited (NSDL) and Central Depository Services (India) Limited (CDSL) have signed a memorandum of understanding for setting up Market Infrastructure Institutions comprising of International Bullion Exchange, Clearing Corporation and Depository at Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT). The move is in line with the Government of India's objective to make India a price setter in bullion through GIFT International Finance Service Centre (IFSC) and in accordance with the International Financial Services Centres Authority (Bullion Exchange) Regulations, 2020 and other applicable laws.

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5 Ways a Low Code Digital Automation Platform Can Transform Government Organizations

With ever-evolving customer expectations and dynamic business needs, digital transformation is no longer a matter of choice for enterprises. Like every other business, government organizations also must embrace digital transformation to stay agile and future-ready. Gartner estimates that by 2023, more than 80 per cent of the government's digital implementations that do not build on a technology platform will fail to meet objectives, writes Arpan Bansal, Global Head COE (Govt.), Newgen Software. Low code digital automation platforms combine multiple technologies—including intelligent business process management, content management, and cloud—in a single, unified suite that can help reduce service delivery costs, foster innovation, and accelerate digital initiatives. They leverage workflow management, process intelligence, analytics, omnichannel communication, and master data management to effectively orchestrate data and information across

siloed departments in government organizations. Take a quick look at five ways in which low code can usher in a new era for government services: 1. Enhance Citizen Experience while Optimizing Costs. Citizens' expectations are on the rise—they want transparent, consistent, and omnichannel services. Government agencies are making all efforts to simplify tasks, including renewing driving licenses, applying for grants and benefits, various registrations (birth, death, marriage, etc.), for their citizens. However, constrained budgetary provisions to limit the ability of governments to achieve these goals. Low code application development allows departments with limited resources to develop high quality, secure, and user-friendly applications for citizens. What's more! Government agencies no longer need to wait for prolonged periods to roll out new processes. They can design, develop, and deliver solutions faster, thereby rapidly responding to new requirements and delivering extraordinary experiences to their citizens.

2. Modernize Existing Systems with Faster, More Efficient Processes. With government organizations undergoing digital transformation at breakneck speed, there is an urgent need to modernize the existing IT systems. It has become imperative to replace siloed systems that weigh less on productivity and high on maintenance. Low code, with minimal investment and disruption, can be leveraged to build applications using agile methodologies that are faster, readily adaptable, and highly scalable per the changing needs of the government sector. 3. Transform Business Users into Citizen Developers. Low code platforms can enable government agencies to not only empower their IT departments to take charge of the application lifecycle but also non-IT professionals to equally contribute to delivering, managing, and customizing applications quickly. Business users of a government organization can leverage a model-driven, point-and-click application development environment to rapidly deliver applications while saving a considerable amount of time for their workforce. 4. Reduce Total Cost of Ownership with Cloud-based Applications. Low code, with the power of the cloud, can further accelerate digital transformation for public sector organizations while reducing the total cost of ownership. Furthermore, cloud-based low code is instrumental in enabling remote operations, decreasing potential server downtime, and making government organizations more scalable, resilient, and agile. 5. Enable Faster Implementations with Readily Adaptable Applications. Government agencies can rapidly develop and deploy applications with a low code platform to further accelerate their speed of rolling out new processes. This has been especially critical to facilitate a digital workplace during and beyond the pandemic. Low code platforms can enable paperless and automated administration by transforming day-to-day functions and bridging silos for improved collaboration.

Furthermore, low code can streamline content lifecycle management from creation to disposition. Government organizations can leverage low code capabilities to enable multi-channel content capture, compliant records management, secure archival, easy integration with core government legacy applications, and faster retrieval for

effective service delivery and public accountability. Low code offers a distinct edge over traditional frameworks by making application development simpler, faster, and more cost-effective. To meet the ever-increasing expectations of citizens and deliver rapid and responsive services, government agencies must make low code an integral part of their digital transformation journey. Low code can reform government-to-government operations, enhance government-to-citizen interactions, and enable seamless government-to-business transactions.

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Dr GP Samanta to Be New Chief Statistician of India

The Government of India, on March 10, issued official orders for the appointment of Dr GP Samanta as the new Chief Statistician of India (CSI) and Secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). Samanta has been initially given the charge for a period of two years. At present, he is serving as Advisor in the Department of Statistics and Information Management, Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Samanta will replace the incumbent CSI Kshatrapati Shivaji (IAS 1986-Batch). Shivaji was holding the additional charge as Secretary, MoSPI.

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Digitising Governance, Recovering from COVID Crisis

The COVID pandemic brought along a plethora of challenges for the government, private sector, and citizens. Digitisation, online platforms and collaborative tools posed effective solutions. Focussing on the road to recovery from the COVID crisis and making systems and governance resilient, Ajay Prakash Sawhney, Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and IT, addressed the Digital Governance Cloud & AI Summit. Anant Maheshwari, President, Microsoft India, hosting the session, asked Sawhney, how government, industry and civil society can work together to create a responsible and secure technology ecosystem? "With the proliferation of technology, not only in India but worldwide, there have been concerns on developing trust in digital platforms and also cybersecurity issues," said Ajay Prakash Sawhney. Moreover, private firms are contributing to improving the security of cyberspace. "However, much more needs to be done. From our end, we are looking at some principles that need to be embedded in the legal and regulatory framework," he said. "One of those principles will come in through the personal data protection bill which has been tabled before the parliament. It will lay down the principles and will bring India up to speed with what has been happening across the globe. Secondly, we are looking at organising ourselves better in terms of integrating an array of small projects which are operating in silos. Through this, we will be able to use the resources, data,

services, and make it a part of an ecosystem. The ecosystem will help us navigate in the direction of improving services to citizens and preparing ourselves in taking advantage of the new technologies,” he added.

Further, he detailed a strategy that MeitY has been actively working to bring newer concepts from across the globe. Also, on cybersecurity, the Ministry has been closely working with the industry and with the Data Security Council of India, and individual companies like Microsoft to roll out things like the ‘Cyber Surakshit Bharat’ campaign. Another thing in focus is to build newer products and services within India. “Fortunately, we have a fabulous human resource and burgeoning startup ecosystem which is capable of taking up the challenge. We are making efforts to identify different segments and support product development in the area of cybersecurity by Indian entities and give them a market within India and help them develop a product that not only serves in India but beyond the Indian shores.” On adoption of AI & Data, Sawhney said, “We’re very excited about the potential of data analytics using large amounts of data generated, creating new algorithms which are getting developed across the globe to our advantage. Moreover, the focus is not on the technology but what we get out of the technology for a holistic improvement in the existing systems.” In preparing for this, the government is encouraging innovations and trying to create a collaborative mechanism by which the ones interested in participating for problem-solving can do so, he added. Closing his address, Sawhney said that the above mentioned are some of the efforts which help us systematize and harmonise with the existing systems and then use this exercise to get a better grip on what we have, understand the concerns and aspirations of the stakeholders and then create new platforms which go on to meet the requirements.

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Jayanthi Angayarkanni to Take over as Deputy Secretary, DoPT

Following the orders from the Centre, Jayanthi Angayarkanni GD, an Indian Revenue Service-Income Tax (IRS-IT) officer of 2008-Batch, has been selected for appointment as Deputy Secretary in the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), Delhi. Jayanthi will be posted at her newly designated post for a tenure of three years.

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Former CS of Andhra Pradesh Nilam Sawhney IAS Becomes State Election Commissioner

The Governor of Andhra Pradesh Biswabhusan Harichandan recently released

official orders to appointed Nilam Sawhney (IAS 1984-Batch) the former Chief Secretary, as the State Election Commissioner (SEC). She retired as Chief Secretary in December 2020. Following her retirement, she was posted as the principal advisor to the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Sawhney will be taking over the newly appointed charge of March 31 when the incumbent SEC Nimmagadda Ramesh Kumar leaves the office.

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President Kovind clears Govt of NCT of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, More Powers to LG Than Elected Govt

In a historic move to redefine governmental powers in Delhi, President of India Ram Nath Kovind, on March 28, approved the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill 2021 that accords primacy to Delhi's Lieutenant Governor (L-G) over the elected government. The Government of India, in a Gazette notification, announced the President's approval to the Government of NCT of Delhi (Amendment) Bill 2021. With the Bill in effect, all executive powers for the national capital rest with Lieutenant Governor (L-G). The Bill got passed by the Lok Sabha on March 22 and finally, the Parliament cleared it on March 24 after the Rajya Sabha passed it with an 83-45 vote amid a walkout by the Opposition. As per the Bill, the 'government' will now be referred to as L-G in the context of all laws passed in the NCT of Delhi. Also, it establishes a mandate on LG's approval on every executive action. Moreover, the state assembly has been barred from forming any committees to examine the day-to-day administration of Delhi.

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Vineet Pandey to Take over as Secretary, Deptt. of Posts

Following the orders from the Centre, Vineet Pandey (IPoS 1986-Batch) has been appointed as the Secretary, Department of Posts. Pandey is currently serving as Director General Postal Services (DGPS). He will be taking over the charge from the incumbent officer Pradipta Kumar Bisoi (IPoS 1985-Batch) who will be retiring soon.

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Chhattisgarh Govt Reshuffles Charges of 3 IAS Officers

The Government of Chhattisgarh, on March 30, issued official orders for the transfer

and posting of three IAS officers in the state. Shahla Nigar (IAS 2001-Batch) has been transferred and appointed as Secretary of, Health and Family Welfare and Medical Education Department. Rina Babasaheb Kangle (IAS 2003-Batch) has been given the charge of Chief Electoral Officer. Also, Kangle gets the additional charge of Secretary, Women and Child Welfare Department. Kumar Lal Chauhan (IAS 2009-Batch) will take over as the Additional Commissioner, Bilaspur Division. Also, Chauhan gets the additional charge of Additional Commissioner, Sarguja.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Reliability of Data Center Confirmed by Int'l Certification Institute

The reserve data center of AzInTelecom LLC subordinated to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies was awarded the "Tier 3 Facility" certificate of the Uptime Institute international certification institute on January 25, 2021, the ministry told Trend on March 5. During the technical tests, Uptime Institute specialists tested all the equipment and systems of the critical infrastructure of the data center in stages. The purpose of the construction of a backup data center in Yevlakh is to protect user data, provide reliable and high-quality data storage services in the "cloud" space. The center was built through the World Bank's funds within the "Progressive Services of Justice and Modern Judicial Infrastructure" project of the Azerbaijani Ministry of Justice. One of the main advantages of the backup data center is its mobility, which will allow in case of emergencies to move the data center to a safer place. "The geographic reservation of IMS-type stations (transmission of multimedia content in telecommunications-based on the IP protocol) can be carried out through this data center, which will provide an opportunity to exchange international telephone messages between Azerbaijan and all countries," the ministry said. AZCLOUD cloud services, presented on the basis of AzInTelecom LLC, the first data center in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region with TIER III, ISO 20000, ISO 22301, and ISO 27001 certificates, were launched in December 2016. The Uptime Institute is one of the most famous and trusted international certification institutions that has developed its own data center reliability standard. The TIER III certification standard differs from others in the ability to carry out scheduled work (repair and maintenance) without stopping the data center. The reliability level of data centers in this category is 99.982 percent.

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New Appointments in Azerbaijani Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies and Its Structure

Azerbaijani Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies Rashad Nabiyev has appointed a new adviser, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies told Trend. Farid Ahmadov has been appointed as a new adviser to the minister. Ahmadov graduated from Baku State University (Bachelor of Laws) in 2000, received the master's degree in international law with distinction in 2002. Ahmadov received the master's degree in international human rights at the University of Essex in England and also has a number of other degrees of local and foreign universities in 2003. Moreover, new deputy director general Khayyam Alizade has been appointed in Azerpost LLC. "The new deputy director general took up his duties on February 22, 2021," Azerpost said. "After this appointment, there are three deputy directors general." Alizade entered the Faculty of Applied Mathematics of Baku State University in 1989 and graduated from this university with dignity in mathematics in 1994. Today Subkhan Kazimov, Nazim Suleymanov and Khayyam Alizade are deputy directors general at Azerpost LLC.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: More iCare Reform Work Needed - Report

Troubled NSW state insurer iCare is yet to fully clarify the type of organisation it seeks to be and the standards to which it aspires, a report has found. iCare on Monday released the PwC-produced report, which was commissioned in October 2020 to report on the agency's governance and culture. It is separate to the McDougall Review, a statutory five-year review of iCare which was in August 2020 brought forward and tasked with a "root and branch" examination of the insurer's conduct. iCare is an employer-funded workers insurer, owned by the state and overseen by the NSW treasurer but independent from government. It was one of three organisations that replaced WorkCover in 2015. It emerged last year that iCare had underpaid thousands of injured workers millions of dollars in compensation and suffered major staffing issues.

Former chief executive John Nagle was forced to resign in August after failing to properly declare his wife's contract with the insurer. The report released on Monday lauded iCare for the appointment of a new chief risk officer and renewal at the chair and chief executive level. However it also outlined that significant changes need to be implemented if the organisation intends to clean up its act, with governance not yet sufficiently focused on delivering quality customer outcomes. The report found

iCare had not fully clarified the type of organisation it seeks to be, nor the compliance standards to which it seeks to be held. It also found accountabilities for iCare's decisions, outcomes and performances were not adequately defined, while policies for identifying and managing emerging issues have not been resolved. The report made 76 recommendations including the enhancement of management, risk and conduct reporting, a stronger relationship with insurance regulator SIRA, and improved record-keeping.

It also said iCare should clarify employee responsibilities and standards. iCare said it would use the PwC report to refocus on its "core priorities" of caring for injured workers and road users, and would soon hire a group executive for risk and governance. "We welcome the report and have already taken action on many of the issues highlighted - new employee policies, tighter rules and guidelines, more stringent reporting, new avenues to speak up when there is an issue," chief executive Richard Harding said in a statement. iCare announced earlier this month interim chief executive Don Ferguson would leave the government-owned insurer in six months' time, while group executives Rob Craig and Sara Kahlau would depart sooner. But the NSW Labor opposition said the trio's lucrative payouts, reaching a combined \$1.2 million, were tantamount to a "golden parachute". The agency insisted the three departing executives would only receive entitlements in line with their employment contracts. iCare provides workers compensation insurance to more than 326,000 businesses in NSW, insuring some 3.6 million employees.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/01/2021

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Government Mulling Levy Hike for Aged Care

The Morrison government has left the door open to a tax increase to find billions of dollars needed to fix Australia's besieged aged care system. But coalition backbenchers are lukewarm on asking taxpayers to pick up the bill, which looms as crucial to repairing the deep problems facing older Australians. A damning royal commission report has outlined reform options including a Medicare-style levy or an income tax increase. Aged Care Minister Greg Hunt said cabinet would consider those recommendations before laying out a major overhaul of funding in the May federal budget. "We'll consider that and we'll respond as part of the overall budget," he told Sky News. "When we're laying out a five-year plan, we want to do that comprehensively in the context of the budget so we understand all of the investments but then of course the ability to pay for it." Liberal senator Gerard Rennick said he was "50-50" on a levy or tax increase but acknowledged the sector needed more funding.

"I don't think anyone disputes that we need to improve aged care services and that all senior Australians are entitled to a good retirement," he told Sky. The outspoken

Queenslander would prefer to allow seniors more access to superannuation to pay for aged care and boost incentives for children to care for older parents. Nationals senator Matt Canavan struck a cautious tone when asked whether he would back a levy to pay for aged care. "I'm not supportive, generally speaking, of new taxes. Especially as we try to get out of COVID," he told Sky. "But obviously the needs here are great. We already have a situation here where our budget is in significant deficit and we're going towards \$1 trillion of debt." The commission's report made 148 recommendations and found one in three aged care residents had experienced substandard care. Commissioners Tony Pagone QC and Lynelle Briggs split over recommended funding models.

Mr Pagone said an aged care levy legally tied to funding the sector would be optimal, while also raising the prospect of an income tax rise. Ms Briggs is in favour of a one per cent Medicare-style levy which would flow into government coffers without having to be spent on aged care. Former Labor leader Bill Shorten, who was attacked over tax policy at the last election, said a levy would need bipartisan support to succeed. "What we've got to do if we say that is not turn it into a left-right tit-for-tat political Punch and Judy show where we say 'oh, it's a new tax, it's a new tax'," he told the Nine Network. Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese said there needed to be proper funding, real regulation and a fix for workforce issues. "It's a damning indictment about the treatment of Australians who built this country," he told 2CC radio. The report also calls for home care packages to be approved within a month of assessment and for staff to receive a minimum amount of training, similar to child care.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/02/2021

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Minister's Leave Fuels Work Reform Delay

Controversial workplace law reforms will almost certainly be delayed, with a key crossbench senator declaring negotiations will be impossible next week. Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter has taken time off after emphatically denying historical rape allegations. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has backed his temporary replacement Michaelia Cash to lead negotiations while he is on mental health leave. But independent senator Rex Patrick says Mr Porter needs to lead talks with the cross bench on the wide-ranging industrial relations omnibus bill. "It's impossible while he is absent from work," Senator Patrick told the ABC on Wednesday. "Asking Michaelia Cash to step in and do the negotiations where Christian Porter has had significant involvement in this negotiation from the get go is unreasonable." The government needs the support of at least three of the five crossbench senators to pass the bill next week, which will be the last time the upper house sits until the May budget.

"It will not be dealt with next sitting week, I can almost guarantee you that," Senator Patrick said. The South Australian won't enter talks until the government has secured two crossbench votes because of constraints on his time as an independent. He has also flagged concerns with the bill over concerns there is not enough recourse for casual workers who are refused a conversion to permanent roles. "I have considerable concerns," Senator Patrick said. "There's a lot of ground that would have to be covered before I would even come close to supporting it." Senator Patrick said he wouldn't make an independent inquiry into the allegations against Mr Porter a condition of considering the legislation. One Nation's two Senate votes shape as crucial to the bill's passage, with the party's industrial relations spokesman Malcolm Roberts not opposed to it being debated next week.

Centre Alliance's Stirling Griff and independent Jacqui Lambie have expressed concerns with parts of the reform package. Labor and the Greens are fiercely opposed. The coalition has dumped the most contentious part of the bill, which would have given the industrial umpire more scope to allow enterprise agreements that don't meet the better off overall test. The industrial relations omnibus bill makes changes to enterprise bargaining, wage theft penalties, long-term pay agreements on major projects and awards.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/10/2021

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Jobless Could Determine Federal Election

Welfare advocates have warned federal politicians that unemployed people living in marginal seats could determine the next election. As parliament prepares to vote on the ongoing rate of income support, social policy researchers at the University of NSW have produced data on the people it will affect. The researchers have found more than 50 electorates could be decided by people affected by the abolition of the coronavirus supplement at the end of March. They found 52 seats held by margins less than the number of people on pandemic top-up payments. Cassandra Goldie from the Australian Council of Social Service said replacing the supplement with a "paltry" permanent increase of \$3.57 per day was nowhere near good enough. Dr Goldie said jobless Australians could not be expected to survive on just \$44 per day. "Parliamentarians preparing to vote for this bill need to be aware of the reality in their electorates, and that this is the single most important issue in the lives of people directly affected," she said. "The parliament must not turn its back on the millions of people who right now don't know if they can pay their rent, put food on the table or pay the next electricity bill." Labor has questioned the adequacy of the proposed JobSeeker rate but will not stand in the way of the legislated increase, guaranteeing its passage through parliament.

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Workplace Reforms Facing Rocky Senate Road

Big business is urging the government to forge ahead with controversial workplace law reform despite a minister's leave hampering crossbench negotiations. Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter will not be in parliament this week, which is the final Senate sitting until the May budget. One Nation leader Pauline Hanson and party colleague Malcolm Roberts are meeting with Mr Porter's temporary replacement Senator Michaelia Cash on Monday. But the other three minor party and independent senators have signalled they are unlikely to negotiate the legislation without Mr Porter. The government needs three of the five crossbench senators to back the industrial relations omnibus bill, which is listed for debate in the upper house on Tuesday. A powerful coalition of employers has urged the coalition government to pass the bill this week, arguing there is no valid reason for the delay.

The joint statement is signed by the heads of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australian Industry Group, Australian Mines and Metals Association and the Business Council of Australia. The Australian Retailers Association, Master Builders Association, Restaurant & Catering Industry Association, the Nationals Farmers' Federation are also represented. "A failure to vote on the bill will increase uncertainty and stifle business confidence at the worst possible time - just before the JobKeeper scheme ends and as businesses are making critically important decisions on whether to retain staff," the group says. Crossbench trio Rex Patrick, Stirling Griff and Jacqui Lambie have raised concerns with parts of the bill relating to casual employment. Government Senate leader Simon Birmingham said negotiations with the crossbench would look at any issues senators raised. But he said the talks wouldn't be necessary if Labor supported the legislation. "This is a bill that increases penalties in relation to wage theft, it's a bill that deals with sham contracting," Senator Birmingham said. "It's a bill that provides greater certainty in relation to casual employment and greater opportunity in relation to part-time employment." After this week, the Senate will sit for just three days in budget week, before returning in mid-June.

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PM Morrison Weighs Up Cabinet Reshuffle

Cabinet colleagues of Christian Porter and Linda Reynolds have rallied behind them as Scott Morrison puts the final touches to a reshuffle expected to be announced this weekend. The attorney-general and defence minister, who have been on leave, are both expected to be retained in cabinet but moved to other portfolios. Mr Porter took mental health leave after revealing at a media conference he was the person accused in media reports of a historic rape in 1988, when he and the alleged victim

were teenagers. He strongly denies the claim and is taking defamation action in relation to media reporting of the allegations. The prime minister has been taking advice on whether the defamation action presents perceived or actual conflicts of interest for Mr Porter as attorney-general. There have also been calls for an independent inquiry into whether Mr Porter is a fit and proper person for the role.

Cabinet minister Simon Birmingham said he was sure the prime minister would look carefully at the solicitor-general's advice. "And if he thinks there needs to be changes as a result of it, he'll make them," he said. Senator Reynolds took leave in February to receive treatment for a pre-existing heart condition. She has been under pressure over her handling of a rape allegation by her former staffer Brittany Higgins, exacerbated by her calling Ms Higgins a "lying cow" for which she apologised. Ms Higgins' high-profile case has also triggered a national debate over the treatment of women and workplace behaviour in Parliament House. Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who is likely to replace Senator Reynolds in the defence portfolio, denied Mr Morrison was afraid to sack her. "I don't think the PM is afraid to sack anyone if they've done the wrong thing," Mr Dutton told the Nine Network.

He said Senator Reynolds had done an outstanding job in defence, and provided what she believed was enough support to Ms Higgins. If appointed, Mr Dutton would be the sixth defence minister in eight years. Cabinet colleague Dan Tehan said he looked forward to both of the ministers returning to work in coming weeks. "They've done very good jobs in their cabinet roles." Labor leader Anthony Albanese said there was little point to the reshuffle. "Shuffling the deck will not change the bad hand that this government is dealing Australians," he said. It is speculated Employment Minister Michaelia Cash will be the new attorney-general, with Mr Porter taking over her portfolio. The University of London honours graduate and former Freehills solicitor would be only the second woman to hold the position. Her elevation would also make history in that the nation's two most senior law positions - attorney-general and High Court chief justice - would be held by women. Government Services Minister Stuart Robert is tipped to take on Mr Dutton's home affairs role.

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Politicians 'Fail' Public Interest Poll

Even before recent scandals rocked state and federal parliaments, Australians overwhelmingly felt politicians were failing to meet their public interest expectations. The latest Next25 Navigator study, a poll of 2825 people from last December to February, has found the political class fared the worst of six key institutions on public interest performance. According to the annual report, released on Wednesday, only 22 per cent of respondents thought politicians were acting in the public interest. "One conclusion we can draw from our data is that whatever the government is doing, it

isn't working," said Ralph Ashton, executive director of Next25, a non-profit group which runs regular leadership courses for parliamentarians. "Our research found that four in five Australians believe politicians have the most say in setting priorities for Australia, but only one in five believe politicians are acting in the public interest. "This is a clear fail for the political class."

The report shows just 27 per cent of those surveyed think governments prioritise voters above others, and 34 per cent believe they take into account the impact of their decisions on future generations. Most respondents (61 per cent) do not think Australia is a better country than it was five to 10 years ago, while only 39 per cent are confident the nation will be better off in another five to 10 years. But public dissatisfaction was not just reserved to politicians, with none of the other five groups - the media, public service, businesses, academia and experts, and non-government organisations - scoring above 40 per cent on public interest. The nation's legal system was also heavily scrutinised, with less than half of people (46 per cent) saying they thought it to be "fair, honest and capable". Women (42 per cent) were less likely to agree with that statement than men (51 per cent).

The report notes the poll was taken before the nationwide March 4 Justice rallies - sparked by the alleged rape of former Liberal staffer Brittany Higgins and the sexual assault scandal involving senior government minister Christian Porter - and further Indigenous deaths in custody. Nonetheless, 70 per cent of those surveyed still believe politicians can contribute to change on important issues, although two-thirds want more of a say beyond just voting on decisions made on their behalf. Mr Ashton described the survey results as a "wake-up call" for leaders in all sectors. "We now have a clear picture of the future Australia wants," he said. "We know where the biggest gaps are. The public has set out the to-do list for Australia's leaders."

AUSTRALIANS' VIEWS ON INSTITUTIONS ACTING IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST: *

Politicians: 22 per cent * Media: 26 per cent * Public service: 27 per cent * Businesses: 32 per cent * Academia and experts: 37 per cent * Non-government organisations: 40 per cent

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NEW ZEALAND: Access and Equity Focus of Health System Reforms

Reforming New Zealand's health system will deliver better outcomes for all, Health Minister Andrew Little says. "Our publicly-funded health system is one of New Zealand's greatest assets. It performs well on a range of metrics but is under serious stress and does not deliver equally for all," Andrew Little said. "Life expectancy at birth for Māori and Pacific peoples is significantly lower than that for other groups and around half of deaths are potentially avoidable, more than double

the rate of other New Zealanders. Disabled people, on average, also face outcomes worst than most others.” Next month, the Government will announce the new shape and structure for the health and disability system which will be the blueprint for the health sector in the future. “Tackling inequity will be at the heart of the change we make,” Andrew Little said.

In its first term the Government completed the Health and Disability System Review / Hauora Manaaki Ki Aotearoa Whānui (HDSR) to consider options for reform to make it more equitable and sustainable. “The review found our health system has become complex and unnecessarily fragmented with unclear roles, responsibilities and boundaries. There is duplication of activity, and variation that creates a post-code lottery when accessing services,” Andrew Little said. “Who you are and where you live shouldn’t determine access to quality health services. “Addressing inequities is not about creating an advantage. There is no advantage in being sicker and dying younger. It is about removing disadvantage and ensuring everyone has access to the same level of high-quality care. “We’ve been working hard for the last five months developing proposals to ensure New Zealanders get the health services they need and expect.

While I can’t pre-empt the decisions Cabinet will make over coming weeks, there are five key shifts we need to deliver.” The health system will reinforce Te Tiriti principles and obligations to address current inequities and provide a stronger voice and influence for Māori, including a new Māori Health Authority. People will have more support to help them stay well in their communities through a better range of integrated primary and community services with increased access and protected funding to help them stay well. High quality emergency or specialist care when it’s needed to ensure equitable access through services planned to ensure the best distribution of care and equitable access across all regions. Digital services and technology will provide more care in people’s homes and communities building on the virtual care we saw during the COVID-19 response and providing more ways for people to access safe, quality and convenient services.

Health and care workers will be valued and well-trained ensuring we have enough trained people, resourced to provide better services for our communities. “I certainly don’t underestimate the size or the complexity of this task, but the ambition is right and New Zealanders deserve a country where people live longer in good health and have an improved quality of life,” Andrew Little said.

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3、 Management, Capacity Building and Innovation

Asia-Pacific

A Citizen-centred Approach to Smart Cities

IT solutions/tools can make urban services more efficient, sustainable and user-friendly. The citizens from these areas would need to fully understand how these tools work, and what the benefits are to profit from them. An ambitious EU-funded project has sought to achieve this by developing citizen-focused tools and supporting the next generation of smart city innovators. Cities in the 21st century need to provide their ever-increasing populations with sustainable, safe and liveable environments. In recent years, the term 'smart cities' has been coined for IT-based initiatives that monitor and analyse different aspects of urban life, and manage the provision of various services, such as transport, lighting and waste disposal, intelligently. A service or app on your mobile that integrates bus, train and tram frequencies in real time is an example of a smart city application. Smart cities must be inclusive and participatory, to ensure that these services are actually used. To be effective however, citizens need to be able to understand the processes that are driving smart cities. Citizens also need to feel that they are in control, rather than being under the control, of these innovative developments. "The GEO-C project sought to investigate how we can realise truly open cities," explains scientific coordinator Christian Kray, head of the Situated Computing and Interaction Lab at the University of Münster, Germany. "This means smart cities that are open to all citizens and that facilitate participation at all societal and technical levels."

Collaborative approaches

To achieve this, the project brought together, in addition to institutes from Germany, Portugal and Spain, experts from academia, industry and government, specialising in a range of fields. Disciplines included environmental modelling, statistics, human-computer interaction and decision support systems. The aim was to find ways of building smart city services that put citizen needs at the centre, for example by ensuring that users can easily see which app is using what data. "One key goal was to develop the Open City Toolkit (OCT), a collection of tools, software, libraries and apps that can empower citizens to participate in and shape the future of their cities," says Kray. "The toolkit would help to deliver services based on open data that are useful for citizens, businesses and governing bodies alike." GEO-C, a research project undertaken with the support of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme, also sought to train the next generation of smart city experts, within this multidisciplinary environment. "This research area provides challenging and rewarding topics for early-stage researchers to carry out PhDs," notes Kray. "These topics include, for example, how to encourage participation across all ages and groups of society, how to assess quality of life, and how to deliver fundamental urban services." Some 15 EU-funded PhD researchers recruited for 3 years helped to develop the toolkit. City councils in the cities of Münster (Germany), Castellón (Spain) and Lisbon (Portugal), as well as several companies across Europe provided

invaluable data, real-life case studies and technological expertise.

Providing urban solutions

The successes of GEO-C have underlined the importance of openness, collaboration and accessibility to the success of smart city innovations. All the tools and guidance developed through the project are open-source and freely available. Tools are highly practical, as they are focused on delivering solutions to real challenges. “Shortly after our project started, Europe faced a large influx of refugees and was struggling with how to handle the situation,” notes Kray. “One of our researchers was inspired to work closely with refugees, to find ways of collaboratively developing technological solutions to be used by disadvantaged groups.” A resulting paper was published in the prestigious journal ‘Transactions in Human-Computer Interaction’ (TOCHI), and this is often cited as a successful example of how to work with groups that are socially excluded. A number of follow-up projects continue to build on the project’s initial discoveries. These include the development of a tool to create software fully compliant with data protection rules and the investigation of methods to ensure that location tracking technology does not negatively affect digital sovereignty (in other words, it ensures that individuals have control over their data). “All our EU-funded early-stage researchers have gone on to jobs in the field, many of them staying in Europe to help make open cities a reality,” adds Kray. “Their results are currently being used and trialled in ongoing and upcoming projects, giving citizens the power to contribute to the design of their own smart cities.”

From <https://ec.europa.eu/> 03/04/2021

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World Bank and UN Women Launch Course on Managing Gender Equality in Transportation

A first-of-its-kind course presented by the World Bank and UN Women will examine the often-invisible gender issues surrounding mobility in the transport sector. Barriers to transportation, and to jobs in the transport sector, mean diminished mobility and fewer opportunities for women. Limited access to jobs, healthcare and education is not only bad for women and girls, it also impacts whole countries. Gendered mobility barriers take a significant toll on countries’ economic growth potential. A 2017 report from the International Labour Organization identified lack of transport as the greatest challenge to female labor force participation in developing countries, lowering the probability of women participating in the labor force by an estimated 16.5 percent. The COVID-19 crisis has made gender access issues even more urgent. As national and local governments revisit transport systems to make them more resilient and green, there is an increased focus on public transport, walking, and cycling—already some of the most important modes of transportation for women. Failure to include women’s needs and voices in these plans is a missed opportunity to build back better.

The new course, Gender Equality in Transportation, seeks to move away from “gender-blind” transport planning, which does not consider the mobility needs of its diverse range of users, women and girls in particular. It also looks at strategies planners can use to address the difficulties women face in getting jobs and climbing the career ladder in transport, a sector dominated by a male workforce. The course highlights the importance of approaching transport through a gender lens, and proposes practical solutions for enhancing inclusion and equality across the sector, balancing “why” questions with operational “how” questions. It also offers examples of concrete interventions designed to support the shift toward greater gender equality in transport. This course was jointly prepared by the World Bank’s Transport Global Practice and Open Learning Campus, and the UN Women’s Training Centre and the Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Initiative. The course benefited from funding from the Republic of Korea, Ministry of Economy and Finance under the OLC’s Korea Program for Operational Knowledge.

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Gaps Remain in Countries Readiness to Deploy COVID-19 Vaccines

As countries undertake the largest vaccination campaign in history, the World Bank has worked with governments, WHO, UNICEF, the Global Fund and GAVI on assessing countries’ readiness to safely deploy COVID-19 vaccines in 128 low- and middle-income countries. The results indicate that income level and other economic indicators correlate weakly with vaccine preparedness. The report focuses on ten key indicators, including cold chain & logistics, population prioritization, budgeting, training of healthcare personnel, and safety surveillance, among others. Initial findings show that 85% of countries that participated in the assessments have developed national vaccination plans and 68% have safety measures in place, including systems for reporting adverse reactions. However, only 30% have developed plans to train the large number of vaccinators who will be needed and only 27% have created social mobilization and public engagement strategies to encourage people to get vaccinated. Given worrying vaccine hesitancy, strategies to generate confidence, acceptance and demand for vaccines are urgently needed. Countries affected by conflict and fragility (37 out of 128) scored lower than other countries on almost all indicators.

“Many developing countries are in the midst of preparing aggressive COVID19 vaccine delivery plans,” said Mamta Murthi, Vice President for Human Development at the World Bank. “While most countries are well enough prepared to begin inoculating their populations, there are still important gaps that must urgently be addressed for wide, large scale vaccination rollouts to succeed.” The World Bank is

providing \$12 billion for developing countries to purchase and distribute COVID-19 vaccines, tests, and treatments and strengthen health and vaccination systems to ensure that vaccines get to those who need them. Our vaccination programs will reach over 40 countries in the near-term, amounting to \$3 billion out of the \$12 billion available. The readiness assessments will inform our projects and help governments and healthcare professionals better understand and manage the complex task of vaccinating large adult populations in a very short timeframe.

The assessments also show that:

Although countries have gaps in readiness, most have prepared well enough across most essential areas to begin their immunization drives as soon as they receive vaccines. Existence of well-functioning child immunization national delivery systems is not a strong predictor of country readiness to deliver vaccines for adults, such as COVID-19 vaccines. A weak correlation between GDP and readiness indicates that countries with more developed economies are not necessarily better prepared for massive vaccination programs. The COVID-19 vaccine rollout is an opportunity to create a sustainable, environmentally friendly cold chain that could be of use well beyond the current crisis. Fair, broad, and fast access to effective and safe COVID-19 vaccines, especially in poor countries, is vital to save lives and strengthen global economic recovery. Only once the pandemic is contained in all countries will each country be safe from a resurgence and able to focus all efforts on overcoming the deepest global recession in eight decades.

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 03/18/2021

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How ADB Is Spurring Innovation to Lift Tourism Out of the COVID-19 Collapse

Last year was one of the worst in living memory for the travel industry, with the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease forcing strict lockdowns and tight restrictions on cross-border movement, both internationally and locally. This was, and is, having an immense impact on Asia and the Pacific, where some countries rely on tourism for as much as half their GDP. The pandemic stands to cost the Asia and the Pacific some \$70 million jobs and \$1.1 trillion in GDP—more than any other region in the world. For travel and tourism in Asia and the Pacific to bounce back—and not forfeit the immense economic gains of recent decades—the travel industry needs to adapt to this new normal and put in place structures for a post-COVID-19 future. And that calls for innovation. Together with the Asian Institute of Management (AIM), the Asian Development Bank launched the #DigitalAgainstCOVID-19 hackathon, a series of virtual challenges to crowdsource digital solutions and ideas to not only help countries in Asia and the Pacific deal with the medium- and long-term effects of the pandemic but also help create a new way of doing things. One of the four themes covered by the ADB-AIM's challenge was health and well-being. Under this theme,

the Restoring Public Confidence on Safe Travels online challenge was launched.

“The challenge aimed to develop innovative digital solutions that support new travel policies emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as screening procedures and health checks, physical distancing protocols, new travel requirements, standardized facility sanitation, and passengers’ hygiene regimens to reduce spread of infection and restore confidence in travel,” ADB Chief of Health Sector Group Dr. Patrick Osewe said. Participants were asked: How can technology help travelers to regain their trust in every stage of the travel experience—from booking flights, to transiting through airports before departure, to the flight itself, to transiting through airports on arrival , to ground transportation, and finally to arriving and staying at destinations such as hotels, resorts, or holiday apartments—all while ensuring the highest health and safety precautions?

“Health passports” may be key for minimizing COVID-19 transmission risks

From the four team finalists, MyHealthDiary from Indonesia emerged as the winner of the challenge. MyHealthDiary team’s winning concept centered on an app that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to support various processes relating to COVID-19 transmission prevention, virus detection, and patient care. The app aims to provide real-time COVID-19 information, online booking of a COVID-19 PCR test, and also an e-shop feature which allows users to safely shop online their COVID-19 medical needs. The team, partly composed of doctors who provided insights into the development of the app, also proposed a MyHealth Diary app-based COVID-19 patient monitoring feature and the introduction of a National Health Passport. The patient monitoring feature will monitor a COVID-19 positive app user’s health conditions by collecting daily data on the patient’s vital signs. It will also provide contact tracing as well as health alerts and reminders to a patient. A National Health Passport will support safe travel through a color-coded barcode which identifies the health status of app users. Using the universal color scheme for traffic lights, green is reserved for users with no or minimum risk; yellow for medium-risk users; and red for users with COVID-19. The MyHealthDiary team sees a safer way of traveling, particularly if their app will be used not only in Indonesia, but in the wider Asia and Pacific region. The app can be a digital health certificate which will significantly minimize or prevent COVID-19 transmission for travelers. It is also a health information repository which can assist stakeholders and policymakers to implement data-driven regulations for the travel industry.

Modern solutions can support the recovery of travel and tourism

MyHealthDiary’s safe travel feature will be piloted in Indonesia by mid-April. According to the MyHealthDiary team, ADB’s \$10,000 funding has enabled them to procure the first batch of wearable technology and strengthened their human resources for the implementation of the pilot project. The other three finalists were MySeREG Team from Indonesia, which proposed a keyless check-in system for hotels; the BeFC Team from France, which introduced its bioenzymatic fuel-cell

system, a sustainable alternative to coin or button cells that power most wearable sensors; and the MedAccess Team from Hong Kong, China, Philippines, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, who proposed a monitoring system for travelers to observe cost-effective, hygienic safety procedures. “The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the travel and tourism industry to a virtual standstill and that’s taking a toll on national economies and people’s livelihoods,” said Mr. Osewe. “So the travel and tourism industry needs smart, modern solutions that can be widely and easily implemented. We hope the kind of thinking and ideas we saw with the ADB-AIM hackathon will help the travel and tourism sector to adapt and recover. Around the world, and particularly here in Asia and the Pacific, that will play an important role in how quickly we can rebound from the shock and impact of COVID-19. Reimagining the travel and tourism industry is an ongoing challenge and ADB and its partners are still seeking innovative solutions to shape this new world. New online challenges are regularly launched and innovative minds are invited to join these challenges.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 03/09/2021

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APEC Advances Environmental Goods Tariffs Cut

APEC’s pursuit of green growth in the region got a boost with Indonesia being the latest APEC member economy to complete tariff reductions to not more than five percent for 54 products included in the APEC List of Environmental Goods. Endorsed by APEC Economic Leaders in 2012, the APEC List of Environmental Goods gave impetus to the Environmental Goods Agreement negotiations in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The APEC list includes 54 products at the Harmonized Standard (HS) six-digit level including solar panels, wind turbines, bamboo flooring, as well as environmental monitoring, analysis and assessment equipment. Almost a decade down the road, member economies have strived to implement measures to comply with the APEC list’s provisions of reducing applied tariff rates to five percent or less to the 54 environmental goods and report their progress to the forum. “Trade liberalization in environmental goods makes access to crucial environmental technologies easier and cheaper for both businesses and consumers,” said Helen Kwan, convenor of the APEC Market Access Group, who monitors the implementation of the initiative. “This is important for the region as it facilitates green and sustainable recovery.” With Indonesia’s announcement, there are now 19 APEC member economies who are fully compliant with the APEC Environmental Goods List.

“The APEC List of Environmental Goods is one of APEC’s significant success stories and represents the role of APEC as a regional forum where ideas are born and developed,” said Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, the Executive Director of the APEC Secretariat. “The progress made by Indonesia is very encouraging and we look

forward to the day when all members fully comply with the tariff reductions.” APEC members are also exploring ways to further advance the work under APEC’s list of environmental goods taking into account regulatory, environmental and technological changes the region has gone through over the decade. The discussions will be carried over in the Committee on Trade and Investment. On top of the APEC List of Environmental Goods, APEC’s Market Access Group also discussed initiatives in support of the WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation (TFA), the importance of implementing the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) Expansion and plans on remanufacturing and rules of origin among other trade matters related to market access. “We will use this momentum moving forward to deliberate on policies and measures to incentivize sustainability and enable economic and trade policies to drive recovery,” Kwan concluded.

From <https://www.apec.org/> 03/11/2021

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ADB Bolsters Support for Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has quadrupled its support for food systems development in the past decade from \$409 million in 2010 to \$1.2 billion in 2020 to help close the financing gap in ensuring food security. “One of the most important lessons learned from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is the urgency of generating global awareness and building sustainable and resilient food systems which requires actions at many levels,” said ADB Vice President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development Bambang Susantono during the launch of the Sustainable Food Webinar series on 16 March. “We definitely need to scale up public and private investments in green business, such as ecological agriculture, circular bioeconomy, eco-tourism, and pollution control.” The COVID-19 pandemic has increased food insecurity risks, lowered the nutritional status of vulnerable populations, and highlighted the weaknesses of food supply chains and the delicate connection between food systems and development challenges. A large financing gap, estimated at \$140 billion per year, also poses a barrier in transforming food systems.

In response to the findings of a recent ADB study on sustainable and resilient food systems, ADB is diversifying its investment portfolio to include food systems transformation, leveraging on private and public partnerships, and providing innovative knowledge solutions. Through an Innovative Natural Capital Financing Facility under development, ADB will drive investments towards natural capital and provide knowledge solutions by using existing accounting tools to quantify the ecosystem service value of green agricultural value chain and strengthen eco-compensation, or payments for ecological services, to incentivize behavior change of small farmers. Experts from ADB, the International Fund for Agricultural

Development, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank, and other development partners joined the seminar along with representatives from civil society organizations, national think tanks, and independent scholars. The webinar was the first of the Sustainable Food Webinar Series in preparation for the United Nations Food Systems Summit in September and ADB's Rural Development and Food Security Forum later this year.

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ASPIRE Science Prize Spotlights Diverse Knowledge for a Sustainable Future

The 2021 APEC Science Prize for Innovation, Research and Education or known as ASPIRE is now accepting nominations. The prize features influential work by young scientists from among the 21 APEC member economies. New Zealand, the host economy for APEC 2021, has chosen 'Diverse Knowledge for a Sustainable Future' for this year's theme. It is aimed at focusing on researcher insights from Indigenous and ethnic minority cultures and communities to help inform new frontiers in science, technology and innovation. "In an era of rapid global change, a robust science and research enterprise is critical to advance disruptive and transformative technologies, providing the evidence base to make informed decisions that balance risks and rewards, and advance our understanding and ability to address global challenges like COVID-19," said Daniel Dufour, Chair of the APEC Policy Partnership on Science, Technology, and Innovation, which administers the annual prize.

"Global issues, such as pandemics and climate change, have further highlighted the importance of leveraging diverse knowledge and perspectives to bolster science, technology and innovation, and create better solutions for a greener, safer and more inclusive future." "The selected theme explores interactions between traditional and contemporary approaches to knowledge and science, as well as applications such as better management of natural resources, healthcare and agricultural systems," said Professor Juliet Gerrard, Chief Science Advisor for New Zealand. "This will open up much needed new holistic and inclusive approaches for economies to meet the challenges of the future." In its 11th year, the ASPIRE prize promoted scientific success by providing opportunity for the young and bright scientists among the APEC member economies to showcase their hard work, specialty and global contribution. Each APEC economy may nominate one individual to represent them in this year's competition. The nominee must be from the region and under 40 years of age. The impact of their work will be judged on their excellence in research and cross-border collaboration with peers from other APEC economies. Relevant academic disciplines include biology, chemistry, environmental science and physics, among others.

The winning entry will receive a cash prize of USD25,000 by Wiley and Elsevier, distinguished publishers of scholarly scientific knowledge. The prize will be awarded at a virtual ceremony hosted by New Zealand in August 2021. “The future of science depends on a robust and diverse set of minds drawn from all corners of society,” said Youngsuk “Y.S.” Chi, Chairman of Elsevier. “These young scientists are paving the way for a brighter and more sustainable future. Not only are they broadening the borders of science, research and healthcare with their discoveries, but they are giving Indigenous and ethnic minority cultures the recognition they deserve.” “Over this past year, we have learned that diverse and inclusive knowledge systems lead to more effective and agile global research,” said Judy Verses, Executive Vice President and General Manager of Wiley Research. “We look forward to spotlighting the amazing work of young scientists across the region—they are our future.” For information on the previous year’s ASPIRE prize, please visit this link. For application information and questions, please visit this link.

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Supply Chain Mapping Tool Expands Its Support for Fight Against COVID-19

ADB’s interactive mapping tool for supply chains of products needed to contain COVID-19 now covers 34 items, including vaccines. Staff at Mario Dimitri’s trading company Green Anchor Group Ltd. used to spend much of their time on the road, moving from city to city and factory to factory, searching for companies in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that make the machinery and other heavy industry products needed by their international clients. “Once COVID-19 has been beaten, the tool can be a useful resource for governments, banks and companies as they reboot global trade.”

Steven Beck, ADB’s Head of Trade and Supply Chain Finance

Since he started the company in 2004, that was the way things worked. The internet made the search a bit easier, but Dimitri, Green Anchor’s managing director, says finding the right company making the right product meant a lot of on-the-ground detective work. Then the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic hit. Factories closed; travel was halted. Still, as demand rose for items like surgical masks and personal protective equipment from the PRC, Dimitri thought there was something he and his team could contribute, given their experience scouring the country for supplies. Their first idea was to procure masks for their clients: “We wanted to send them as a present to our customers and friends in Europe that were struggling with COVID-19.” Their usual method to find suppliers wasn’t going to work, however. They needed a reliable list of potential companies who might be able to supply what they wanted, with contact details and other key information they could use.

Mapping tool shines a spotlight

That's where the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) new supply chain mapping tool came in. Dimitri found it while searching the internet shortly after the tool went live in May last year. Staff at ADB's Trade and Supply Chain Finance Program (TSCFP) first identified the need for such a tool when it became clear that supply chain problems were hindering global procurement of key medical products at the start of the pandemic. "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 TSCFP's Head Steven Beck. "The idea was that we could help shine a spotlight and get help to where it was needed." But as it turned out, that information was not available. Even the banks didn't have a clear 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 the creation of an interactive mapping tool for the supply chains of products vital to those on the frontlines of the COVID-19 battle to allow governments, banks, investors, healthcare professionals, and firms like Green Anchor to trace the companies that make every component in these products, down to the metal and rubber that goes into each part. Information on who makes which part for which product was available in piecemeal fashion before the ADB effort. But it had never been brought together in one database that would allow a quick search. The TSCFP was in a prime position—firstly to understand the problem and then to act on it.

Helping companies set up PPE supply chains

Within weeks of Dimitri discovering the ADB tool, his company's plan to provide a small number of masks to their customers in Europe had expanded. First, they were contacted by a representative of a European government, asking for help finding machinery to make personal protective equipment (PPE). Then, companies from several European countries asked Green Anchor to help them find the machinery and tools that would allow them to manufacture PPE themselves. "We were contacted by numerous new entrants in the market asking us to advise on materials and machinery to set up production lines and how to source all this," he said. There was an opportunity both to open up a new business sideline and make a real contribution to fighting the pandemic. "While this situation created a new market for us, we tried to work on cost basis, limiting our markup in order to avoid speculation, since the scarcity in supply and spikes in demand had already made the prices increase exponentially." Others were also seeing the value of the mapping tool. In the first few months, around 10,000 visits were made to the ADB website hosting the mapping tool. Anyone can use the tool, free of charge, to search a database of 47,000 companies involved in supply chains around the world. "The ADB supply chain mapping tool has proved to be a strong entry point for discussions with clients regarding supply chains, disruption challenges, and building resilience."

Gwynne Master, Managing Director for Trade at Lloyds Bank

Big international banks found they could use the ADB tool to help their clients cut through the noise around efforts to increase production or shipments of pandemic-related products. “The tool has helped us map critical COVID-19-related suppliers, which has ensured we are able to offer financing to those who need it the most, and when they need it,” said Global Head of Trade Portfolio Management, Sustainability, and Financial Institutions at HSBC Surath Sengupta. Lloyds Bank used the tool to help their clients improve supply chains related to the virus. “The ADB supply chain mapping tool has proved to be a strong entry point for discussions with clients regarding supply chains, disruption challenges, and building resilience—whether by enhancing or diversifying supply, improving costs, enhancing quality, or improving the timing of delivery,” said Managing Director for Trade at Lloyds Bank Gwynne Master. “The ADB tool was particularly effective in supporting clients through the pandemic, as more businesses sought to identify additional manufacturers of PPE equipment to meet extreme demands,” Master said.

Mapping trade in goods beyond the pandemic

As those demands have expanded, so has the mapping tool. From the initial seven products, the tool now maps 34, including the supply chains of vaccines, and related goods such as the equipment that keeps vaccines cold en route to where they are needed. But uses for the mapping tool don’t stop there. It now offers a visualization of import and export trade flows for vaccines and related products between countries. Users can also check out news stories on blockages in the supply chains for vaccines and related products, listed by country. Other supply chains—for products related to agricultural security or medicines—might also benefit from future scrutiny in the mapping tool. “It is exciting to think about the broader applicability of the tool, beyond PPE,” said Master. “Technically, the tool itself can be used for any product and all components that make up that product.” ADB’s Trade and Supply Chain Finance Program plans to explore those opportunities as well. “The mapping tool has made a difference during the pandemic by helping unblock bottlenecks in the supply of life-saving products,” said ADB’s Steven Beck. “Once COVID-19 has been beaten, the tool can be a useful resource for governments, banks and companies as they reboot global trade.”

From <https://www.adb.org/> 03/29/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Xi's Article on China's Science, Innovation Development to Be Published

An article by Chinese President Xi Jinping on making China a global center for science and innovation will be published Tuesday. The article by Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, will be published in this year's sixth issue of the Qiushi Journal, a flagship magazine of the CPC Central Committee. Noting that science and technology exercises a profound influence on the future of the country and people's lives, Xi stressed that to achieve prosperity and rejuvenation, China must dedicate itself to advancing science and technology, and become a major world center for science and innovation. He called on Chinese scientists and engineers to stay at the forefront of scientific and technological development, shape its direction, and be the pioneers of scientific and technological innovation in the new era. He called for committed work in independent innovation, stressing that China cannot ask for, buy or beg for core technologies in key fields from other countries. "Only by holding these technologies in our own hands can we ensure economic security, national security and security in other areas." He also called for efforts to deepen the reform of the system of science and technology in all respects, get deeply engaged in global scientific and technological governance, and make human resources the priority in development.

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China to Spur Business Innovation with More Tax Incentive

China will further raise the extra tax deduction on the research and development (R&D) expenses of manufacturing firms, to incentivize business innovation and advance industrial upgrading, the State Council executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Wednesday. The principal role of enterprises in making innovations shall be better harnessed. More market-oriented, equitable and inclusive support policies shall be employed to better motivate the business sector and other private actors to scale up their R&D spending. This will help boost the momentum of economic growth and improve the economic structure. The intensity of the tax break of extra deduction of R&D expenses has been raised in recent years, which has effectively supported corporate innovation. "This institutional arrangement is the largest in this year's structural tax cuts.

Boosting R&D inputs from the society with tax incentives and market-oriented means is an effective way to stimulate technological innovation," Li said. To implement the tasks outlined in the Government Work Report in support of business innovation, the ratio of extra tax deduction on enterprises' R&D costs will be raised from 75 percent to 100 percent, starting Jan. 1 this year. This means, for every one million yuan spent on R&D, a company will see two million yuan deducted from its taxable income. This policy is expected to reduce corporate taxes by another 80 billion yuan this year, on top of the 360 billion yuan tax cuts last year. "There is still room for further scaling up

of this policy. Deeper tax cuts can be introduced as things develop," Li said, "We should accumulate experience along the way and simplify the procedures in a step-by-step manner." The calculation method in the tax deduction of R&D costs will be reformed.

Enterprises may choose to benefit from the tax incentive on a semiannual basis, allowing R&D spending in the first half of the year to be deducted during the prepayment of corporate income tax in October, rather than during its settlement in the next year. The reform aims to let enterprises benefit as early as possible. Preferential tax policies shall also be weighed for R&D service providers, innovation firms and business startups. Efforts will be made to strengthen policy advocacy, improve tax services and streamline review processes, to make it easier for enterprises to benefit and see that the policies be effectively executed. "It is important to further encourage companies to increase R&D inputs. Investing more in R&D will help companies bolster growth potential," Li said.

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Xi Stresses Full Support for Innovation

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, on Wednesday said China will give full support to those who are committed to innovation and make contributions to the country. Xi made the remarks when he visited RICOM, an optical lens company in the city of Fuzhou, the provincial capital of east China's Fujian, during his inspection tour of the province. Xi learned about the company's products and visited the workshop to see the production of precision equipment. When talking with employees of the company, Xi said innovation is a must for the country to continue making progress during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025), and this requires those who can seize opportunities with a sense of responsibility and mission and have the capability to do the job well.

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JAPAN: Establish Strategic System to Treat Infectious Diseases

The fragility of Japan's medical system has been exposed as many COVID-19 patients could not be admitted to the hospital amid a third wave of novel coronavirus infections. There is a concern that variants, believed to be highly infectious, may spread in the future. With the lifting at the end of Sunday of the state of emergency that covered the prefectures of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba and Saitama, The Yomiuri Shimbun has compiled a seven-point proposal to strategically establish a system to

prevent another spread of infection on the premise that virus countermeasures will need to be implemented over an extended period of time. Japan is at the top level among developed countries in the number of hospital beds per capita, about five times that of the United States and Britain, while the number of infection cases in the nation has been considerably lower than in such countries. Nevertheless, Japan quickly fell into a hospital bed shortage for COVID-19 patients.

Excluding psychiatric beds, the percentage of hospital beds reserved for coronavirus patients is just over 3%. Meanwhile, private hospitals, where governmental authority is not easily exercised, account for 80% of the total number of hospitals. Thus, it was hard to make progress in securing hospital beds for such patients. The hospital bed shortage problem highlighted the rigidity of Japan's medical system, which was unable to respond quickly to the contingency of an explosive infection situation. In New York, where medical care collapsed in spring 2020 due to a sharp increase in the number of infected people, the governor ordered all hospitals in the state to increase the number of beds for virus patients. State laws in each U.S. state allow governors to issue mandatory measures in emergency situations. On the other hand, the central and local governments in Japan, which experienced the first and second waves of the pandemic in spring and summer last year, failed to take any strategic measures to secure hospital beds even though they had enough time until the third wave.

The prefectural governments' plans to secure beds based on the central government's guidelines have been lax. Thus, localities where the infection had spread were forced to increase the number of hospital beds. Japan's spending on health care as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in fiscal 2017 was 10.7%, the sixth highest figure among member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Despite the huge amount of taxpayer money and insurance premiums spent on medical care, the government has downplayed preparations against new infectious diseases. Many medical institutions have difficulty accepting COVID-19 patients because of a shortage of doctors and nurses who can deal with the coronavirus even if beds at such hospitals are available. It was not the number of beds that was tight, but the number of medical personnel.

The government must create a plan that takes into account both medical facilities and personnel availability, and for the entire medical system during the outbreak of infections to shift its focus to treating COVID-19. Many lives of COVID-19 patients who become seriously ill can be saved if they receive proper treatment, yet there was a shortage of hospital beds for seriously ill coronavirus patients. Cooperation within the medical community is essential to create a cycle of transferring patients whose symptoms have improved to other hospitals and accepting new patients with severe symptoms. Local governments are now asked to play a central part in determining the roles of medical institutions in accordance with their scale and capabilities. It is

important for Japan to establish a system to quickly enlist temporary medical and care facilities in case of an outbreak of an infectious disease.

It is necessary to reduce the burden on nurses who have been working strenuously on the front lines. Also, it is essential to strengthen the system at public health centers, which serve as command posts for local governments to deal with the virus. The key is for the local governments and local medical institutions during normal times to discuss the medical system in case of the spread of infection. The central and local governments as well as medical institutions need to create effective medical plans with a sense of urgency. The central government should provide financial support to strongly promote these measures. The proliferation of COVID-19 vaccines will determine whether Japan can stop the virus from spreading again. Municipalities should develop plans that allow flexibility for mass vaccinations at large venues as well as individual vaccination through clinics and house calls. Japan has lagged behind in developing and securing vaccines. According to a private research firm, the nation was 33rd among the 37 OECD member countries to start its COVID-19 vaccination program.

Vaccines from countries such as the United States, Britain, Germany, China and Russia have already been put into practical use, but in Japan, domestic manufacturers are still at the clinical trial stage. Supplying vaccines for new infectious diseases is directly related to national security. The government should make it a national strategy to foster vaccine manufacturers that can compete with the rest of the world and create an environment in which Japan can domestically manufacture foreign firms' vaccines. Should variants thought to be even more infectious than the original virus become prevalent, similar measures taken these days may not be able to stop the variants from spreading. The government must ask local governments as well as private testing companies and universities to quickly improve testing systems for mutated viruses so that they are ready to detect variants across a wide range. — Members of The Yomiuri Shimbun's Editorial Bureau, Editorial Board and the Yomiuri Research Institute formulated these proposals through discussions and interviews with experts.

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Gov't Halts Use of Message App Line for Sensitive Information

The Japanese government has decided to temporarily halt its use of popular messaging app Line, owned by SoftBank Corp's Z Holdings, to handle sensitive information, Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato said on Monday. The decision comes after domestic media reports this month that four engineers at a Line affiliate in Shanghai were allowed to access servers in Japan from 2018 that contained the names, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of users. Following the reports, a

spokesman for Line, which has 186 million users worldwide, said the company has since blocked access to user data at the Chinese affiliate. "The government will halt the use of Line when handling sensitive information for now, and set up a task force swiftly, so that usage guidelines can be compiled soon," Kato told a regular news conference.

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Japan Eyes Setting Up Site to Recycle Rare Metals

The industry ministry plans to set up a site in Japan to recycle rare metals procured in and out of the country, as demand for such materials is set to grow for use in electric vehicles, ministry sources said Monday. The plan is also intended to reduce the nation's heavy reliance on foreign countries for its procurement of rare metals. China, for example, accounts for more than 60 percent of Japan's rare earth imports. The development comes as the global race to procure the materials used in facilities to generate renewable electricity and batteries could further intensify amid moves to decarbonize. As the technology to recycle rare metals is still in the testing stage in Japan, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry plans to subsidize research costs and implement other support measures to put the technology into practical use, the sources said.

The ministry is also seeking to export recycled metals, they said. To manufacture 1 million electric vehicles, the ministry estimates about the same amount of rare metals currently in demand in Japan would be required. Rare metals such as cobalt and lithium are used in car batteries. Separately, the ministry plans to step up the recycling of copper, which is used in electrical wires, as increased efforts are under way to electrify various aspects of society and cut carbon dioxide emissions, according to the sources. The ministry hopes to secure the stable supply of copper for use in motors, electrical wires and transformers of offshore wind power generation, they said. Japan is focusing on development of wind power as it seeks to bring greenhouse gas emissions in the country to net zero by 2050.

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SOUTH KOREA: To Raise 400 Bln Won for Tech Innovation Fund

South Korea said Monday it plans to raise 400 billion won (US\$354 million) through 2024 to support businesses seeking to innovate their products and services by utilizing high-end technologies. The first batch of the digital technology innovation fund, amounting to 102 billion won, will be rolled out throughout this year, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. The amount surpassed the original

target of 80 billion won. The fund, raised jointly by the public and private financial institutions, will be used to help businesses harnessing artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, cloud computing, big data and mobile technologies. It will be managed by L&S Venture Capital and KDB Capital Corp. "The project will help South Korea cope with the changing environment in the global supply chain amid the fourth industrial revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic," the ministry said in a statement. South Korea plans to raise an additional 80 billion won this year.

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South-East Asia

CAMBODIA: Deputy PM Urges Continued Solidarity Among LMC Countries to Address COVID-19 Crisis

Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn on Wednesday called on the six Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) countries to continue showing solidarity to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. In a message celebrating the annual LMC Week 2021, Sokhonn said 2020 had been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching impact on public health safety, the mobility of people and the flow of global supply chains. "In light of the current global crisis, we must continue to show solidarity in addressing these issues of common concerns through cooperation and practical actions to provide adequate vaccines and medical supplies so that the LMC countries could achieve the shared goals of well-being and sustainable development for our sub-region and beyond," he said. The LMC countries include China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Sokhonn said that over the past five years, the LMC has proven itself as a worthy cooperation framework by forging closer collaboration of all six riparian countries in addressing regional challenges in the spirit of openness, inclusiveness and complementarity with other existing sub-regional cooperation mechanisms.

"This mighty Mekong-Lancang river, from which this cooperation framework drew its name, binds our six countries together far more than just a physical connection, closely linking our culture and traditions, our natural resources, and the friendship of our people to form part for a community of shared future," he said. Through open consultations, the LMC has delivered concrete results in terms of its contribution to social economic development and institutional improvement in the respective countries in the sub-region. He said to ensure a promising post-pandemic socio-economic recovery, at the Third LMC Leaders' Meeting in August, the leaders of the LMC countries reaffirmed their resolute determination to address the severe impacts caused by COVID-19 by upgrading cooperation on public health through

establishing the Lancang-Mekong Public Health Community. They have also committed to tackle other global and regional development issues by securing new sources of growth through building the Lancang-Mekong Economic Development Belt and promoting synergy with the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, he added.

For water resources cooperation, they had decided to strengthen cooperation on hydrological data and information sharing to ensure water resources sustainability, and deepen cooperation on emergency management of flood, drought and other disasters. "I am particularly impressed by the unique feature of the LMC, characterized by its effective implementation of cooperation projects, which is supported by the LMC Special Fund that has produced many tangible benefits in enhancing the livelihood and well-being of our citizens," Sokhonn said. Among these projects, Cambodia has benefited from 55 projects that support a broad range of cooperation activities in the fields of rural development, community business creation, water resources, agriculture, air connectivity, education, and cultural heritage, among many others. "Lastly, let me reiterate Cambodia's commitment to reinforce this LMC mechanism so that it can deepen further the bond of friendship and mutual support between the Mekong countries and China, in the spirit of promoting sustainable development, social and cultural interconnections of our peoples," he said.

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Cambodia Aims to Provide 1 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Doses a Month for Citizens

Cambodia's Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen said on Monday that the Southeast Asian nation has set a goal of providing one million shots of the COVID-19 vaccine to its citizens per month. "In our plan, we aim to give at least one million doses a month because more purchased and donated vaccines will be subsequently arriving in the country," he said in a voice message. The prime minister said doctors will be dispatched by the central authorities to assist in the vaccine rollout carried out in different areas of the country in order to speed up the inoculation drive. The move came after a new batch of Sinovac COVID-19 vaccines that Cambodia bought from China's pharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech arrived in the kingdom on Friday. Cambodia launched a COVID-19 vaccination drive on Feb. 10. As of Sunday, more than 383,400 people in priority groups had received vaccines against the coronavirus, a government report showed. Hun Sen said that the kingdom has planned to inoculate at least 10 million of its 16 million population. The country has officially reported a total of 2,273 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 11 deaths and 1,172 recoveries, the Ministry of Health said on Monday.

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Cambodia Launches 200-Mln-USD Guarantee Scheme to Support Businesses During Pandemic

State-owned Credit Guarantee Corporation of Cambodia (CGCC) on Monday launched a 200-million-U.S.-dollar Business Recovery Guarantee Scheme (BRGS), aiming to support businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The BRGS was designed to support businesses including micro, small and medium enterprises, and large firms to enhance their access to formal loans from Participating Financial Institutions (PFIs) for working capital, investment, and business expansion, said a CGCC's press statement. CGCC is the first-ever credit guarantee corporation in Cambodia under the technical and financial guidance of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the statement said, adding that its CGCC's main mission is to provide credit guarantees to PFIs to support and assist financially viable businesses that lack collateral when applying for loans. It said that the first tranche of the BRGS will contribute to 200 million U.S. dollars increase of new loans in the banking sector for business owners to borrow from the following CGCC's PFIs including ACLEDA Bank, Asia Pacific Development Bank, AMK microfinance institution, Cambodia Post Bank, Canadia Bank, Phillip Bank and Prince Bank. The scheme will also be available at other banks and microfinance institutions that are in the process of becoming CGCC's PFIs. CGCC's guarantee will act as collateral or security for 70 percent to 80 percent of the loan amount borrowed from the PFIs; thus, reducing the physical collateral required from the borrowers, the statement said. "The launch of the BRGS by CGCC is timely to support businesses who plan to borrow from the PFIs during this pandemic," Economy and Finance Ministry secretary of state and CGCC's chairman Ros Seilava said in the statement. "This milestone supports the government's policy to maintain sustainable and inclusive economic growth and in line with the Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025," he added.

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THAILAND: Setting Up RCEP Center to Facilitate Trade

Thailand's Ministry of Commerce announced Monday the establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Center to facilitate growth of trade. At the opening ceremony of the center, Minister of Commerce Jurin Laksanawisit said RCEP member countries are accelerating the ratification procedures of the agreement, which will generate huge development opportunities for Thailand. The RCEP Center will provide information and assistance about trade and tariff policies among RCEP member countries as well as under other free trade agreements for Thai people and businesses, according to the ministry. The RCEP groups the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. It is the world's

largest free trade zone across a wide assortment of indicators. Ratifications from at least six ASEAN member countries and three of the other five member countries are needed for the trade deal to take effect. China and Thailand have ratified the agreement.

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VIETNAM: E-Government Development Among Outstanding Achievements

One of the highlights in the e-government building of Việt Nam in the last two years is the inauguration of the National Public Service Portal on December 9, 2019, reported the Government Office at a meeting of the National Committee for E-Government on Wednesday. According to the office, as of March 8, 2021, more than 2,800 out of total nearly 6,800 public services had been provided through the portal at four administrative levels. The portal received over 116 million visits and more than 468,000 registered accounts. More than 940,000 administrative documents were processed online through the portal, while 67,000 e-payment transactions were made with total amount of VNĐ26.7 billion. The portal also received more than 10,000 comments as feedback. The portal has helped save more than VNĐ8.1 trillion (US\$351.53 million) each year, along with over VNĐ1.2 trillion each year in paper and delivery costs. So far, the national reporting information system has connected to the systems of 14 ministries and agencies as well as 37 localities, helping save about VNĐ9.9 trillion each year in accordance with calculations by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

According to the Ministry of Information and Communications, as of 2020, the most important platforms for e-government development of Việt Nam had been formed and operated effectively. Meanwhile, a number of databases for e-government have been built, including the insurance database with information of 24 million families joining health insurance and more than 90 million people covered by health insurance, along with those on businesses, finance, education, healthcare, and population. As of December 2020, nearly 40 “Make in Việt Nam” platforms built by domestic businesses had been introduced. Addressing the meeting, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, who is Chair of the National Committee for E-Government, noted that the UN placed Việt Nam at 86th position among 193 countries in its e-government ranking in 2020, up 2 places from 2018, which showed Việt Nam’s progress in the field. However, in Southeast Asia, Việt Nam only ranked sixth, he added. The PM said that regional countries’ rises in the e-government ranking means their business environment and competitiveness are improving, creating fiercer competition with Việt Nam across all fields, posing a great challenge for the nation to tackle.

He said that with the issuance of Resolution No 17/NQ-CP, Việt Nam for the first time has a master plan on e-government building, with the focus placed on building institutions and shared platforms. Reviewing a number of outstanding achievements of Việt Nam in recent years, the PM said that along with socio-economic successes, the country has seen a bright spot in e-government building, especially in 2020. Besides, he also pointed out a number of shortcomings in the field, including the incomplete legal environment, and limited ratio of level-4 online public services (the highest level available where people's and businesses' administrative documents and/or payments can be processed online). In the future, it is necessary to speed up the provision of online public services, and the effective implementation of the national database on population, thus reducing paperwork in administrative procedure processing. He assigned the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to hasten the building progress of the national database on land, which is expected to be launched in July. The PM requested ministries, sectors and localities to effectively exploit public services provided online, while actively sharing their data to other State agencies, and ensuring system safety. The ministries, sectors and localities should complete the building and launching of strategies, programmes and plans in digital transformation for the new period in line with the national digital transformation programme, he said, adding that they should maintain online operations like what was done during the social distancing period due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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HCM City Aims to Support 1,000 Innovative Start-Ups in Next Five Years

The HCM City People's Committee has introduced a project to facilitate the development of its innovative start-up ecosystem in 2021-25, with a target of supporting 1,000 start-ups. Its efforts are hoped to put HCM City's innovative start-up ecosystem on par with the region, gradually becoming a cornerstone of activities and helping businesses improve productivity and sharpen their competitive edge. It also aims to raise the rate of total factor productivity to 45-50 per cent of its gross regional domestic product (GRDP). The project is expected to improve the capacity of 3,000 start-ups, assist 1,000 projects, and help 100 start-ups access venture capital by 2025. The committee has devised seven major tasks to meet such goals, including infrastructure development, the introduction of services serving the start-up ecosystem, support for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and international co-operation, among others. Capitalising on HCM City's development potential, particularly of its innovative start-up ecosystem, will provide impetus for the socio-economic development of the southern region, the Mekong Delta, and Viet Nam as a whole. In recent times, the city has rolled out incentives to spark innovative start-up ideas. An average of 700 received aid to improve their capacity between

2016 and 2020, while around 10 start-up contests are held annually.

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VN Needs Proper Legal Framework to Manage E-Commerce on Social Networks

Việt Nam needs to develop a proper legal framework to manage e-commerce on social networks in the context that e-commerce was booming in the country, according to the Việt Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI). Đậu Anh Tuấn, Head of the VCCI's Legal Department, said at the VCCI's conference about e-commerce on social media on Tuesday that the practice of using social media to market an e-commerce business was increasing in recent years. However, the legal framework for e-commerce and social networks were mainly built in 2013, which proved to be outdated while e-commerce was developing very rapidly. It was necessary to review and adjust the legal framework to better manage the development of e-commerce, Tuấn said. The VCCI's report pointed out that the existing legal framework on e-commerce was applied for both social networks and e-commerce platforms, pointing out that the basic differences between these two forms had not been taken into account. The VCCI recommended that e-commerce activities on social networks should be classified in accordance with their operation for better management.

Accordingly, normal social networks should be regulated by the Government's Decree 72/2013/NĐ-CP about the management, provision and use of internet services and information. Social networks which supported e-commerce business but did not allow ordering online should be managed through regulations on e-commerce at a simple level. Only social networks which allow ordering online should be managed like e-commerce platforms. Nguyễn Minh Đức from the VCCI's Legal Department, said that social networks currently did not have functions for ordering online, thus, buyers and sellers must make contact directly to arrange orders. He said that several social networks played a role as intermediaries, adding that social networks still had a mix of different contents, commercial and non-commercial. Another matter of concern was the monitoring of content published on social networks, as the current regulations remained too general. In addition, social networks were facing difficulties in complying with regulations about developing automatic content monitoring tools. VCCI said that it was important to develop clear regulations about content that must be censored or removed.

It was also necessary to verify the information of users on social networks with e-commerce business. The verification of users' information could depend on how much the social networks engaged in e-commerce. The information could include phone numbers, emails and bank accounts. A transparent mechanism to manage

taxes of individuals and organisations operating in e-commerce on social networks was also needed, especially cross-border e-commerce. According to Vũ Tú Thành, Deputy Regional Managing Director and Vietnam Representative for the US-ASEAN Business Council, it was necessary to develop detailed and transparent regulations about the responsibilities and rights of relevant parties in e-commerce business. To promote the development of e-commerce, the costs and risks must be reduced, Thành said, stressing that this would be the way to encourage participation in e-commerce platforms which would contribute to economic growth in the future.

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South Asia

INDIA: Startups & Innovation - Key to Rural Development Avatar

India lives in villages and the path that takes India to the league of developed nations is bridging the inequalities between the urban and the rural areas. 'Model Gaon' supported by ICICI Foundation is one such initiative that aims at inclusive and sustainable development of villages. This can be achieved when startups and entrepreneurs in India draw their attention to rural development and come up with low-cost innovative solutions, writes Adarsh Som of Elets News Network (ENN). As per Munish Gangwar, Chief General Manager (Retd.), NABARD, President, Model Gaon and Saurabh Lall, CEO, Model Gaon, the concept of Model Gaon aims to enrich lives by promoting self-employment and inculcating innovation in people's mindset. However, to realise this, it has been decided to promote entrepreneurship, startups and low-cost innovations for the growth and development of rural areas and villages. The inclusion of young innovators and startups can be a gamechanger when it comes to rural development. The startups will aid in implementing technology-powered solutions and providing urban amenities in rural areas that will result in generating employment opportunities and enriching the quality of life in villages. The vision to include startups and young innovators to resolve rural issues and work towards the development of the villages was inspired by the success story of a three-day Innovation and Startup Summit organised in Banda in the year 2019. Dr Heera Lal, Additional Mission Director, National Health Mission, Uttar Pradesh, the former District Magistrate of Banda took the initiative to organise the summit. The eminent speakers that participated in the summit shared their knowledgeable insights on local issues of Banda district such as Anna Pratha, water crisis, malnutrition and agriculture, among others.

"We do not have solutions to many problems in villages. Most of the existing solutions are costly, complex and inefficient. Hence, they are not sustainable and viable. To enrich and develop villagers and villages, we need to deploy startups and innovations to find better options for problems," said Dr Heera Lal. Further, he added,

“Startup and innovation provide us less costly, more efficient, simple and sustainable solutions as compared to the existing one. If we do not have any solution for some problems, we can find them from startups. To convert Agri of villages into Agribusiness and to change the mindset of villagers, we have to take startups and innovations to villages.” Shedding light on the involvement of startups in villages, Dr Heera Lal mentioned that under Model Gaon, startups will be included in two ways – registering startups in a prescribed format wherein the requirements of each startup working with Model Gaon will be considered and then supply will be made accordingly. The second approach is assisting and promoting registered startups and innovation. In this, domain experts will be selected to fill in the knowledge gap to strengthen the entrepreneurs and innovative minds. Secondly, pilot projects will be launched to get an estimation of the aptness of the solutions implemented. And, thirdly, startups will be aided for the provision of funds and various angel investors and venture capitalists will be connected. At its core, Model Gaon, a brainchild of Dr Heera Lal is an amalgamation of Gandhiji’s vision of Gram Swaraj and former President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam’s vision of Providing Urban Amenities to Rural Areas (PURA). The initiative is supported by ICICI Foundation.

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Creating the Tools to Solve Life’s Biggest Challenges

India is a big country with a large population, which sees us facing some equally sizeable challenges. Providing positive life outcomes to such a large populace starts with investing in foundational social capabilities. Improving healthcare and education and building up financial literacy is essential for creating the circumstances for individuals to thrive and help their communities, writes Rahul Sharma, President – Public Sector, AISPL, AWS India and South Asia. Over the past decade, we have increasingly seen business and service providers across India adopt cloud technology to achieve these positive outcomes. But judging by the predictions recently shared by our global Vice President and Chief Technology Officer Werner Vogels, the speed at which cloud technology evolves means we are only at Day One of what’s possible. Many of our customers are using our cloud technology for social progress and inclusion, from fast-growing health and education providers to emerging agri-tech businesses, and services for boosting financial and social inclusion. One example is the Wadhvani Initiative for Sustainable Healthcare (WISH) Foundation, whose mission is to improve the health of underprivileged people in India by addressing accessibility, equity, and quality of health services. WISH Foundation uses the cloud to securely store and manage large data sets containing confidential health data. Another example is English Helper, whose reading and comprehension tool, called ReadToMe, uses artificial intelligence to help boost literacy in primary school children in India and around the world. In 2013-14 ReadToMe helped 20,000 students. By the end of 2021, the number will cross 20

million. Also, we see our cloud technology being used to unravel environmental challenges such as air pollution. The UN World Health Organization (WHO) reporting that air pollution is a factor in one in eight deaths worldwide, and now the non-profit technology organisation OpenAQ is using cloud computing to facilitate the sharing of air quality data for communities globally.

In each of these instances, cloud services allow organizations to grow quickly without having to spend money upfront on computer hardware and grow their usage when they need to. That means they can manage huge volumes of data – and customers – that would have been inconceivable just a decade ago and there is plenty more to come. At our global AWS Re:Invent conference, held virtually for the first time last December, Werner Vogels outlined eight predictions that will boost the cloud's ability to tackle the challenges we face, and many of these developments are specifically important for India. For starters, the cloud will be everywhere. Older models of computing were centralised in data centres, but the cloud makes computing available in even the most remote locations, from rural communities and remote wilderness areas through to near-earth orbit! This means the cloud is being brought closer and closer to where it is needed, whether that is in someone's kitchen or on the handlebars of their bike. When combined with high-speed networks we see new capabilities emerge for gathering and analysing data quickly and using it to improve people's lives. A critical building block in the cloud is artificial intelligence (AI), and specifically the machine learning (ML) technology that helps AI become smart quickly. The huge volumes of data we gather today are too large for people to analyze themselves. But, by making cloud-based ML tools more powerful, cost-effective, and easy to use, we put them into the hands of the people who need them. This is proving especially helpful for communities who previously had little access to technology. The rapid spread of easy-to-use cloud data capabilities enable small farm-holders in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa boost the yield of their crops, without having to invest the time and expense of building these tools themselves, and these same outcomes are already being achieved in India. For example, our customer CropIn is helping farmers in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh tackle the adverse effects of climate change and adopt climate-smart agricultural practices faster, while Hyderabad-based Kalgudi's AI-based commerce portal creates intelligent marketplaces that aggregate demand and supply and facilitate transactions with digital assistance.

All of Werner's predictions bode well for the many emerging businesses that are striving to make a big difference in people's lives, and every day we are astounded by the ways in which we see our customers using cloud technology to create outcomes we could have never predicted. While 2020 has been a challenging year, we know that there are still many more challenges ahead, and we look forward to helping our customers to solve them in the most effective and efficient ways possible. If there is one prediction that I would like to make for this year, it is that the imagination and skill of our customers and their dedication to solving the challenges

we all face will never cease to astonish us.

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Municipal Performance Index 2020: New Delhi Municipal Council Tops the List

Recently, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs Minister of State (IC) Hardeep Singh Puri released the Municipal Performance Index 2020 on March 4 and the New Delhi Municipal Council topped the chart in the 'less than a million population' category. Whereas, in the 'million plus population' category, Indore secured the top position. However, South Delhi, East Delhi and North Delhi stood 28th, 42nd and 48th respectively among the list of 51 cities. In the 'below one million population' category, Tirupati secured the second rank followed by Gandhinagar, Karnal, Salem, Tiruppur, Bilaspur, Udaipur, Jhansi and Tirunelveli. These were the top 10 cities in the category that assessed 60 civic bodies with Shillong on the last spot. Whereas in the million-plus category, Surat stood second, Bhopal followed and Pimpri Chinchwad, Pune, Ahmedabad, Raipur, Greater Mumbai, Visakhapatnam, and Vadodara were the top ten respectively in the list of 51 civic bodies. However, Guwahati was placed at the bottom of the "Municipal Performance Index" list in the category.

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Digital Solutions Can Aid Affordability in Affordable Housing

With the growing urban population in India, stress on the housing sector and its struggle to cater to such huge numbers is visible. Therefore, constant efforts from the Centre and the state governments are being undertaken to implement affordable housing projects. Sharing international perspective on 'ensuring liveable and greener affordable housing', Ajay Tyagi, Chief Executive Officer, Rialtes Technologies, addressed the National Housing Summit. He commenced his address with a brief on Rialtes Technologies. "As a company, we are focused on ensuring that affordable housing remains affordable irrespective of pre-COVID or post-COVID", said Tyagi. Speaking on the impact of COVID on the housing sector, he said, "Many people lost jobs due to a nationwide lockdown imposed by the government (to shun the spread of the COVID-19 infection) that impacted businesses adversely." Construction works were halted, migrant labourers migrated back to their home towns or villages. All of this raised various issues for the housing industry, however, there are various measures taken by the government to dilute the impact such as rent or mortgage forbearance, eviction suspension, support to the construction sector, etc. he added. "If we look at long term impacts of the situation we see – lower residential mobility,

lower housing investment profitability, and dysfunctional construction sector”, he pointed out. Highlighting the role of Rialtes Technologies and how it can aid the housing sector to overcome the crisis, Tyagi mentioned, “The most important is the experience that we have, the knowledge we bring to the table, the innovations that we do, and the credibility that we have.” Moreover, the people on board with Rialtes are widely experienced in the affordable housing sectors and had worked for some of the best real estate managers in the world, he added.

Further, Tyagi presented ‘GovHouse’, a digital solution for the affordable housing sector based on Salesforce platform. He pointed out that the digital platform is specifically designed keeping in sight the norms of the Government of India and the United States Government as these are the two core areas of operation for Rialtes. GovHouse is one such digital platform that helps to do proper waitlist management of the beneficiaries. Further, it can automate many processes. People can apply online through the website or through the mobile application. It also allows access to all the data on the go at the mobile app. Also, we have an entire software module that does property maintenance and finally, aiding in providing government clearances and approvals electronically.

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e-Auctions & Innovative Approach, a Gamechanger for RHB

“If you have the knowledge, let others light their candles in it”, a popular quote by Margaret Fuller is simply an example to put forward the importance of knowledge sharing. Realising the fact, Elets Technomedia Pvt. Ltd. has been organising Knowledge Exchange Summit annually for nine years. The 10th Elets Knowledge Exchange Summit saw the light of the day on December 10. Highlighting the affordable housing scenario in Rajasthan, Pawan Arora, Commissioner, Rajasthan Housing Board (RHB) addressed the summit. The summit opens a platform for government leaders, senior policymakers, renowned industry leaders, and other intelligentsia to share the best practices they adopted year-long and that fetched them desired growth and development. Contributing his share of knowledge, Pawan Arora, Commissioner, Rajasthan Housing Board (RHB), addressed the 10th Knowledge Exchange Summit. He commenced by highlighting a few challenges that the Housing Board was facing when he joined in 2019. He said, “The Board was in a dire condition and talks were going around to get it either merged with some other government organisation or dissolve it. RHB owned 20,000 unsold housing units and this was a major reason for the situation.” Following his joining he said that to clear off this inventory of 20,000 residential units, e-auctions method was adopted. The officials from the Board mapped all the unsold houses, got their floor maps done, numbered them as per their location and colonies they were in, photographed all the housing units, and finally, they were placed on the RHB website for selling. All of this

was done in just 25 days. Further, he discussed internal challenges, saying, “In RHB, the operations were being carried with one-third of the total sanctioned and the average age of the employee in the Board was 56 years. This clearly showed that there were no recruits in the past few years. Therefore, it was needed to motivate the employees towards their duties. For this, I wrote a personal letter to every single employee to boost their morale and get them back in action.

“To break the fallacy around the use of technology and e-services for selling houses, we adopted the e-auction model. Moreover, to make it a sure success, we ran advertising campaigns, announced on television and radio shows, placed banners, etc. Further, we created a new marketing cell and equipped its employees with the task to market our houses in talk shows, conferences, and other occasions of mass gatherings”, told Arora. Besides, he mentioned that the Board stationed a couple of its employees at the sites of unsold houses to set up helpdesks. These were meant to make the bidding process easier for interested buyers. Speaking of the fruits of all the hard work the Board did to keep it afloat in troubled waters, Arora said, “In the first phase of the auction, we sold a many as 1010 houses in just 35 days earning a revenue of Rs 162 crore. This was also recorded in the Book of World Records. And, the second phase of the auction broke our record wherein we sold 1213 houses in just 12 days through e-auctions.” The next big innovative initiative he mentioned was “Budhwar Nilami Utsav”. Arora said that the ‘Budhwar Nilami Utsav’ was another beneficial move that helped us in selling over 4500 houses. With this, we targetted the Indian sentiments as Wednesday or ‘Budhwar’ is considered a providential day in most parts of north India. So, people in Rajasthan were well aware that from Monday to Wednesday they can bid on properties available and after four in the evening on Wednesday the bids were enlisted. Another important aspect that resulted in the successful selling of houses by the RHB was revising the costs. “Earlier, there was a norm in the Board about that the houses that have not been sold, the prices of these properties increase annually at a certain rate of interest. So, I tabled a proposal to Chief Minister and the Housing Minister of state of Rajasthan that rather than increasing prices we need to consider the depreciation on the properties caused with every passing year. Hence, instead of increasing the prices we should decrease the prices or offer discounts or schemes.” The proposal saw a positive response from the Ministry and the prices of the properties were brought down by 25 per cent and for those houses which were very old and were not in good shape, the prices were slashed by 50 per cent, he added.

“I take pride in saying that with our recurring hard work and innovative approaches, we were able to sell over 7000 houses in just one year and generated revenue worth Rs 1400 crore. Moreover, considering the commercial properties, lease, EMIs on the sold properties, and other miscellaneous areas of work, we were able to generate Rs 400 crore revenue additionally, therefore, Rs 1800 crore in a year. All of this, despite the COVID crisis and a few months of the complete lockdown.” Recently, the Rajasthan Housing Board came out with a scheme for the poor ‘Apni Dukan, Apna

Vyavsay'. "For this, we considered untaken plots allotted to shopping complexes in residential areas. We categorised these as plots less than 27 meters in length and plots longer than 27 meters. We had around 1650 commercial plots of which around 400 were constructed shops. These were posted for e-bid submissions under the scheme of 'Apni Dukan, Apna Vyavsay'." Many people were laid off due to COVID crisis and this scheme was launched keeping such people in mind as this might provide many with a new opportunity to work. Of the total 1650 shops, 900 have been sold. The shops were priced from Rs 3 lakh to Rs 12 lakh, and this allowed even a commoner to own his/her shop. Also, people were helped to get loans easier, he added.

In an effort to take a multidimensional approach, the Rajasthan Housing Board ventured into various projects to bring in positive changes and provide people of Rajasthan more convenience. One such project is a Coaching Hub. "The work on Coaching Hub has already started and all the clearances and administrative formalities have been completed. We aim to create a place where as many as 60,000 students can study in a day in twoshifts. We have created a universitylike complex on 6500 sqm of land area in Pratapnagar. The complex will house eight towers. The towers will not only house classroom for tuitions but will also have a health and wellness centre for students, a library, recreational space, consultants will be hired to ensure mental wellness and stress-free environment for students. The Hub will also feature sports facilities for students", told the Commissioner. The next such project is 'Fountain Square'. RHB had land in Mansarovar area where the Board is working to develop an open public space with a large fountain in the middle. The open space will house food outlets, space for cultural programmes, street entertainers, and for people to hang out with friends, spend quality time with their families, etc. "The concept is similar to what we see in large cities like London, Singapore, Dubai, etc. We are working to create such a happening public place for the people in the Rajasthan."

Further, he said, "RHB is making Chaupatis or Food Courts near all its residential societies to get more footfall at their sites. These spaces will serve almost every kind of food, it will have areas for photography, and all essential components to make people happy on their day out."

Adding on Arora mentioned that RHB has created All India Service Residency in Pratapnagar for IAS officers of Rajasthan cadre or those from Rajasthan but serving in other cadres. This move was well-appreciated not only in the state but all across the country. "Earlier, the properties in the Residency were for Rajasthan cadre officers only, however, after getting huge demands from across India, we opened it for all the officers in Rajasthan." While concluding his address he mentioned that a prestigious project for building around 160 houses for MLAs was given to RHB. "We aim to complete the project soon and deliver the best of us", he concluded.

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Technology Empowering Power Distribution in Madhya Pradesh

Vishesh Garhpale Since the onset of the COVID pandemic, it became clear that discoms need to wrap off manual processes and shift to digital, deliberated Vishesh Garhpale, Managing Director, Madhya Pradesh Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitaran Corporation Ltd., while addressing the Digital Governance Cloud and AI Summit on the theme 'Empowering Energy & Utilities'. Speaking on recovery from the COVID crisis, he said, "We immediately started WhatsApp chatbots for complaint redressal and customer service. Also, during this time we saw a lot of our customer care executives getting infected. So to keep the call centres running we immediately floated tenders to set up an AI-based call centre so that we will be able to answer calls without manual interference." On data management, he said, "Discoms have a lot of data but they do not have a good analytical tool. So we need an analysis of this data so that with minimum efforts and inputs, maximum output can be achieved. We have started an AI-based vigilance app and which is coming in as a helpful tool... We are looking forward to having an advanced tool, either AI-based or machine learning, wherein we can better forecast our demands." Further, meter data management software is being developed. It is cloud-based software, added Garhpale. Lauding the authority's efforts, he said, "I proudly announce that we have our own data centre and we host all our applications from the centre." The data centre has been recently updated and it is estimated that for a few more years the data can be managed from the centre and then cloud adoption will be the possible option for further processing of that huge data. There is clearly mentioned in the tender document that if the data centre is not able to cater to the needs then the cloud will be adopted, he added.

"Though we have a great team of software engineers who are developing almost all the applications in-house, we are looking forward to private firms to further improve our capacity. Also, we have started the implementation of the e-office system, developed by the National Informatics Centre, for business continuity during the lockdown," Garhpale said. Moreover, there are a few systems for substation monitoring like meter data acquisition systems in all our feeders, we have SCADA in major cities and we are further implementing RT-DAS and SS-DAS for substation monitoring. So, real-time monitoring is being done... We are also looking forward to implementing smart meters. Indore already has two lakh smart meters, however, we are planning smart metering in all R-APDRP towns, he added. Calling Madhya Pradesh the 'flag-bearer' in adopting new technologies for development, Vinit Mishra closed the Garhpale's address.

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People-driven Approach to Develop Villages, a Must Needed

India lives in villages and the development of villages is of utmost importance if India has to get aligned with the developed countries of the world. A revolutionary approach for rural development is taken by Model Gaon that believes that development cannot come from outside it should evolve within the village and the people should play the role of changemakers. Highlighting the fact, Alok Ranjan, former Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh, interacted with Arpit Gupta and Adarsh Som of Elets News Network (ENN) in an exclusive interview. How can India climb to be a developed nation when its villages are not developed. What should be the roadmap for developing villages? The development of India is not possible without the development of its villages. We may talk about various developments in the urban areas such as IT, infrastructure, roads, and so on but unless we focus on developing our villages India can never be developed. India lives in villages. If we consider population statistics talk of the state of Uttar Pradesh, we see that 66 per cent of its population lives in villages. Unfortunately, these are the areas where there is poverty, lack of proper facilities and amenities, lack of proper road connectivities, lack of electricity and piped water connections, lack of proper education facilities, public toilets, etc. and if these things are not set right it leads to inequalities. Inequality in healthcare facilities, inequality in education, inequality in public services, and the list goes on. This hinders the overall development of villages. Therefore, for the development of India, it is essential to develop our villages, our youth in villages and provide them with apt facilities, education, skill training, as these form the future of our nation.

Policy reforms, schemes, government benefits reach the villages at last just like development. Is this lack of will or is the interest of big companies is limited to cities only? Every government that comes to power do include agriculture and rural development in their agendas but somehow the type of development that should reach the villages does not reach there. We have seen that there are development schemes like linking villages with pucca roads, providing tap water connections, providing electricity connections, and so on and so forth. However, these schemes work in silos and focus on developing individual aspects. Whereas, to change the scenario of villages what is needed is holistic development. There are no effective initiatives taken that focus on comprehensive development. We need to bring all the stakeholders together to work towards the comprehensive development of rural areas. For this, what is required is comprehensive planning. This comprehensive approach is lacking in our efforts due to which it appears as if the benefits have not reached the villages. Moreover, it is seen that there are issues in implementation. Schemes are being rolled out, funds are being allocated but implementation is not always as expected because the people in villages are unaware of the schemes and hence, are unable to reap the benefits out of those schemes. Therefore, it highly significant that people are aware of the government schemes, become a part of them and reap benefits. If people become aware they will become knowledgeable and

once they gain the knowledge they will demand development. When the people themselves will plan and demand the development of their village then the right kind of development will flow towards them which will eventually lead to the development of the community.

In the comprehensive development plan of villages what should be the key areas that should be included in the agenda of the government? There are numerous things when it comes to the development of villages. It should have proper road connectivity, there should be healthcare centres, nutrition centres, schools, toilets, electricity connections, solid and liquid waste treatment facilities, it should have schemes for providing employment, and much more. However, it is important that we train the youth of the village to brainstorm about how do they plan for their village development. So we should look forward to them for planning as they know the best about their village. One thing that is of primary importance is that the people of villages and the youth should be made aware of their village so that they can be the changemakers and contribute significantly to develop their villages. As changemakers, these people can draw a village manifesto, a development plan and should demand the government to act on it. People should be developed first then they will develop their community and develop their village.

'Model Gaon' is working towards the development of villages. As per you, how significant is the role of Model Gaon and how do you think they're bringing forth the agenda of village development? I am supportive of Model Gaon as they are working on a people-centric approach. Model Gaon also believes in the ideology that the development cannot be brought from outside it has to organically evolve within the village itself. Village youth should themselves take the responsibility to develop their villages. The youth in rural areas must be made aware of their villages so they should know what kind of facilities are required, which kind of agricultural produce they should grow, what type of water conservation and supply methods are needed, how much electricity do they need, what charges do they pay for electricity, what type of waste treatment is needed, and so on and so forth. There are many such issues on which the Model Gaon is focussing on to develop villages. Moreover, when the changemakers will be trained, they will further upskill and train others in the village to bring in true development. They will be able to draw up a village plan on the basis of which government schemes can be designed to benefit the people and the community at large.

Considering villages we would be needing low-cost innovations and solutions to rural issues. In what ways the government can support small innovators and startups? The government should completely support such initiatives and innovators or startups. A lot of youth in villages have innovative ideas to resolve issues in their villages and they can become social innovators or social entrepreneurs. These ideas can be turned into schemes to benefit their villages and society at large. Therefore, the government should encourage young talent to come up with development-centric

ideas. Also, competitions can be arranged to bring out the best of innovations from young minds from rural parts of India. For those ideas which are good enough, scalable and targets the issues, the government should nurture those into real-life solutions and form schemes out of those. The government should extend its support to such ideas financially, physically and in all possible ways. Thus, the government plays an instrumental role in nurturing and executing a real-life solution from an idea that came out of the village youth. How the concept of self-reliance is applicable to villages and how can that be achieved? The real concept of 'Aatmanirbhar Gaon' or self-reliant villages can only be possible with an approach like that of Model Gaon. Wherein, the village people, youth should identify the areas that need to be developed, issue the village is facing and draw a village manifesto and chalk out a development plan for their village. So, people should think and plan for the development of their villages. When people are empowered to plan their development and the government do the handholding for realising those plans and aids proper execution then genuine development takes place. With this approach, even if one village becomes a model gaon then that can be scaled up and such a model of development can be replicated across a state to develop other villages as well. So, Model Gaon focusses on a development model that directly involves people's participation and urges them to decide and plan for themselves to bring out the best and actually needed development in villages. Further, through egov, I would like to encourage the youth to actively come forward and contribute to the Model Gaon approach in every possible way. This is important as unless the villages of India are not developed India will not develop.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 03/26/2021

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SRI LANKA: Spectrify AI to Launch Agri-tech Revolution

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

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

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

From <https://www.lankabusinessonline.com/> 03/03/2021

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AZERBAIJAN: State Customs Committee Develops New Portal for Visualizing Customs Statistics

To visualize customs statistics in accordance with modern requirements, the State Customs Committee (SCC) of Azerbaijan has developed a new portal, Chairman of the State Customs Committee, Colonel-General of the Customs Service, Safar Mehdiyev, wrote on his Twitter account, Trend reports. "On the portal, the presentation of which will take place in the coming days, all interested parties will be able to access statistical data in a more convenient way," Mehdiyev noted. The chairman also noted that the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan transferred an additional 77.74 million manat (\$45.72 million) to the state budget over two months of this year.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 03/03/2021

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Azerbaijani Ministry of Education Implementing Innovative Projects with Microsoft

Azerbaijani Education Minister Emin Amrullayev and Microsoft Corporation Vice President Anthony Salcito signed a number of documents during the online event envisaging the expansion of cooperation in the field of education and ensuring the implementation of joint innovative projects, Trend reports with reference to the Azerbaijani Education Ministry. The cooperation with Microsoft envisages joint activity in four spheres. "These are strategic cooperation in the direction of the digital transformation of education, joint activity on the project "Digital Leadership and Policy Formation in Education", improvement of information systems and e-services of the Ministry of Education, as well as Azerbaijan's participation in the "World Leaders of Digital Transformation" coalition formed by Microsoft," the message said. "Moreover, cooperation in Teaching and Learning includes the results-oriented learning, individual approach to learning, 21st-century skills, a teacher-to-be model, and joint work to shape analytical thinking," the ministry said.

"It is planned to implement special programs to improve the technical knowledge of students of pedagogical specialties before hiring," the message said. "At the same time, cooperation will be established on the application of industrial content and certification in teaching at all levels of education." The "Creation of a digital environment" direction includes the use of cloud technologies and secure software. "The establishment of joint cooperation with Microsoft on the use of analytical tools of a new generation for artificial intelligence in recognizing the Azerbaijani language and improving decision-making in education has a special place in this sphere," the ministry said. Student and School Success includes integrating Microsoft content into STEAM, educating and certifying technology educators anywhere, anytime, and at any pace, innovative ideas, presentation of innovative ideas and technical solutions in local and international spheres, as well as learning opportunities on innovative expert models.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 03/06/2021

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Azerbaijani State Agency Launches Open Auction for Subsoil Use

The State Agency for the Use of Mineral Resources of Azerbaijan has announced an open auction for the provision of subsoil plots for use on the territory of the country's Goygol district, Trend reports. Bidders must have the necessary financial and technical capabilities to extract minerals from the field. Applicants must submit the documents required to participate in the auction by 16:00 (GMT+4) on April 9, 2021 at the address: 31 Istiglaliyyat street, Sabail district, Baku city. To participate in the auction, legal entities and individuals must submit an application to the State Agency

for the Use of Mineral Resources in the manner prescribed Articles 29 and 30 of the Law 'On Administrative Enforcement Proceedings'.

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FAO Launches New Project to Improve Azerbaijan's Food Safety System

Food systems need to produce enough safe food for all. To this end, FAO has initiated a three-year project to amplify support for food safety controls in five countries: Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan and Turkey, Trend reports citing FAO. The project includes regional and national components and was launched at a high-level national inception meeting in Azerbaijan on 16 March, with the participation of representatives from FAO, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Entitled "Improving national food safety systems and regional cooperation", the project is financed by the Government of Turkey through the FAO-Turkey Partnership Programme on Food and Agriculture (FTPP II). It aims to strengthen official food safety controls and communication about risks in recipient countries and provide an enabling environment for public and private sectors to address priority food safety risks. The project will also support the creation of more inclusive and efficient food safety systems in beneficiary countries and prioritize improvements in agrifood trade and market integration by focusing on the implementation of risk and evidence-based food safety controls. The project will last three years (1 January 2021 – 31 December 2023).

The project is based on the understanding that an effective food control system – from farm to table – provides benefits for all stages of the food supply chain and all actors involved. Being cognizant of the risks and social costs of unsafe food, the Government of Azerbaijan established the Food Safety Agency (AFSA), in 2018, with a view to developing and enforcing legal regulations and official food controls to protect consumers and ensure fair trade. The national inception meeting began with opening remarks by Melek Çakmak, FAO Representative for Azerbaijan, Yunus Bayram, Deputy General Director of Food and Control at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Turkey, and Zakiyya Mustafayeva, Deputy Chairperson of AFSA. Çakmak explained that this multi-country project will provide an excellent opportunity for the beneficiary countries to share experiences and take advantage of cross-learning opportunities. Mustafayeva was also highly positive that the outcome of the project will be supportive and advantageous for both food business operators in Azerbaijan and the AFSA. Bayram reiterated that this project will contribute to enhancing the capacities of national food safety authorities and food business actors involved in risk-based inspection, and will play an important role in the development of effective risk management structures.

Following the opening remarks, Mary Kenny, the Lead Technical Officer of the project, explained the main objectives of the project to the participants. She emphasized that the project builds on ongoing efforts by AFSA and the Agency's longstanding cooperation with FAO. A series of technical presentations on planned activities provided an insight into upcoming aspects of the project. The project meeting provided an opportunity for participants to share knowledge and experience in the area of food safety systems, and represented a positive step in efforts to bolster Azerbaijan's institutional arrangements in this field.

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UZBEKISTAN: To Start Mass COVID-19 Vaccination

Mass vaccination against coronavirus will begin in Uzbekistan on April 1, 2021, the Deputy Head of the Sanitary and Epidemiological Service and Public Health in Uzbekistan Nurmat Atabekov said, Trend reports citing Uzbek media. Thus, firstly it is planned to vaccinate people over 65 and medical personnel. "This does not apply to all medical personnel, but to medical personnel who are most likely to become infected through contact with patients with coronavirus disease," Atabekov said. Those who will be vaccinated include medical workers in specialized hospitals for treatment of coronavirus, ambulance structure, emergency care system, hospitals for infectious diseases, coronavirus diagnostic laboratories. Also, according to Atabekov, at the first stage it is planned to vaccinate 330,000 people using the AstraZeneca (Covishield) vaccine. On March 17, Uzbekistan received 660,000 doses (two doses per person) of this drug as part of the global COVAX program. It is noted that the next batch of AstraZeneca vaccine is expected to be delivered to Uzbekistan in early April.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 03/29/2021

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AUSTRALIA: Regulators Keeping Eye on Housing Market

Australia's financial regulators are closely watching developments in the housing sector where a record number of mortgages are being granted as house prices race to their fastest pace since 2003. The Council of Financial Regulators - comprising the Reserve Bank, Treasury, the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority and the Australian Securities and Investment Commission - said it places a high emphasis on lending standards remaining sound. This is particularly the case in an environment of rising housing prices and low interest rates. "It will continue to closely monitor developments and consider possible responses should lending standards deteriorate

and financial risks increase," the council said in a statement on Wednesday. The council's quarterly meeting last Friday noted Australia's recovery from the pandemic has been stronger than earlier expected.

It expects the commencement of Australia's COVID-19 vaccine program will have a positive effect on confidence and economic activity. "Members also discussed how the winding down of some temporary support programs would affect the finances of households and businesses over coming months, recognising that many had strengthened financial buffers over the past year," the statement said. "Financial institutions and regulators will need to remain vigilant here." On business lending, the council noted while lending has been stable in recent months and is now around the level seen before the pandemic, it had been subdued last year. "There are some signs that demand is increasing with the improvement in the economic outlook and it is important that borrowers continue to have access to finance on reasonable terms," it says. However, members expect there will be a pick-up in business insolvencies this year from the very low levels experienced in 2020 when temporary insolvency relief measures were in place.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/03/2021

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Govt to Young People: Call Out Disrespect

Australia needs to ensure young people don't pick up disrespectful attitudes during childhood towards women, Federal Families Minister Anne Ruston says. The government is targeting young people in the next phase of a national campaign to stop violence against women and children. The \$18.8 million third phase of the program was launched on Monday to mark International Women's Day. "Each and every one of us has a role to play in ensuring disrespectful attitudes and behaviours towards women are not learned in childhood," Senator Ruston said. "We all need to unmute ourselves when we witness disrespect and turn it into an opportunity to set the standard for what is and isn't acceptable." Senator Ruston rejected suggestions Australia as a country was failing its female citizens. "I'm lucky enough to be a member of the government that has seen the highest female participation in our workforce, the lowest gender pay gap," she told the Nine Network. "Women in Australia have the full support of their government." The minister was also asked how hard it was to promote a message of respect toward women, given recent questions raised about the treatment of women in federal parliament. "There is no time that we shouldn't be promoting a message of respect," she said. Phase three of the anti-violence campaign will be rolled out across television, cinema, online, outdoor, digital and social media from Sunday March 14.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/08/2021

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Public Service Seeks More Digital Skills

The public service is soon to launch a recruitment drive to boost the number and range of bureaucrats with digital and data skills. The push will be part of a workforce strategy to be released in coming weeks, as part of the response to a landmark review of the public service led by former Telstra boss David Thodey. Australian Public Service Commission boss Peter Woolcott told an inquiry hearing in Canberra on Friday the world was becoming much more interconnected, and issues and technologies were moving quickly. "What we are trying to do with the workforce strategy is recognise we need to be better as a public service in developing and growing our own capabilities in the digital and data space," he said. "We have a good sense of our requirements going forward and what are the skills we need going forward as a public service." He said contractors would still be used to fill skill gaps and meet short-term needs, but it was time for the public service to ensure it was developing its own capabilities.

Asked by Labor senator Tim Ayres how many contractors and labour hire personnel were currently used across the Australian public service, Mr Woolcott said: "We don't collect that (data)." However, the inquiry heard individual agencies and departments routinely published the information in their annual reports. Mr Woolcott also confirmed the new APS Academy, to be headquartered at Old Parliament House, would be launched in July. The academy will provide training in leadership, integrity, governance and policy delivery, as well as work with academic institutions and specialists.

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Super Contributions Reflect Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap means men receive \$12 billion more in employer superannuation contributions each year than women. Analysis of ATO tax file median balances also reveals that women retire with 36 per cent less super than men and women have less super at every stage. The super balance gender gap begins to expand when a woman hits her 30s, increasing from just under seven per cent for women in their late 20s to almost 35 per cent once a woman reaches her late 40s. And one in three women retires with no super balance at all, according to a 2016 Senate report. A report by financial comparison website Finder reveals women retire with an average \$122,848 compared with men who retire with \$154,453. Meanwhile, the Financy Women's Index fell in the December quarter, predicting that the time frame for achieving financial equality increased to 101 years. "We are unlikely to see equality in Australia until the year 2122," Bianca Hartge-Hazelman from the FWI said.

Industry Super Australia strategic engagement director Gemma Pinnell said lifting the rate to 12 per cent as legislated was vital to lift women's savings, with more women than men likely to receive the super rate increase. "Until we fix inequities in the super system, like the outdated \$450 threshold, we will continue to see women retiring with balances that are persistently lower than men," she said in a statement on Monday. New research reveals three-quarters of women are unlikely to retire having received a full 40 years of super contributions, and yet key government modelling assumes everyone retires with four decades of super. Women average just 30.1 years of contributions, while men average 36.2 years. The research to be released this week analyses two decades of Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey to estimate the actual labour force experience of women over their life.

It highlights a dramatic flaw in the Retirement Income Review base case modelling which assumes everyone receives 40-years of super contributions - leading to big overestimates in retirement balances. The report's co-author Roger Wilkins said it "seems likely" COVID would have increased the unpaid work disparity last year. "The increase in child care provided at home brought about by closure of child care centres and learning from home is likely to have been disproportionately borne by women," Mr Wilkins said. A recent retirement survey, commissioned by Industry Super Australia, found that on average women spend 12 years less in the full-time workforce than men, with that time away from work having a dramatic impact on their super balance. ISA deputy chief executive Matt Linden said modelling based on wrong assumptions had serious ramifications, with some wanting to cut super for millions who otherwise wouldn't save enough for retirement. "This would be a terrible outcome as a more realistic working life pattern shows the current super rate is not adequate for most women to fund a secure retirement," he said.

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Morrison Urged to Tackle Gender Inequality

Prominent Australian women have inked an open letter to the prime minister, calling for the forthcoming federal budget to tackle gender inequality. The missive has been signed among others, by high-profile Minderoo Foundation chair Nicola Forrest, former Sydney lord mayor Lucy Turnbull, Fortescue Metals Group chief Elizabeth Gaines and previous Australian of the Year Rosie Batty. "We know that while inequality persists, true development and economic growth can never flourish," it says. "While we have made some strides on gender equality over recent decades, we are still falling short for women in almost every workplace, including the federal parliament. "Australia's post-pandemic economic recovery depends on finding ways to support and unlock economic growth and jobs. One way to do this is to unlock the

productivity gains that come from increasing women's workforce participation."

The group is urging Scott Morrison to reinstate the women's impact statement in the May federal budget, which used to show the effect of decisions and reforms. "Why was that important statement removed?" the letter asks. "We ask that this statement and the greater transparency it gives on the gendered impacts of the budget, be immediately returned." Early learning should be on national cabinet's agenda, the letter says. "The time is now. We urge you to move towards a better, more equal future." Women's marches are being planned across the nation next Monday to protest against sexism and gendered violence, amid criticism of the Morrison government's handling of multiple rape allegations. Protesters in Canberra are preparing to rally outside Parliament House next week at the start of a sitting fortnight.

Mr Morrison continues to dig in against calls for an independent inquiry into whether Attorney-General Christian Porter is suitable to hold his position after historical rape allegations were levelled at him. He is also standing by Defence Minister Linda Reynolds, whose former staffer Brittany Higgins says she was raped by a colleague at Parliament House in 2019. Ms Higgins has reactivated a police investigation into the incident but says she felt pressured to choose between pressing charges and keeping her job after the alleged assault.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/11/2021

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NSW Social Services Overwhelmed: Report

Social services in NSW risk falling dramatically short of the population's needs unless a major investment is made, a new report suggests. Such an injection of funds would also create thousands of jobs as well as assisting the community. The report by Equity Economics was commissioned by the NSW Council of Social Services and other state peak bodies, with sponsorship from HESTA. The sector will need another 62,000 employees by 2030 to meet a surge in demand, the report finds. Currently, more than 230,000 people work in social services in NSW, helping more than one million people each year. The report says an investment of \$1 billion would yield a \$10 billion return in new jobs and help people who are currently providing informal care back into the formal workforce. The report includes alarming statistics on the current state of affairs in the sector.

In the 2019/20 financial year, more people needing crisis accommodation from homelessness services were turned away than accepted. More than 94,000 people presented to emergency departments with mental health problems in 2017/18 - up 76 per cent from 2004/05. Some 51,000 people are on waiting lists for public housing and over 10 per cent of that number are in priority groups. NCSS chief executive

Joanna Quilty said the report was a "defining moment" for the sector. "In a nutshell, the NSW Government can invest and obtain a ten-fold multiplier in terms of jobs and productive capacity, or not invest and risk a sub-standard service system for the growing population who will require support into the future," she said in a statement. "We need to reimagine the social services sector and see it for what it really is: a vital industry that is crucial to our economic prosperity and social wellbeing."

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Nationals Must 'Do Better' on Women Issue

Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack has called on his party to "do better" when it comes to the treatment of women and has apologised broadly to anyone who has felt unsupported. In his address to the Nationals' federal conference in Canberra on Saturday, the party leader addressed "behaviour not befitting our federal parliament and that is gut-wrenching". He said those who had brought the house of national democracy into disrepute were few and did not represent the majority of "hard-working" and "honourable" people who work there. "Behaviour of this nature must stop, and must stop now," he said. "As with all workplaces in our nation, all homes, all places where people gather - we should be respectful. "No female, no person, should ever feel unsafe in their workplace. "No person should tolerate harassment of any kind or other inappropriate behaviour.

"We can all do better and we must do better." Mr McCormack also apologised to anyone who has felt unsupported. "And - if there have been those people who tell us they haven't had that support they needed, then I am sorry. "I'm sorry for those people and I will work, as I know all my colleagues will, to provide that support, to provide that respect and to provide that decency." He says the Nationals party room has agreed to undergo empathy training to improve their workplace culture. "If we can learn from an expert ... and actually learn a few tips on how to not only be better ourselves, but how to call out others for it, then I think that's a good thing," Mr McCormack told ABC. His comments come in the context of a growing crisis around sexual discrimination and abuse in federal politics, including the alleged rape of Brittany Higgins at Parliament House by a colleague in 2019, a Liberal staffer's lewd sex act on a female MP's desk, and Liberal MP Andrew Laming's trolling of two women on social media.

The Nationals leader also used the conference to spruik his party's achievements and vision to the party faithful. As parts of Australia wait for fatal and devastating floodwaters to disperse, his pitch entailed plans to expand the regional network of dams, weirs and pipelines. "I am absolutely delighted to announce the government will establish through the National Water Grid Authority, a fund dedicated to building more smaller, targeted dams, weirs and pipelines throughout rural and regional

Australia," he said. The party will seek applications of up to \$20 million from each state and territory to be matched by the government for smaller water projects to be built. Mr McCormack also used the stage to champion the benefits of regional living, where communities are "big enough to get a good cup of coffee and small enough to still care". He added that city dwellers are moving in large numbers to the regions, which have proved to be the safest locations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The regions are the hotspot opportunity, with 56,510 job vacancies showing online," he said. "From the coalminer to the nurse, from the farm labourer to the truckie, good jobs are there." Some regional centres have received hundreds of millimetres of rain in the past 10 days and Mr McCormack said the coalition federal government had been quick to respond with flood assistance. The Nationals conference is scheduled to run on Saturday and Sunday, with addresses by deputy leader and Agriculture Minister David Littleproud and the party's Senate leader Bridget McKenzie.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/27/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Building for Climate Change - How Plumbing Is Impacted by the New Proposal

Garcia Plumbing and Gas strives to follow the government's advice on the regulation of carbon emissions at construction sites. With the goal of becoming zero carbon emission in 2025 the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment has set up the Building for Climate Change programme. The framework includes suggestions about how emissions associated with materials and products during the building's whole lifecycle can be reduced. These include using existing stock, reducing construction waste, and increasing the durability of materials. It also includes objectives, such as reducing operational carbon emissions and water use, and improving the wellbeing of occupants by bettering the indoor environmental quality. MBIE is proposing to regulate the efficiency through several requirements that will need to be followed and reported on.

The proposed regulations will mean that plumbers, like Garcia Plumbing, will need to turn to the use of more natural materials, rather than fossil fuels such as gas. Even though the proposed ban on new household gas connections will be difficult to follow, Garcia Plumbing will ensure they offer the most climate-friendly products and services to their customers. Get in contact with us to see how we can help make your house more energy efficient and aligned with these future requirements. Garcia Plumbing and Gas provides their services across the Wellington region, whatever your needs may be. Their services include plumbing, gas fitting, renovations, and servicing. The experienced team is friendly to work with and will ensure that all your needs are met and are done to the highest of standards. Contact us now if you require our services!

\$4M to Reduce Homelessness in Five Locations

Associate Housing Minister Marama Davidson today announced funding support for new initiatives that will prevent and reduce homelessness in Whangarei, Auckland, Napier/Hastings, Rotorua and the Hutt Valley. “Over \$4 million has been allocated to projects that address homelessness in local communities,” Marama Davidson said. “This is the first round of funding from the Government’s \$16.6 million Local Innovation and Partnership Fund, which is a key part of our Homelessness Action Plan. “The fund allows Government to partner with local providers or organisations who are doing innovative mahi to reduce homelessness in their area. The initiatives funded in this first round have a strong focus on Māori, rangatahi and the rainbow community. They offer new and tailored strategies to disrupt the cycle of homelessness for communities experiencing discrimination and isolation.

“For example, one of the recipients, Rainbow YOUTH, will partner with the housing and homelessness sector in Auckland to reduce the barriers LGBTQIA+ face when accessing mainstream housing services. Another, a partnership between Te Taiwhenua o Heretaunga Trust and Whatever It Takes in Hastings, Napier will provide support, positive relationships and connection using tikanga Māori to assist people who’ve experienced long-term homelessness and move people into permanent housing. “We have inherited a homelessness crisis that has been decades in the making, we know that homelessness disconnects people from their community, and has long-term impacts on health and well-being. Addressing Homelessness is a key priority for this Government, the projects funded today build on the knowledge, strengths and connections of local organisations and people. “We’re pleased to work together with our community partners to ensure that homelessness in New Zealand is prevented where possible, or is rare, brief and non-recurring,” Marama Davidson said. Round two of the Local Innovation and Partnership Fund is expected to open in mid-2021. The full list of successful applicants for round one funding is below.

From <https://livenews.co.nz> 03/26/2021

Health and Safety Management Systems Keeps Everyone Safe Says New Zealand's Leading Rural Consultants for AgSafe New Zealand Ltd.

Developing a health and safety plan and work culture is key in keeping everyone on

farms safe says New Zealand's leading farm consultants, AgSafe NZ. AgSafe NZ specialises in consulting with rural sectors to prepare hazard management programmes and safety plans. "We work hard to ensuring that everyone who works on farms comes home safely at the end of every day," says Jim Findlay, Rural Consultant for AgSafe New Zealand Ltd. The purpose of a health and safety plan is to ensure that everyone on the farm is conscience about safety and hazards and risks are identified and managed. It is also to ensure that everyone knows what they are meant to be doing, is trained for the jobs they do, equipment is regularly serviced workers wellbeing and environment is monitored. Managing risks and hazards on farm is the responsibility of the whole team.

"Leading by example by showing your team that safe practices are required and are part of your normal day to day operation is a great way to ensure that everyone follows your farms health and safety plan," advises Jim. It is key to remember that a health and safety plan is a living document and as changes happen on farm, the risks and management practices for these need to put in, old ones taken out, and changes documented. When reviewing the plan, we will consider the following: Any success in achieving health and safety objectives. Any incidents or accidents that have happened. Any changes to that farming operation, such as people or equipment that could impact on the health and safety. Any updates in legislation or recognised good practice. "We advise that you talk regularly with all workers and ensure that everyone understands how things are to be done. Discuss with your team out what farm activities, equipment or features have the potential to cause harm and record these with your staff." adds James.

This is a fantastic way to get the whole team involved, gives everyone a feeling shared accountability and you are more likely to get your team committed to health and safety when everyone feels involved in the process. A health and safety plan provides everyone working on your farm with clear-cut guidance for tasks and responsibilities and ensures you are completely compliant with current workplace law. AgSafe offers you independent and unbiased view on the legislation and will assist you in understanding these issues and remain compliant. If you are looking to get your farm or rural business up to code then contact the friendly experts at AgSafe NZ.

<https://www.infonews.co.nz> 03/31/2021

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Asia-Pacific

Smart City Initiatives a Promising Start but Follow-Through Is Crucial

Cyta CEO Andreas Neocleous in a recent interview with the Cyprus Mail raised an interesting point regarding the implementation of 5G and the resulting facilitation of advanced technology solutions on the island. Neocleous explained that while the telecommunications infrastructure will be there to support and enable the use of certain technologies in a variety of applications, this would not be enough for their successful implementation and long-term use. "We still have to enhance the existing transportation infrastructure, parking infrastructure, re-invent city plans, as well as put in place related legislation and updated Highway Code," he said in reference to the rising popularity and availability of vehicles with automated driving features. "These are not simple things, they require a strategic shift in policies and regulation," Neocleous added. Indeed, the need for a more holistic and considered approach is key for Cyprus in a wide array of fields but technology offers the most gleaming example. On February 2, Paphos mayor Phedonas Phedonos announced plans which aim to modernise the city and its administration through the use of a Geographic Information System (GIS). Think of GIS as a multi-dimensional, integrated tool for analysis and insight. It correlates data on multiple levels, allowing its users to manage and analyse that data for them to make the most informed decisions at any given moment. Moreover, it can allow organisations to monitor changes, observe trends and create forecasting reports which can in turn allow for better preparation or the application of corrective measures.

For Paphos council the GIS system will ultimately be able to combine data provided by all public utility networks. This includes their own internal maps. In essence, if a new development project is under consideration, the council will be able to see how this affects or is affected by the water board, the electricity authority and the Department of Town Planning and Housing. Moreover, this can then in turn be combined with data relating to traffic, emissions, noise pollution, and more. Since then, Nicosia has also announced its own plans for the implementation of Smart City features. However, the Cypriot capital has gone one step ahead, stating that it will become 'the first smart city on the island'. In truth, Nicosia's plans are much more expansive in scope than Paphos', at least for the time being. The smart city plans for Nicosia include a fibre optic network, a wireless network, information points, mobility solutions digital signage, and smart LED lighting. However, one of the most intriguing parts of the project involves the installation of a number of sensors related to atmospheric pollution (measuring dust, temperature and air quality), the creation of a smart waste system, and a smart parking system. But while the data and its subsequent analysis will produce certain findings the crux of the matter is how those findings are acted upon. Cyprus has already suffered from its non-adherence to European Union-mandated climate change-related emissions targets. So while the

council ascertains that the smart parking system will reduce emissions by decreasing traffic, any reduction in emissions would sadly not be enough to neither tangibly improve air quality nor bring down our cumulative emissions to the desired levels.

Initiatives elsewhere in the world: Estonia, South Korea, Japan

Cyprus taking its first Smart City steps at a later point than other cities elsewhere in the world is not necessarily a drawback. Being late to the party allows local administrations and governments to better scan the field and implement solutions that have been tried and tested elsewhere without having to suffer the teething problems of emerging technologies. South Korea, one of the leading countries in terms of Smart City implementation, started a smart mobility system in Seoul all the way back in 2003. This system was a response to the decreasing use of public buses and the shift of Korean drivers to personal vehicles, a problem faced by Cyprus today. The system integrated GPS and the city's bus management system to create a fluid public transport system which diverted buses to the route they were needed to the most at any given time during the day.

In Estonia smart city features have been implemented in capital Tallinn. Beyond the availability of WiFi everywhere in the city, the Estonian government has also made a lot of data open to the public. In Japan, Toyota recently began work on its Woven City project, designed to be integrated from day one, rather than gradually implementing smart features into a pre-existing city or urban area. It will have three different but interconnected street types, one for automated vehicles, one for pedestrians and one for people using personal mobility vehicles. Moreover, the city will include wooden houses partly constructed by robots, and it will use a combination of solar energy, geothermal energy and hydrogen fuel cells. "We will take on the challenge of creating a future where people of diverse backgrounds are able to live happily," said Toyota president Akio Toyoda.

Concerns

Of course, the implementation of 5G and smart city features are not without issues that need to be accounted for in the government's planning and should always be firmly addressed in any communications strategies going forward. These primarily concern the ethical issue of privacy. Private citizens will invariably welcome any schemes if they make their lives better, but will also need to be convinced that any technology solutions implemented will not be used maliciously. Two key factors the government needs to stay abreast of and incorporate in their planning includes the way to categorise and prioritise data (people are willing to share some information more readily than other pieces of information) and the purpose for which the data collection is taking place. As Dutch researcher Liesbet van Zoonen stated: "the contrast between service and surveillance purposes [is] most paramount".

From <https://cyprus-mail.com/> 03/02/2021

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Nearly 350 Million Children Lack Quality Childcare in the World

More than 40 percent of all children below primary-school age – or nearly 350 million – need childcare but do not have access, according to a new World Bank report launched today. As a result, too many children are spending time in unsafe and unstimulating environments. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the inadequacies in childcare provision and the vulnerability of the sector across the world. The new report, *Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in Childcare to Build Human Capital*, highlights how investments in childcare can increase women’s employment and productivity, create new jobs, improve child outcomes, drive economic growth, and support a more resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic. It notes that the struggles so many parents have experienced during the pandemic to balance childcare and work responsibilities may also generate policy momentum to address the issue. Investing in quality, affordable childcare is key to unlocking pathways out of poverty, helping everyone achieve their potential, and increasing equity – all of which are cornerstones of a country’s economic growth and productivity.

“The first five years of a child’s life are a period of rapid brain development. Providing children with a safe and stimulating environment during this time has huge returns and makes subsequent education investments much more effective,” said Jaime Saavedra, World Bank’s Global Director for Education. “But 40 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries need childcare and do not have access. We need to urgently expand investments in childcare.” In order to maximize both female labor force participation and child development, governments play a crucial role. They can help ensure that quality childcare is available, affordable, and meets the needs of all families, particularly the most vulnerable. Expanding the childcare economy and building the childcare workforce also can create up to 43 million new jobs while facilitating more people—particularly women—to be able to seek or return to employment. “Without quality childcare, parents—and in particular women—face an enormous hurdle. The lack of access can keep women from returning to work after childbirth, limit the quality or quantity of employment and earning opportunities, which can result in substantial negative impacts on family welfare,” said Caren Grown, World Bank’s Global Director for Gender. “The World Bank is supporting countries as they take action to develop childcare solutions that can increase women’s labor force participation, improve child development and human capital outcomes, and reduce inequalities.”

The report highlights five key policy goals that governments can take to accelerate progress towards quality, affordable childcare for all families that need it:

1. Expand access to childcare by promoting different types of provision – to meet diverse family needs (this may include center and home-based care options, providing flexible funding for families, and covering extended working hours, among

others).

2. Prioritize childcare coverage for the most vulnerable families and ensure low-cost and free options are available.
3. Allocate sufficient financing to make childcare affordable for families and ensure quality.
4. Define clear, workable institutional arrangements and build system coherence – and ensure alignment across different parts of government.
5. Ensure that children are in safe and stimulating environments through a robust quality assurance system and a supported and capable workforce.

The report comes on the heels of the World Bank's Women, Business and Law 2021 report, which found that women around the world continue to face laws and regulations that restrict their economic opportunity as the pandemic is creating new challenges for their health, safety, and economic security.

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 03/04/2021

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Digital Skills in the EU's Neighbourhood

Digital Skills in the EU's neighbouring regions is the focus of the ETF's March communication campaign. For the whole month, experts and practitioners at national, regional, and international level will share evidence and opinions on digital skills and learning in the workplace, and how education and training systems are preparing the future workforce and empowering citizens. Stay tuned to our various channels with #Skills4future and #digitalskills!

Why digital skills?

Digital skills cut across many policy areas. They are necessary for economic competitiveness and critical to job creation and employability. A lack of digital skills and learning opportunities create a 'digital divide' exacerbating the exclusion of those persons and communities already vulnerable and marginalised in society, as witnessed during the pandemic. The ETF's mapping reports on the response of education and training systems in the EU's neighbourhood during the health crisis give an overview of the coping mechanisms and responses of education and training systems, businesses, schools, teachers, students and their families, often using unfamiliar and untried technology and imperfect systems and infrastructure. It is important to learn from this experience to inform future policy choices and enhance the quality and access to digital skills and learning. The ETF has been actively supporting the development of digital skills and learning within a lifelong learning perspective, in partnership with key stakeholders and other international and donor organisations. We provide targeted policy advice to partner countries and implement several initiatives to prepare for the future, some of which are outlined below.

What is the ETF doing?

The ETF supports the development of the digital key competence for students and educators through supporting innovations in learning and the curricula through the Creating New Learning initiative, and helping schools to improve their digital readiness by using the SELFIE tool. 'Industry 4.0 and digitalisation' is one of 8 themes in the ETF initiative Network of Excellence offering a platform for continuous exchange of practice among new and existing centres of excellence at local, national, or international level. This initiative also supports public-private partnerships, an essential component of good governance which the ETF advocates in all our partner countries to bridge the widening gap in skills and labour market matching due to digital disruption. We are engaged with business through the Skills for Development initiative to support them to develop skills, including digital skills, and upskilling and reskilling. At the same time, as indicated in the ETF's publication "Changing Skills for a Changing World" and discussions on platform work attention needs to be given to protecting the well-being and rights of digital workers.

What is the EU policy basis?

The ETF's works within the EU's external action providing policy advice to partner countries informed by the European Skills Agenda (including the Green Deal, the European Pillar on Social Rights, the Pact for Skills, and the Vocational Education and Training Recommendation); the Digital Education Action Plan within the European Education Area, Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, and Digital Competence Framework for Educators; and the EU Industrial Strategy, amongst others.

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Japan, Australia, India, ASEAN to Promote Data Sharing on Supply Chains

Japan, Australia, India and ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) are promoting cooperation on sharing the production data of key industries such as cars and electronics, as the supply chains for such industries are expanding into many countries and regions. Entities from both the public and private sectors are expected to participate in the scheme, according to sources. Production data on parts and materials used in these key Japanese industries is difficult to trace because production bases have been dispersed overseas, and supply networks and logistics systems have become complicated. The aim is to establish a system to quickly share information on factories that can serve as production alternatives, as well as on inventory status, to apply a lesson learned from the coronavirus crisis, which caused stagnation in parts supply and distribution.

The industry ministry and JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) hosted an

online forum on supply chains for two days through Friday, at which government officials and businesspeople from countries and regions that have many production bases for Japanese companies agreed on the need to share data. The Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry aims to make it easier to monitor the status of production and inventory at plants in various countries and regions by using digital technology. It plans to establish a system to minimize the impact on production in the event of a large-scale disaster or an infectious disease outbreak, by means of finding factories that can serve as production alternatives for parts. The ministry will hold these forums on a regular basis and discuss tangible ways to cooperate through opportunities such as ministerial-level meetings.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 03/12/2021

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OECD Reports to G7 on Need to Strengthen Economic Resilience Against Crises

Creating an emergency Rapid Response Forum to ensure global supplies of essential goods continue to flow during major international crises is one of a broad range of recommendations contained in a new OECD report to the G7 on building economic resilience. *Fostering Economic Resilience in a World of Open and Integrated Markets* says the devastating impacts of the Global Financial Crisis and now the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to leave lasting scars on our economies and societies. With the risk of other systemic threats on the horizon – starting with climate change but also spanning security threats, including cyber attacks - it is critical to learn the lessons of these and previous crises in order to tackle the vulnerabilities of our economic system, absorb shocks and engineer a swift rebound. Ensuring the resilience of global supply chains of essential goods is crucial, the report says. An emergency Rapid Response Forum would provide G7 and other governments with a means of upstream policy co-ordination and, particularly, consultation ahead of the imposition of any trade restrictions. Such an initiative could also prepare timely co-operation on logistics, transportation, procurement, planning and communication.

Commissioned by the UK government, which is currently holding the G7 presidency, the OECD report underlines the need for governments to co-operate both with the private sector through, for instance, supply chain stress tests and emergency planning, and with other countries to boost transparency, discipline export restrictions and adhere to international regulation and standards. The report says the COVID-19 crisis has caused a huge surge in demand for certain goods, notably in the health and information technology sectors but argues that global supply chains have been part of the solution. After shortages of masks and personal protective equipment, in particular at the beginning of the pandemic, both global production and trade of facemasks later increased tenfold to meet demand. Strategies based around

a reliance on domestic production are unlikely to ensure supply of essential goods and can remove important risk management options such as the diversification of sourcing, the report says. Although temporary scale-up of domestic production for essential goods could be explored as a risk management strategy, reliance on domestic production is not cost-effective nor feasible for strained health budgets, especially for lower income countries, which are almost entirely dependent on global markets to source medical products related to COVID-19. Global supply can allow products to be sourced from the most efficient and cost-effective supplier and enable access to more and different varieties of medical products, ensuring that future surges in global demand are fully met.

Presenting the report alongside Lord Sedwill, chair of the G7 Panel on Economic Resilience, OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría said: “As we have seen in the past decade alone, in today’s interconnected world, shock events can quickly cascade across borders and economic sectors, and have devastating effects on people’s lives, jobs and opportunities, and on their trust in governments, institutions and markets.” “Building economic resilience in the face of future shocks is a global challenge for the post-COVID world. For global markets and supply chains to serve as a source of resilience, governments and the public need to have the confidence that markets are and will remain open and fair, including during times of stress.” Lord Sedwill said: “The unprecedented impact of the covid pandemic on the global economy has highlighted issues of resilience, arising from the growth of monopolies, geopolitical trade tensions, global economic governance falling behind innovation and technology, and the supply of the critical elements essential to the future economy. In response, we should renew our common purpose and commitment to open, well-regulated global markets which promote the green transition, inclusive growth and economic resilience as we build back better.”

The report looks at how to build resilience in global markets, including by reducing distortions and promoting a level playing field for competition, trade and investment. Ensuring global markets are reliable and predictable includes ensuring access to critical raw materials. This calls for enhanced co-operation to develop international agreements for stronger monitoring, notification and disciplines on export restrictions on critical raw materials, promoting responsible sourcing and increasing circularity in this sector. Tackling harmful practices that undermine trust such as foreign bribery is also key. The OECD proposes governments revise their risk management policies and frameworks to ensure a systemic all-hazards-and-threats approach to resilience with international co-operation playing a central role. This could be supported by a comprehensive evaluation of the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 crisis, including benchmarking and comparison of national preparedness responses.

The OECD says emerging technologies, particularly digitalisation, can contribute to boosting resilience through prevention, absorption and recovery capabilities but can also pose threats. Among its recommendations, the report says governments could

strengthen the responsiveness of innovation systems to global policy challenges, reconsidering the way they are organised, structured and financed. It also proposes linking support for innovation more closely to broader public policy objectives and improving international collaboration on emerging technology governance, including by moving towards smarter and more agile regulation. For further information, journalists are invited to contact the OECD Media Office (tel. +33 1 4524 9700) 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.

From <https://www.oecd.org/> 03/23/2021

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OECD Steel Committee to Accelerate Work on a Subsidies Database as Steel Market Conditions Deteriorate

The OECD Steel Committee expressed deep concern as it met this week over the deterioration in steel market conditions related to the COVID-19 crisis, and agreed to accelerate work to build a comprehensive database of government support provided to steel producers in major steel-producing economies. A statement by the Steel Committee Chair said the pandemic had accelerated the decline in global trade of steel, with a sharp downturn in exports in the second and third quarters of 2020. The slump in demand for steel has taken place amid increases in steelmaking capacity, which may not reflect market fundamentals, the statement said. Committee members reiterated the need for capacity reductions, including by facilitating the exit of inefficient producers in relevant countries while supporting workers affected by plant closures. The statement said government subsidies and other support measures and interventions had also led to distortions in steel trade flows and contributed to trade tensions.

The latest OECD data show that global steelmaking capacity increased to 2,453.2 million metric tonnes (mmt) in 2020, and the gap between global capacity and production widened to 625.4 mmt. Global demand is likely to only partially recover in the near term, with the level of demand for finished steel in 2021 expected to remain below pre-pandemic levels in most countries. During a virtual four-day meeting, the Committee discussed the state of its work on building a database of subsidies in the steel sector. Members agreed to resume collecting subsidy data on the world's largest steel producing jurisdictions, including those where recent data on increasing production has raised concerns about potential government support. This marks a further step towards improving transparency on support measures and will feed into future work examining the impact of these measures on global steel markets.

The OECD Steel Committee has 25 members (Austria, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain,

Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the UK, the US and the EU). In addition, five associates (Brazil, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia and Ukraine) and seven participants (Argentina, Bulgaria, Egypt, India, Malaysia, South Africa and Chinese Taipei) bring their perspectives to the Committee's work. A number of other economies also participate in some Steel Committee meetings as invitees. For further information, journalists are invited to contact Catherine Bremer in the OECD Media Office (+33 1 45 24 97 00). 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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Stronger Data Systems Needed to Fight Poverty

The World Bank is calling for strengthened national data systems in order to realize the full potential of the data revolution to transform the lives of poor people. From information gathered in household surveys to pixels captured by satellite images, data can inform policies and spur economic activity, serving as a powerful weapon in the fight against poverty. More data is available today than ever before, yet its value is largely untapped, according to the new World Development Report 2021: Data for Better Lives. Data is also a double-edged sword, requiring a social contract that builds trust by protecting people against misuse and harm, and works toward equal access and representation. "Data offer tremendous potential to create value by improving programs and policies, driving economies and empowering citizens. The perspective of poor people has largely been absent from the global debate on data governance and urgently needs to be heard," said World Bank Group President David Malpass. "Lower-income countries are too often disadvantaged due to a lack of institutions, decision-making autonomy, and financial resources, all of which hold back their effective implementation and effectiveness of data systems and governance frameworks. International cooperation is needed to harmonize regulations and coordinate policies so that the value of data is harnessed to benefit all, and to inform efforts toward a green, resilient, and inclusive recovery.

Data collected for public or commercial purposes, by traditional or modern methods, is being used, combined, and reused in ways that delivers benefits to more people and provide information with greater accuracy. Better data are enhancing governments' abilities to set priorities and target resources more efficiently. In Kenya, for example, social media, mobile phone data, and digitized official reports of traffic accidents in Nairobi identified the most dangerous roads, leading to road safety improvements to save lives. The private sector is using data to power platform-based businesses that boost economic growth and generate international trade in services. In Haiti, technology has helped mango farmers track their produce through to final sale, eliminating many intermediaries, letting them keep more of their profits.

Innovative data methods are also empowering people to make better decisions leading to public service improvements. In India's Tamil Nadu state, tools were developed with World Bank support to address data literacy challenges, enabling residents to express preferences in ways that could be readily digitized, guiding community discussions to set priorities.

"Combining data from multiple sources can advance evidence-based policy making through more precise and timely statistics," said World Bank Group Chief Economist Carmen Reinhart. "The adverse effects of COVID-19 have been felt unequally, and innovative uses of data offer new opportunities to understand its spread, assess policies to mitigate it, and target government resources to the people most in need." COVID-19 has dramatically highlighted opportunities and challenges associated with newfound uses of data. Countries have repurposed mobile phone data to monitor the virus -- but have had to provide protection against harmful misuse of such data. The abrupt shift to virtual work has also exposed a digital divide between those with access to technology and those without, serving as a reminder of the need to work toward equitable access to mobile phones and the internet for the poor and for low-income countries. Virus containment has hindered basic data collection in numerous countries, underscoring the need for investments in infrastructure, data systems and statistical capacity.

However, the more data is used, the greater the potential for misuse. Careful design of regulations to strengthen cybersecurity and protect personal data is essential to engender trust. In a global survey of 80 countries, only 40 percent had provisions for best-practice data regulations, including fewer than one-third of low-income countries, although many are now beginning to adopt them. For all of data's potential for development, the benefits of the global data system are, for now, skewed to the better off. Improved representation in, and access to, data for marginalized people is a priority. Digital connectivity is low in Sub-Saharan Africa, and modern infrastructure in low-income countries for exchanging, storing, and processing data is negligible. Lower income countries also find themselves at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to harnessing the economic benefits of data platform businesses.

The report acknowledges the wide range of views related to data, and an uncertain policy environment. To reap data's full benefits and create opportunities for all, renewed efforts are required to improve data governance domestically, as well as through closer international cooperation. The cost of inaction is high, leading to missed opportunities and greater inequities. Forging a new social contract for data—one grounded in principles of value, trust, and equity—will ultimately make the difference. The World Bank, one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, is taking broad, fast action to help developing countries respond to the health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19. This includes \$12 billion to help low- and middle-income countries purchase and distribute COVID-19 vaccines, tests, and treatments, and strengthen vaccination systems. The financing

builds on the broader World Bank Group COVID-19 response, which is helping more than 100 countries strengthen health systems, support the poorest households, and create supportive conditions to maintain livelihoods and jobs for those hit hardest.

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Uneven Recovery Drives Growing Inequality Across East Asia and the Pacific

More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the developing economies of East Asia and the Pacific (EAP) are facing a markedly uneven recovery, according to the World Bank's latest economic update for the region, released today. Only China and Vietnam are experiencing a V-shaped rebound where output has already surpassed pre-pandemic levels. In the other major economies, output remained on average around 5 percent below pre-pandemic levels. Hardest hit of all have been the Pacific Island countries. Economic performance has depended on the effectiveness of virus containment, the ability to take advantage of the revival of international trade, and the capacity of governments to provide fiscal and monetary support. In 2020, poverty in the region stopped declining for the first time in decades. An estimated 32 million people in the region failed to escape poverty (at a poverty line of \$5.50/ day) due to the pandemic.

“The economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has stalled poverty reduction and increased inequality,” said Victoria Kwakwa, Vice President for East Asia and the Pacific at the World Bank. “As countries begin to rebound in 2021, they will need to take urgent action to protect vulnerable populations and ensure a recovery which is inclusive, green and resilient.” Inequality increased, driven by the pandemic and resulting shutdowns, as well as unequal access to social services and digital technologies. In some countries, children in the poorest two-fifths of households were 20 percent less likely to be engaged in learning than children of the top one-fifth. Women are suffering more violence than previously: 25 percent of respondents in Lao PDR and 83 percent in Indonesia said that domestic violence worsened due to COVID-19. Growth in the region is expected to accelerate from an estimated 1.2 percent in 2020 to 7.5 percent in 2021. But we are likely to see a three-speed recovery. China and Vietnam are expected to grow even more strongly in 2021, by 8.1 percent and 6.6 percent, respectively, up from 2.3 percent and 2.9 percent in 2020. Other large economies, more scarred by the crisis, will grow about 4.6 percent on average, slightly slower than pre-crisis growth. Recovery is expected to be particularly protracted in tourism-dependent Island economies.

The report estimates that US stimulus could add 1 percentage point on average to the growth of countries in the region in 2021 and advance recovery by about three months on average. Risks to the outlook come from slow implementation of

COVID-19 vaccines, which could slow growth by as much as 1 percentage point in some countries. The report calls for action to contain the disease, support the economy, and green the recovery. It warns that with current stocks and allocation of vaccines, industrial countries would achieve more than 80 percent population coverage by the end of 2021, while developing countries will achieve only about 55 percent coverage. In many EAP countries, relief is less than earning losses, stimulus has not fully remedied deficient demand, and public investment is not a significant part of recovery efforts, even as public debt has increased on average by 7 percentage points of GDP. And “green” measures are outstripped by “brown” activities in the stimulus packages across the region: on average only one-in-four recovery measures taken by countries in the region are climate friendly.

“We need international cooperation more than ever, to contain the disease, support the economy, and green the recovery,” said Aaditya Mattoo, Chief Economist for East Asia and the Pacific at the World Bank. “China can play a vital role, by exporting more medical products, boosting its consumption, and taking stronger climate action. And it too would benefit from a safer world and more balanced growth.” The report calls for international cooperation in the production and approval of vaccines as well as in allocation based on need, to help contain COVID-19. Fiscal coordination would magnify the collective impact because some governments tend to under-provide stimulus. And apart from cooperative reduction in emissions, international assistance would help poorer developing countries take deeper climate action. Uneven Recovery, which focused on vaccination, fiscal, and climate change policies, follows on two economic updates for the region in 2020 that looked at six other policy dimensions of a resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: smart containment, smart schooling, stepped-up social protection, support for firms, balanced financial sector policies, and trade reform.

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New Global Tracker to Measure Pandemic’s Impact on Education Worldwide

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education for 1.6 billion children worldwide over the past year. To help measure the ongoing global response, Johns Hopkins University, the World Bank, and UNICEF have partnered to create a COVID-19 – Global Education Recovery Tracker. Launched today, the tool assists countries’ decision-making by tracking reopening and recovery planning efforts in more than 200 countries and territories. The effort captures and showcases information across four key areas:

Status of schooling

Modalities of learning (remote, in-person or hybrid)

Availability of remedial educational support

Status of vaccine availability for teachers

The Global Education Recovery Tracker seeks to build upon Johns Hopkins University's pivotal work in gathering quality data on COVID-19 cases, testing, and vaccinations, along with the strategic roles that the World Bank and UNICEF play in operational and policy support to countries during the pandemic.

"Throughout the pandemic Johns Hopkins has demonstrated the vital role for universities in providing accurate, evidence-based data and information for the world," said Johns Hopkins Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Sunil Kumar. "We hope the work of this partnership will build understanding of how COVID-19 continues to affect students everywhere." Data through early March 2021 show that 51 countries have fully returned to in-person education. In more than 90 countries, students are being instructed through multiple modalities, with some schools open, others closed, and many offering hybrid learning options. Regionally, there are emerging indications of shifts in learning modalities. Remote learning continues to dominate in the Middle East and North Africa where schools were largely closed in recent weeks. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, most students are physically attending school. In the East Asia and Pacific region, in-person education has mostly resumed, with stringent social distancing measures. The regions of South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe are mainly relying on hybrid education where the infrastructure allows. Across Latin America, countries are using mixed approaches that include remote, hybrid, and in-person education. However, the majority of schools remain partially or fully closed to in-person classes with remote education as the most used modality.

"The world was facing a learning crisis before COVID-19," said Jaime Saavedra, World Bank Global Director for Education. "The learning poverty rate – the proportion of 10-year-olds unable to read a short, age-appropriate text – was 53% in low- and middle-income countries prior to COVID-19, compared to only 9% for high-income countries. A year into the pandemic, continued disruptions to schooling, shifts in learning modalities, and concerns for students' well-being are ever greater, and this learning crisis is getting worse. COVID-19 related school closures are likely to increase learning poverty to as much as 63%." Saavedra emphasized the importance of this Tracker, "In many countries, students and teachers need urgent supplemental support. The return to school requires accelerated, remedial, and hybrid learning, as well as other interventions. Collecting and monitoring this data on what countries are doing is critically important to help us understand the magnitude of what support is needed as we go forward, learning from the major trends observed among countries."

In addition to tracking the operational status of schools, the Tracker will also monitor how students are being supported. This includes changes to the school year schedule, tutoring, and remediation, especially for the primary school grades. These

interventions will be a critical component of the education recovery process after a year that has affected the learning and well-being of 95% of school children across the globe. In countries where the COVID-19 vaccine is available, the tool is tracking whether teachers are eligible as a priority group. As of early March, teachers are largely not being immunized as a priority group in low- and low-middle-income countries. Of the 130 countries where vaccine information was available, more than two-thirds are not currently vaccinating teachers as a priority group.

“Even as vaccines are beginning to rollout worldwide, for hundreds of millions of the world’s schoolchildren, the consequences of this pandemic are far from over,” said UNICEF Chief of Education Robert Jenkins. “We must prioritize the reopening of schools, including prioritizing teachers to receive COVID-19 vaccines once frontline health personnel and high-risk populations are vaccinated. While such decisions ultimately rest with governments making difficult tradeoffs, we must do everything in our power to safeguard the future of the next generation. And this begins by safeguarding those responsible for opening that future up for them.” The Tracker is intended to offer evidence that informs policy makers and researchers working on COVID-19 responses. The tool is built to have the flexibility to incorporate emerging issues while offering a time trend of actions in the past months. The Johns Hopkins University eSchool+ Initiative is a collaboration between the Consortium for School-Based Health Solutions, the Berman Institute of Bioethics, and the Johns Hopkins Schools of Education, Medicine, and Public Health. The eSchool+ Initiative focuses on child well-being from an equity lens, developing tools and resources for K-12 schools to help policy makers and educators support students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information about the eSchool+ Initiative, please visit: <https://equityschoolplus.jhu.edu>.

The World Bank Group works on education programs in 100+ countries, supporting access to quality education services and lifelong learning opportunities for all. As the largest external financier of education in the developing world, its portfolio of \$20 billion covers education programs, technical assistance, and other projects designed to build human capital through improved learning outcomes. This is complemented with tools and resources available to policy makers, researchers, school leaders, teachers, and the public, all aimed at supporting the achievement of the World Bank’s twin goals of ending extreme poverty and boosting shared prosperity. For more information about the World Bank’s work in Education, please visit: www.worldbank.org/education

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APEC Business Travel Card Goes Digital

Officials from APEC member economies finalized their work toward modernizing and improving the security and efficiency of business travel by launching the Virtual APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC). The Virtual ABTC displays a digital version of the APEC Business Travel Card on a mobile application, giving cardholders the ability to present their virtual card to enter an APEC economy. “Our objective is to make traveling under the APEC Business Travel Card scheme more secure, efficient, convenient and user-friendly, particularly as APEC members are looking for safe and effective measures to open up borders and resume international travel,” said Kimberlee Stamatis, convenor of the APEC Business Mobility Group, who oversees the scheme. The Virtual ABTC includes security features such as user verification, the use of holographic watermarks and disabling of screenshots within the mobile application to ensure authenticity of the cardholder. It also includes real-time connectivity to the internet, providing immediate updates of pre-clearance information needed for entry into APEC economies. “Each APEC economy will determine its own timeline to transition to the Virtual ABTC for its cardholders,” Stamatis added. “Cardholders from transitional members will not have access to the digital service for now; however, existing processes will remain unchanged.” Stamatis, who is also a director at Australia’s Department of Home Affairs, added that Australia will be the first economy to transition to the digital service for all Australian cardholders from March 2021.

“We really look forward to seeing other economies transition as soon as possible thereafter,” she added. In order to support member economies’ transition to the new digital service, the process for issuing Virtual ABTCs has been streamlined to align with existing operations with as little change as necessary. Nineteen APEC economies are fully participating members of the ABTC scheme, including: Australia; Brunei Darussalam; Chile; China; Hong Kong, China; Indonesia; Japan; Korea; Malaysia; Mexico; New Zealand; Papua New Guinea; Peru; the Philippines; the Russian Federation; Singapore; Chinese Taipei; Thailand; and Viet Nam. Canada and the United States are transitional members. The APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC) scheme facilitates short-term business travel within the APEC economies by streamlining the entry process at ports of entry within the region. Approved applicants are issued with a card that serves as the entry authority to fully participating economies. The scheme reduces travel costs between APEC economies by 38 percent for cardholders, businesses pay 27 percent less in application fees and 52 percent less in immigration processing.

From <https://www.apec.org/> 03/04/2021

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ADB’s Partnership with PRC to Focus on High-Quality, Green Development

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has generally endorsed a new country partnership strategy (CPS) for the People's Republic of China (PRC) covering 2021–2025 to support government efforts to achieve high-quality, green development. This CPS will be central in reorienting ADB's engagement in the PRC as the country transits to high-income status and approaches graduation from ADB's assistance. ADB operations in the PRC will focus on three interrelated strategic priorities: environmentally sustainable development, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and an aging society and health security. "ADB is targeting areas where it can add value through innovative demonstration projects that generate regional public goods, knowledge, and best practices for replication," said ADB's Country Director in the PRC Yolanda Fernandez Lommen. "Close cooperation between sovereign and nonsovereign operations will be at the core of this approach, and synergies between ADB's operational and knowledge departments will be used to help develop solutions to complex issues."

ADB proposes total lending commitments in the country of \$7.0 billion to \$7.5 billion for 2021–2025 for sovereign operations, compared with \$9.0 billion in 2016–2020, with an expected declining trend toward the end of the CPS. Lending levels may fluctuate up and down from year to year, subject to resource availability and project readiness. Nonsovereign operations will remain stable at about \$450 million per year. Knowledge will be central to ADB's operations under the CPS. A country knowledge plan provides a strategic approach for a knowledge-based program to meet the PRC's knowledge needs and share its development lessons with other ADB developing members. Following many years of high growth, the PRC has developed modern physical and economic infrastructure, achieved upper middle-income status, and emerged as the world's second-largest economy. The country announced that it had eradicated extreme poverty in November 2020. But rapid growth has also given rise to new development challenges, including social inequality, environmental degradation and pollution, a rapidly aging society, and health security concerns.

The CPS recognizes that these and other challenges need to be addressed by strengthened social and economic institutions, and will guide ADB engagement with the PRC to help them close the gaps in key institutions and steadily approach to graduation from ADB's assistance. The CPS is aligned with key government development priorities under the PRC's upcoming 14th Five-Year Plan. These include emphasis on natural resource management to combat climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem damage; low-carbon development; social inclusion in the context of population aging; and regional health security. Support for global and regional public goods will be a key area of partnership between the PRC and ADB in the coming years. At the midterm of CPS implementation, ADB will review the graduation assessment to evaluate the PRC's progress against key indices and other performance metrics at the sector and thematic level.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 03/10/2021

Data Privacy Subgroup Statement on COVID-19

We, the member economies of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Digital Economy Steering Group (DESG) Data Privacy Subgroup (DPS), recognize the importance of data in addressing the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data is critical to understanding COVID-19, anticipating and controlling its spread, and expediting the discovery and development of safe and effective treatments and vaccines. Digital technologies have played a crucial role in facilitating continued business operations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ability to collect, process, and move data across borders, which enables the effective use of digital technologies, has never been more important to the global economy. At the same time, it is also crucial to promote consumer and business trust by striking the balance between the utilization of data and the privacy of personal information, in order to draw the full potential of digital technologies in addressing the challenges inflicted by COVID-19. We recognize the need for an accessible, open, interoperable, reliable and secure environment for the use of ICTs as an essential foundation for economic growth and prosperity. As we fight the pandemic, both individually and collectively, we recall the 2020 APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade Joint Statement and the Putrajaya Vision 2040, and reaffirm our commitment to the APEC Internet and Digital Economy Roadmap and the APEC Privacy Framework. We recognize the importance of cooperation in APEC to mitigate the health and economic impact caused by COVID-19 and affirm our commitment to supporting each other in harnessing the opportunities of the digital economy and technologies for enhancing economic growth and public good while ensuring appropriate privacy protections.

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APEC Seeks to Unlock the Potential of Indigenous Economies

APEC senior officials, academia and experts are seeking to unlock the potential of Indigenous Peoples' contribution to the region's economy with better data and insights, spurring APEC's effort to foster inclusive growth that benefits all. The Asia-Pacific is home to approximately 70 percent of the world's Indigenous population, however the full potential of the community's contribution to the region's economy remains untapped. In a policy dialogue on understanding and valuing Indigenous economies in APEC held virtually earlier this month, panelists from various APEC economies discussed their experience collecting and measuring Indigenous economies, highlighting the need to increase data collection efforts and the quality of the data itself. "In Aotearoa New Zealand, Indigenous economic growth is an integral part of inclusive growth and prosperity," Nanaia Mahuta, New Zealand's

Foreign Minister said in her opening remarks at the policy dialogue. Minister Mahuta explained that in the last twenty years, New Zealand has seen the Maori economy grow from NZD 16.5 billion in 2006 to NZD 69 billion in 2019. Good data and information is crucial to better understand the concept of the Indigenous economy and its role within the wider economy. “The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for reliable and timely data to aid policymakers to understand the impact on Indigenous Peoples to deliver targeted, informed, tailored responses and also support economic resilience,” she added.

One of the main challenges for gathering data on the Indigenous economy is the varying definitions of Indigenous individuals, households and businesses across different APEC economies. “Normally an economy comprises of households, business and the government,” explained Hillmarè Schulze, Chief Economist and Director of Business and Economic Research Limited (BERL) in her presentation at the policy dialogue. “The first stage of understanding the measurement of Indigenous economies is identifying and measuring what constitutes Indigenous economic actors, meaning those who are part of the economy, which could include data on individuals, households and businesses,” Schulze added. “Once we have data on economic actors, we can then proceed to the next step which is measuring participation and contribution,” she said. Minister Mahuta stressed the importance of closer collaboration between members in advancing Indigenous economic inclusion in APEC. “This work is important to improving the lives and well-being of all Indigenous Peoples across the Asia-Pacific.” Inclusive economic growth is an important agenda item under New Zealand’s leadership of APEC this year as its member economies join, work and grow, together to build back better. APEC senior officials recognized the potential of the Indigenous economy and encouraged cooperation with respect to data gathering and sharing of best practices in measuring Indigenous economies’ contributions.

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Green Investments, Revenue Mobilization, Big Data Key to Southeast Asia’s COVID-19 Economic Recovery

Southeast Asian countries can benefit from investments in green infrastructure, digital transformation, big data, and revenue mobilization through tax reform as the region recovers from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, said Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Masatsugu Asakawa at the second Southeast Asia Development Symposium. “As countries slowly begin to emerge from the devastating health and economic impacts of the pandemic, we now stand at a critical juncture. The pandemic offers us a unique opportunity to rebuild for a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable recovery,” said Mr. Asakawa at the opening session of the

symposium. “The pandemic is presenting all of us with unprecedented challenges, and we need to forge a new path forward together, one which taps new ideas and technologies, and leverages our existing platforms for innovation and partnership.” Developing economies in Southeast Asia can benefit from action in three key policy areas, which are laid out in a series of policy briefs released by ADB today:

First, investing in environmentally sustainable development in five sectors—agriculture, oceans, urban and transport, waste management, and clean energy—could create 30 million jobs in Southeast Asia by 2030. Second, expanding the tax base, maximizing tax compliance, and simplifying the compliance process will significantly boost governments’ revenue and better position them to finance pandemic recovery. Third, by making better use of big data, countries can capitalize on the region’s digital transformation to enhance the delivery of health care, social protection, and education. The symposium, "Innovation through Collaboration: Planning for Inclusive Post-COVID-19 Recovery", is being held virtually on 17–18 March 2021. The event will explore how Southeast Asian nations can improve access to vaccines, revitalize businesses, create jobs, and harness big data and new technology to support growth. Big data refers to the science of using artificial intelligence, such as machine learning, to analyze large amounts of data for insights beyond what is captured in standard databases.

Other keynote speakers of the plenary session included Philippine Finance Secretary and ADB Governor Carlos G. Dominguez; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Executive Secretary Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana; Google Vice-President and Google.org President Jacqueline Fuller; International Vaccine Institute Director General Jerome Kim; and Bye Bye Plastic Bags and Youthtopia Voices founder Melati Wijsen. The 2-day event is bringing together more than 3,400 high-level government officials, private sector representatives, and other stakeholders from more than 100 countries.

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Digitalization and Regional Cooperation Can Spur SDG Progress Despite Pandemic

Digital transformation and renewed regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific can spur the region’s equitable, sustainable, and resilient recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and deliver progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), according to a new report. The report, Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving No Country Behind, was released today by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP). “The pandemic has provided us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make bold choices that put us on a path to green, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable recovery, in line with the ambition of the SDGs,” said ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development Bambang Susantono. “Through strong and inclusive partnerships, we must work even harder to build a healthier, safer, fairer, and more prosperous Asia and the Pacific.” The report highlights severe inequalities and vulnerabilities in the region that have amplified the impact of the pandemic, especially among the poorest, women, and socially excluded groups. It notes the risk that some parts of the region could recover faster than others, and further deepen inequality between countries.

Rapid digitalization reduced the impact of the pandemic for some people in many countries, but digital divides may perpetuate the exclusion of vulnerable groups. Policy makers and the private sector should work together to ensure that digitalization creates opportunities for all, and enables progress on the SDGs. Regional cooperation can make digital technology more affordable by enabling quality infrastructure and cross-border connectivity. The report says regional cooperation efforts should focus also on people-centered development, sustainability, and climate change, to address environmental vulnerabilities that have compounded the pandemic’s health and socioeconomic impacts. The report was launched at the 8th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. This year’s forum focused on identifying key drivers to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that align with pathways to achieve the SDGs.

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East Asia

CHINA: Premier Stresses Ensuring Sustained, Healthy Economic, Social Development

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Saturday stressed enhancing confidence, meeting challenges head-on, and ensuring sustained and healthy economic and social development. Li, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks when joining lawmakers from Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in a group deliberation on the government work report at the ongoing fourth session of the 13th National People’s Congress, the national legislature. Efforts should be made to coordinate COVID-19 response and economic and social development as domestic and international situations are still grave this year, Li said. He called for an accurate understanding of the new development stage, full application of the new development philosophy, and creation of the new development paradigm to promote high-quality development and keep the economic operation within an appropriate range. The premier stressed

efforts to deepen reform, further energize market entities, unleash potential of domestic demand, and advance high-level opening-up. He also urged actions in promoting green development, consolidating poverty alleviation results and advancing rural vitalization.

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China's Gov't Work Report Boosts Confidence in Global Economic Recovery, Say Experts

China has made significant strategic achievements in epidemic prevention and control and became the only major economy with positive growth last year, experts have said, adding that the blueprint laid out in the government work report has brought new hope for the world's economic recovery and boosted confidence in global development. Attending the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress on Friday in Beijing, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang presented the government work report on behalf of the State Council to the legislature for deliberation. Japanese economist Hidetoshi Tashiro said the Chinese government has adopted a long-term vision in formulating its development plans, especially in key areas, which is very admirable. The "two sessions" held as scheduled in 2021 "are of great importance," said Hussein Ismail, deputy editor-in-chief of the Arabic version of China Today magazine, adding that China is entering a new stage of development.

China aims to expand its gross domestic product (GDP) by over 6 percent in 2021, which shows "the determination and confidence of the Chinese government to promote sustained economic recovery to the world, and China will continue to boost the world economy," said Tursunali Kuziev, a professor at Uzbek University of Journalism and Mass Communications. "China is expressing confidence in its future and its ability to deliver improved economic outcomes for the Chinese people," said Allan Behm, director of International and Security Affairs Program at The Australia Institute. Wilson Lee Flores, a columnist for the English daily The Philippine Star, said that China's achievements in the fight against COVID-19, its reviving economic growth and its commitment to greater openness and international cooperation are positive catalysts for global recovery.

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China's Greater Opening-up to Boost Global Recovery, Experts Say

China's commitment to greater opening-up in the government work report delivered at the annual "two sessions" will serve as a catalyst for global recovery, experts have said. Attending the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 13th National People's Congress on Friday in Beijing, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang presented the government work report on behalf of the State Council to the legislature for deliberation. Commenting on the report, Yu Xiong, a professor at the Surrey Business School of the University of Surrey in Britain, said China's openness has a significant impact on the world, which can greatly support the recovery of the world economy as the ongoing pandemic continues to weigh on growth. "This can bring new hope and confidence to the world," he said. "During the pandemic, many countries could not easily recover by themselves," the professor said, stressing that the growth engines provided by other countries were vital for them to respond to the crisis during and after the pandemic.

"Foreign investors can thus expect to see significant opportunities emerging from a more open, impartial and innovative China in the coming years," he said, adding that the opportunities are not just for China, but also for the whole world. "In a world now still struggling with economic and pandemic crises, China's hard-fought victory over COVID-19, its reviving economic growth, its commitment to greater openness and international cooperation are positive catalysts for global recovery," said Wilson Lee Flores, a columnist for the English-language daily The Philippine Star. Hussein Ismail, deputy editor-in-chief of the Arabic version of China Today magazine and an Egyptian expert on Chinese affairs, noted that the Belt and Road Initiative will benefit citizens of all participating countries.

As China pledged to ensure the success of key exhibitions including the China International Import Expo, the China Import and Export Fair, and the China International Fair for Trade in Services, the government work report "reaffirms China's commitment to globalization and multilateralism," said Cavince Adhere, a China-Africa relations expert based in Kenya. By prioritizing the development of new business models such as international e-commerce, China will make more robust cross-border trade possible, creating opportunities across the world, he said. "This will further contribute to global economic recovery, poverty reduction and actualization of other development goals as codified in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals," the Kenyan expert said.

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China's E-commerce Logistics Activities Moderate in February

China's logistics activities moderated last month due to the week-long Spring Festival holiday, industry data showed. The index tracking e-commerce logistics activities stood at 108.9 points in February, down 1.4 percentage points from the

previous month, according to an industry survey jointly conducted by the China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing and e-commerce giant JD.com. Sub-indexes tracking logistics timeliness and inventory turnover rose while those tracking total business volume, cost and fulfilment rate went down in February. The survey attributed slower e-commerce logistics activity to understaffing and rising costs companies faced during the holiday. It expected demand for e-commerce logistics to rebound as epidemic situation continues to ease and Spring Festival travel rush finishes.

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China's Foreign Trade Sustains Growth Momentum in First Two Months with Exports Soaring

China's foreign trade maintained upward momentum in the first two months of 2021, with exports posting strong performance, official data showed Sunday. The country's total imports and exports of goods expanded 32.2 percent year on year to 5.44 trillion yuan (about 838.16 billion U.S. dollars) in the January-February period, according to the General Administration of Customs (GAC). The growth rate is in a sharp contrast with a virus-induced slump of 9.7 percent during the same period a year earlier. The substantial increase in foreign trade in the first two months was partly due to a low base last year, said GAC spokesperson Li Kuiwen. "Yet even compared with the same period in 2018 and 2019, China's foreign trade in the January-February period this year logged growth of about 20 percent." Notably, export growth soared to 50.1 percent while imports rose 14.5 percent in yuan terms.

The fact that people chose to stay put over the Spring Festival holiday this year contributed to China's export boom, said Tu Xinquan, a professor at the University of International Business and Economics. GAC surveys showed foreign trade companies in export-oriented provinces of Guangdong and Zhejiang managed to continue manufacturing activities during the week-long holiday as many workers followed the government's guidance to stay put to contain the spread of the virus, leading to an earlier-than-usual resumption of manufacturing sector. China's strong foreign trade data also reflected booming overseas demand for Chinese products, said Tu. The country saw double-digit growth in foreign trade volumes with major trading partners in the January-February period. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations remained China's largest trading partner during the period, with the combined trade volume rising 32.9 percent year on year.

Other major trading partners such as the European Union, the United States and Japan saw trade volumes with China surge 39.8 percent, 69.6 percent and 27.4 percent, respectively. China's foreign trade with countries along the Belt and Road amounted to 1.62 trillion yuan in the first two months, up 23.9 percent year on year.

The robust foreign trade data was in line with the Chinese economy's overall growth momentum. Official data showed the purchasing managers' index for China's manufacturing sector, a gauge measuring the vitality of manufacturing activities, remained in expansion zone for 12 consecutive months. Companies showed increasing vitality and resilience. Imports and exports by private businesses stood at 2.57 trillion yuan during the same period, rising 49.5 percent year on year and accounting for 47.2 percent of the country's total, customs data showed.

Some enterprises tended to be bullish about the outlook of foreign trade in the next few months, as they have stocked up on goods in advance, leading to increases in imports of integrated circuit, iron ore and crude oil, the GAC surveys showed. Yet, maintaining steady growth of foreign trade will still be a tough task as instabilities and uncertainties in the global market remained and the COVID-19 pandemic continued to ravage the world, the GAC cautioned. For instance, foreign trade companies in the short term need to tide over difficulties such as the price hikes of raw materials and shipping as well as the shortage of containers. Efforts need to be made to push forward high-level opening-up, improve business environment for imports and exports, and facilitate new business models such as cross-border e-commerce, the GAC said.

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Former Minister Urges Efforts to Keep Manufacturing's Share in GDP Stable

China should step up efforts to push high-quality development of its manufacturing sector and keep the sector's share in the economy stable, a former minister of industry and information technology said Sunday. Miao Wei, a national political advisor, made the remarks when delivering a speech to the second plenary meeting of the fourth session of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the top political advisory body. Promoting high-quality growth of the manufacturing sector is an "important strategic task" in China's economic development at present and for a period to come, Miao said, noting that it will take at least 30 years for the country to achieve the goal of becoming a strong nation in manufacturing. "The proportion of the manufacturing industry in GDP has declined too early and too fast, which will not only drag down the current economic growth and affect urban employment, but also bring potential safety issues and weaken China's ability to counter risks and its international competitiveness," he said.

Policymakers should pay more attention to the manufacturing sector, step up market reforms to remove institutional barriers restraining growth, scientifically allocate resources needed to promote innovation and improve education and training for

talents in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields, he said. China will prioritize the development of the real economy, upgrade the industrial base, modernize industrial chains, and keep the share of manufacturing in the economy basically stable, according to a draft outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for national economic and social development and the long-range objectives through the year 2035 submitted to the national legislature for review. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that China's secondary industry, largely consisting of the manufacturing, mining and construction sectors, accounted for 37.8 percent of the country's GDP in 2020, compared with 54.5 percent of the tertiary industry, mainly the service sector. The proportion of the secondary industry in GDP was 39 percent in 2019.

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Online Tutoring Market Booming in China: Survey

More than 87 percent of Chinese parents have signed their children up for online tutoring sessions to supplement their education, according to a recent survey from China Youth Daily. English and math have proven the most popular online courses, respectively attracting 68.7 percent and 58.5 percent of surveyed parents, said China Youth Daily on Thursday. Entertaining classes that encourage kids to pursue personal hobbies were ranked third most popular, with the Chinese language coming in fourth. A total of 1,523 parents took part in the survey. They mainly attributed the booming online tutoring market in China to the fact that the courses are immune to anti-COVID-19 measures. Online courses also spare parents the stress of taking their children to extracurricular training centers and bringing them back home after their classes, according to respondents. Most respondents (83.5 percent) expressed positivity toward the quality of online tutoring, while just 0.5 percent expressed complete disapproval. Their biggest concern was the impact of online classes on their children's eye health, with 49.3 percent of respondents citing this issue. More than 95 percent of respondents called on authorities to enhance scrutiny over online training platforms in terms of advertisement content, operation licensing and financial safety.

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E-commerce Brings Vitality to Mountainous Region

Wearing light makeup, Liang Qianjuan started a livestreaming session on her phone, telling a story about walnuts grown in her hometown and their health benefits. Within

a minute, dozens of orders for the walnuts swarmed in from her online followers. Liang is a businesswoman from Huixian County of Longnan City in northwest China's Gansu Province. As the owner of an e-commerce company, she has been a deputy to the National People's Congress (NPC), the top legislature, since 2018. "The dual roles give me a sense of accomplishment, yet with greater responsibility," said the 35-year-old. Having dropped out of school at the age of 17, Liang started up her business in 2012 and enjoyed great success, popularizing e-commerce in her remote hometown. Longnan is rich in natural resources, but local specialties such as walnuts, olive oil and pepper were once confined to the mountainous area because of the geological isolation and backward transportation.

Thanks to Liang, e-commerce has added wings to local produce, making it possible to reach customers across the nation. "Our homemade chili sauce was even shipped to Mexico," she said. E-commerce has also emerged as a pivotal means of alleviating poverty in Longnan. Statistics show that by the end of 2020, about 14,000 online stores had opened in Longnan, helping lift about 150,000 people out of poverty. The close ties Liang built with local villagers through her e-commerce venture have proved useful in her other role -- serving as an NPC deputy. Liang would pay frequent visits to local farmers after a long day's work, listen to their concerns and gather their opinions. Shi Haiping, 59, is one of the farmers she visited. During the visit, Shi express her worries about the talent drain in her village. "More and more young people would rather find jobs in big cities than stay in the village," said Shi.

"It's good for them to have more job opportunities, but it's also hollowing out the village." Liang wrote down these concerns in her notebook, reassuring the farmer that the booming e-commerce sector is attracting university graduates to rural areas. "But they still need support from the government and e-commerce companies to start up their own businesses," she added. During last year's NPC session, Liang suggested that more e-commerce training should be provided for young people. At this year's ongoing session, she continues to focus on talent cultivation in rural areas. Liang's warm personality makes her fellow villagers willing to open up to her, and she always listens to them attentively. "It's my honor to represent them, bring their voices to the NPC, and make a contribution to my hometown," she said.

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More Jobs to Spur China's Economic Growth: Premier

An expansion in employment as a result of steady economic recovery will further promote sound growth of China's economy, Premier Li Keqiang said Thursday. Employment is the foundation of people's well-being and development as well as a source of wealth, Li said at a press conference after the closing of the annual

national legislative session in Beijing. China still faces mounting pressures in boosting employment this year, as about 14 million urban people will enter the labor market, including a record 9.09 million college graduates, and over 270 million migrant workers also need job opportunities, Li said. The country will continue with the job-first policy this year and take more measures to stabilize and boost employment, the premier said. China aims to create no less than 11 million new urban jobs in 2021, Li said.

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Chinese Premier Stresses Sustainable Economic Growth

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Monday stressed efforts to consolidate the country's stable growth momentum and achieve sustainable economic development in the long term. Li made the remarks while presiding over an executive meeting of the State Council. The meeting distributed the work priorities set in this year's government work report to the relevant bodies of the State Council and local governments. China's economy continued to recover in the first two months of the year, according to the meeting, but the recovery remains uneven, with the service industry, small and micro businesses and the local economy still facing difficulties. The meeting called for realizing the objectives set in this year's government work report and keeping the country's economy running within an appropriate range. To this end, the country will closely monitor changes in the world economic situation and their impact on China, conduct an in-depth analysis of new developments and problems, make timely pre-adjustments and fine-tune policies to stabilize market expectations.

China will guard against risks and consolidate the base of its economic recovery, said the meeting. It urged efforts to ensure the implementation of its fiscal, financial and employment policies. China's macro leverage ratio should be kept generally stable, while the government leverage ratio should be lowered, the meeting said. Financial institutions should be guided to roll out measures targeting small and micro enterprises, with a view to making financing more convenient and reducing comprehensive financing costs, according to the meeting. Efforts should also be made to accelerate the allocation and use of funds, such as investment in the central budget, transfer payments, and special local government bonds to shore up weak links like compulsory education and basic medical care.

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China Confident of Maintaining Growth Momentum as Key Indicators Improve

China's economic growth gathered steam in the first two months of 2021 and the country is confident of sustaining the current momentum. Major economic indicators greatly improved in the period, with industrial output, retail sales and fixed-asset investment all surging more than 30 percent, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Monday. Retail sales of consumer goods, a major indicator of consumption growth, went up 33.8 percent year on year to exceed 6.97 trillion yuan (about 1.07 trillion U.S. dollars). The figure represents growth of 6.4-percent compared with the level in the same period of 2019, as well as annual average growth of 3.2 percent over the past two years. The value-added industrial output went up 35.1 percent year on year, and increased 16.9 percent compared with the level in the same period of 2019. The annual average growth stood at 8.1 percent over the past two years.

Fixed-asset investment surged 35 percent year on year to 4.52 trillion yuan. The figure represented a 3.5-percent increase from the same period in 2019. Investment by the private sector expanded 36.4 percent year on year to 2.62 trillion yuan. Meanwhile, the country's employment remained stable, with the surveyed urban unemployment rate standing at 5.5 percent in February, 0.7 percentage points lower than the same period last year. NBS spokesperson Liu Aihua attributed the sharp year-on-year increase in major economic indicators to the sustained economic recovery as well as a lower basis of comparison in the same period last year, when the economy was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Industrial production picked up, as many Chinese people opted to stay put during the Spring Festival holiday, which fell in February this year, in response to the government's call to avoid unnecessary gatherings as part of anti-epidemic measures, according to Liu.

Many enterprises and projects have reported more working days than usual, as local governments rolled out policies to offer economic support for employees who worked during the holiday instead of returning to their hometown, she told a press conference. Looking ahead, Liu said the foundations and conditions exist for China's economy to maintain the recovery momentum through the year. The country's confidence in dealing with various risks and challenges and sustaining economic recovery lies in its solid material foundation, a complete industrial system, a vast market and abundant human resources, said Liu. China aims to expand its gross domestic product (GDP) by over 6 percent year on year in 2021, according to this year's government work report.

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E-commerce Cargo Route Links Manila with China's Jiangsu

A special direct air route for e-commerce cargo has recently been launched to connect east China's Jiangsu Province with the Philippines. The first flight carried some 50,000 goods worth a total of 5 million yuan (about 769,000 U.S. dollars) from the Chinese city of Changzhou to Manila on Monday. More than 200 flights via the route are planned for this year to realize exports with a total value of 650 million yuan, according to Changzhou's cross-border e-commerce supervision authorities. As one of the country's major exporters, Jiangsu saw a record 4.45 trillion yuan of foreign trade in goods last year, ranking second nationwide.

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China's Service Outsourcing Market Reports Strong Momentum in First Two Months

China's service outsourcing industry reported strong momentum in the first two months of 2021, data from the Ministry of Commerce showed on Thursday. Chinese businesses inked service outsourcing contracts worth a total of 171.57 billion yuan (about 26.45 billion U.S. dollars) during the period, representing year-on-year growth of 72.3 percent from 2020 and 24.2 percent from 2019, the data showed. Of the total, offshore service outsourcing contracts reached 87.57 billion yuan in value, rising 43.4 percent from a year earlier. The executed contract value of offshore service outsourcing with the Belt and Road Initiative partner countries reached 11.99 billion yuan, surging 85.2 percent from a year earlier, according to the data. The executed contract value of foreign-funded enterprises in offshore service outsourcing skyrocketed 127.7 percent from 2020 to reach 28.97 billion yuan in the first two months, accounting for 45.9 percent of China's total offshore service outsourcing business. Outsourcing is the business practice of hiring an external party to perform services and make goods, tasks traditionally undertaken by a company's employees. In China, service outsourcing is typically divided into three sub-sectors: information technology outsourcing, business process outsourcing, and knowledge process outsourcing.

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Xi Prescribes Solutions for Healthy Development of China's Platform Economy

The ninth meeting of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs, chaired by President Xi Jinping on Monday, analyzed the pros and cons of the country's platform economy, stressing the need to promote its healthy development from the strategic height of fostering new advantages in national competitiveness. The high-profile meeting emphasized the strategic role of the platform economy in fostering national competitiveness and made a clear-cut judgment on how to promote its healthy development, heralding new development opportunities for the sector. Addressing the meeting, Xi, also head of the committee, said the development of China's platform economy is now at a critical stage and it is necessary to focus on the long-term goals and tackle the needs of current development at the same time.

Industrial regulators such as the National Development and Reform Commission, the People's Bank of China and the State Administration of Market Regulation tabled reports at the meeting, which marked the latest policymaking development involving the platform economy. With its business closely related to people's lives, China's platform economy has grown to over 2.39 trillion U.S. dollars as of early April in 2020, according to statistics from the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. Digital marketplace firms each with over 1 billion U.S. dollars market value in China had increased to 193 by the end of 2019. By then, the total market value of online marketplaces had grown nearly 200 percent to 2.35 trillion U.S. dollars from 2014.

STRATEGIC HEIGHT

"Reviewing the sector's development from a strategic height means the policy orientation of encouraging and supporting the development of the sector will not change, nor will relevant policies be weakened," said Fang Aiqing, deputy director of the economic committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee. "This helps to unify the understanding of the sector's development from all walks of life and enables platform economy to secure faster, more stable and better development," he added. According to Zhang Yansheng, chief researcher at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, healthy development of online marketplaces will in turn help advance the country's economic transformation toward better quality, higher efficiency and stronger impetus. The platform economy's roles mainly lie in its ability to make resource allocation across the country more efficient, promote faster and more rigorous transformation in the spheres of informatization, digitalization and smart technologies, smooth the circulation of the national economy and enhance and refine national governance, the meeting noted.

BETTER SUPERVISION

However, problems and risks involving the sector have also caught the attention of policymakers and regulatory authorities. Some large online marketplaces have done too much in tracking and collecting their users' digital footprints to push ads touting

excessive consumption to those with fragile credit standing and thus lured them into the traps of unsecured consumer loans, said Dong Ximiao, a part-time researcher with the Institute for Financial Studies, Fudan University. "Internet platforms improve the availability of financial products but often ignore their affordability, which could cause financial risks to pile up," he added. Other latent risks ranging from data monopoly to deliberately circumventing regulation also trigger concerns. As current regulation is sector-specific, there exist certain regulatory gaps and loopholes. Supervision against cross-market, cross-sector and cross-domain financial risks needs to be strengthened, Dong said.

The meeting made it clear that all financial activities involving platform enterprises must be put under financial supervision to rectify the situation, while regulators need to consolidate their oversight capability under an optimized supervision framework. It also reiterated the need to promote fair competition, oppose monopoly and prevent the disorderly expansion of capital as well as the need to strengthen the protection of the rights of all market entities involved in the platform economy and safeguard users' rights and interests in data and privacy. The meeting had pointed out the direction for the healthy development of the platform economy, which was pursuing development with regulation optimized side by side, Zhang Yansheng said. Another takeaway of the meeting, as analysts noted, is that the platform economy has been tasked with a mission to make contributions to high-quality economic development and improve the quality of life as the country ushers in its 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025).

In this regard, industrial internet platforms are encouraged to facilitate the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries and foster the development of advanced manufacturing, while platform enterprises in the consumer sector will be supported to tap the country's consumption power and provide more quality products and services, the meeting noted. The meeting also emphasized the need to boost opening-up and cooperation, foster a dynamic and innovative institutional environment, and strengthen international technical exchanges and research collaboration. "More should be done to improve the weak links, create an environment for innovation, resolve prominent problems, and promote the regulated, healthy and sustainable development of the platform economy," Xi said.

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China Strives for Quality, Efficiency in Economic Growth: Premier Li

Premier Li Keqiang said Monday that China strives for higher quality and efficiency in stable economic growth, which requires sufficient employment, continued growth in income, and environmental improvements. Li met representatives of overseas

attendees to the China Development Forum 2021 via video link in Beijing. When answering a question about China's growth rate and quality, Li said setting the 2021 growth target of over 6 percent is for consolidating the foundation for economic recovery and growth. It also aligns with what the country can accomplish next year and the year after. The growth target is not low, and China may achieve even faster growth in its delivery, he said, adding that China focuses more on guiding expectations. "While maintaining stable economic growth, China must strive to improve quality and efficiency.

It requires relatively sufficient employment, continued growth in income, and sustained improvement of the ecological environment to optimize the economic structure and improve labor productivity," the premier said. He said China still faces mounting pressures in boosting employment this year, as about 14 million urban people will enter the labor market, while the country aims to create no less than 11 million new urban jobs. "We need to seek a balance between growth, income, and employment, and we cannot pursue economic growth based on high energy consumption and heavy pollution," Li said. He added efforts should be made to increase the activity and efficiency of market players, continue to promote urbanization, unleash massive domestic demand potential, and enhance the role of consumption in stimulating the economy.

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Cross-border E-commerce to Drive China's Trade Growth in 2021

Zhao Jing, a regional sales manager at a Guangzhou-based pigment manufacturer, said she had barely felt a pinch from the pandemic as her company doubled its export value on cross-border e-commerce platforms in 2020, as it has done for the past three years. Zhao speaks for many Chinese exporters. Last year, the country's foreign trade from cross-border e-commerce hiked a whopping 31.1 percent to 1.69 trillion yuan (about 259 billion U.S. dollars) as the pandemic hit store foot traffic. Cross-border e-commerce has become an increasingly important pillar of China's foreign trade, with over 10,000 traditional foreign trade firms going online for the first time last year. China has vowed to develop new forms and models of trade, such as cross-border e-commerce, and support enterprises in diversifying their markets overseas, according to this year's government work report unveiled earlier this month.

Experts and industry insiders say that cross-border e-commerce will continue to propel China's foreign trade growth due to less-tapped market potential and more policy incentives in the years to come. Global demand for made-in-China products has skyrocketed since the pandemic, said Zheng Changqing, general manager of

eBay's cross-border commerce division in China. European and American consumers have grown markedly more accustomed to shopping online and more open to new brands, he said. Industry data shows that global e-commerce sales in 2020 climbed 16.5 percent year on year to 3.91 trillion U.S. dollars, accounting for 16.8 percent of overall retail value. "Sales by Chinese exporters took off on eBay, which revealed vast market opportunities and the strength of China's supply chains," said Zheng, who believes that China also has a competitive edge in human resources and logistics.

China saw its total imports and exports of goods expand 1.9 percent year on year to 32.16 trillion yuan in 2020. It was the world's only major economy to register positive growth last year. To gain more traction with global consumers, Chinese exporters have expanded their portfolios over the years to feature products with higher added-value and unique designs, particularly outdoor supplies, sports equipment and home decor, according to an Amazon.com report last August. Start-ups with tech-intensive, eye-opening products are more involved in the game. CVGC, a Wuhan-based optic firm, developed a stick-on microscope lens for cellphones two years ago that became a bestseller on Amazon.com. The company's exports amounted to around 10 million yuan last year, accounting for half of its revenue. Going forward, experts agree that with improved cross-border e-commerce services, more companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises from China and abroad, will play bigger roles in the global market.

Cross-border e-commerce in China is undergoing a shift from simply doing business online to building a comprehensive service system that covers product design, e-commerce platforms, logistics, financing and more, said Wang Jian, a professor of international trade and economics at the University of International Business and Economics. A full-fledged service system will help bring Chinese firms closer to local markets worldwide and create a win-win situation for everyone, said Wang. Government support will continue to take effect in 2021. China is establishing 46 new, comprehensive cross-border e-commerce pilot zones and simplifying customs clearance procedures. Though more than 1,800 overseas warehouses are already serving as infrastructure for trade, the country is encouraging companies to build more. Trade pacts like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership are also expected to further clear the way for e-commerce trade between member economies.

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Chinese Premier Stresses Strengthening Economic Recovery Momentum, Market Vitality

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has underscored efforts to consolidate the momentum of economic recovery, stimulate the vitality of market entities and enhance the endogenous engines for growth. Li made the remarks while presiding over a symposium on the economic situation via video link attended by local government officials Thursday. The Chinese economy has got off to a good start this year, said Li, noting that the actual annual growth might be higher than the target of over 6 percent set for 2021. Largely due to the lower comparison base of the previous year, some economic indicators have witnessed rapid year-on-year growth, but from a period-on-period viewpoint, the economy has generally been running steady, Li noted. The premier called for consolidating economic fundamentals and avoiding large fluctuations to keep economic development sound and steady. Underlining the challenges posed by the complicated international situation and domestic issues, such as employment stress and slow recovery in some industries, Li stressed keeping the economy running within a reasonable range to lay a solid foundation for sustainable and sound development.

He said that policy support for securing employment, people's livelihoods and the operations of market entities will not weaken, and financial services for the real economy shall be strengthened. Meanwhile, more work should be done to boost employment and people's incomes, while keeping consumer prices stable and improving the ecological environment, which are the major basic tasks for keeping the economy running within a reasonable range, he said. Government policies should focus on helping market entities get back on their feet, while reform and opening-up should be advanced to inspire their vitality and enhance the endogenous engines for growth, Li said, urging local authorities to make all-out efforts in improving the business environment. He also demanded solid work to prepare for the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, enhance opening-up and safeguard the stability of industrial and supply chains while seeking further cooperation. State Councilor Xiao Jie attended the symposium.

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JAPAN: Smart City Offers Residents Quake, Privacy Protection

Digital tools launched in a Japanese smart city that can send disaster alerts to safeguard residents are part of an optional technology push aiming to overcome social and economic challenges, while also allaying privacy fears. The smartphone alerts were introduced in Aizuwakamatsu city, Fukushima Prefecture, last week by consultancy firm Accenture, which has worked with researchers to revitalise the city using technology since a devastating earthquake in 2011. Aizuwakamatsu residents can choose to subscribe to the digital services - a markedly different approach to the

mandatory initiatives in other smart cities that have been held back by data privacy and surveillance concerns, said Shojiro Nakamura, co-lead of Accenture Innovation Center Fukushima. "Opt-in is the fundamental approach in our smart city initiatives," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Most smart city data derives from citizens' activities - energy usage, healthcare, etc - and the owner of the data is the citizen, even if it is held by companies or clinics. So it is critical that citizens have control over the degree to which their data is accessible," he added.

Other digital tools offered to residents of Aizuwakamatsu are in the areas of mobility, education, healthcare, and energy consumption. Citizens can opt in and share any degree of information they are comfortable with. Cities around the world are racing to embrace technology in a bid to improve urban life by collecting data to address problems such as traffic gridlock, crime and waste management. Global spending on smart cities initiatives was estimated to hit nearly \$124 billion last year, according to the International Data Corporation (IDC), in a study released before worldwide lockdowns to contain the coronavirus pandemic. Japan and Latin America were forecast to see the fastest growth in spending on smart cities. In Japan, smart cities became an area of focus after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, with local governments partnering with businesses and researchers to tackle social and economic issues including an ageing population and the impacts of climate change, with technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). Appliance makers Panasonic and Hitachi, and messaging app LINE are among other companies working on smart cities in Japan.

Toyota Motor Corp broke ground last month on a new smart city near Tokyo, that the automaker said will be a "living laboratory" to test and develop autonomous vehicles, robotics, personal mobility and AI for residents. "Building a complete city from the ground up, even on a small scale like this, is a unique opportunity to develop future technologies," Toyota president Akio Toyoda said at the ground-breaking ceremony at the site, a former auto factory. In China too, Alibaba Group Holdings, Tencent Holdings and Baidu are among companies participating in the government-led planning of more than 100 smart cities. But while these initiatives have the potential to solve problems, discussions about smart cities in Japan are too "technology-oriented" and "efficiency-oriented", said Yoshinori Hiroi, a professor at Kyoto University. "More human elements should be taken into account," said Hiroi, an advisor at Smart City Institute Japan, citing improvements to the walkability of cities. "We need more diverse agents such as general citizens and nonprofits to be involved in the development of smart cities in Japan," he added.

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Mori Building Develops 'Hills Network' for Urban Digital

Transformation

Mori Building on Tuesday announced its development of the "Hills Network" digital platform, which will fully utilize advanced technologies for urban digital transformation (DX) to enhance the convenience, quality and joy of living in, working in and visiting popular Hills complexes and other properties managed by Mori Building in central Tokyo. The platform will begin launching sequentially at various Hills communities from April 5. Beginning with Ark Hills in 1986, Mori Building has introduced a number of advanced urban complexes integrated with diverse functions to elevate the quality of urban life in Tokyo. Moreover, with the launch of Roppongi Hills in 2003, Mori Building introduced the concept of town management to foster a stronger sense of community by closely connecting each Hills complex with its residents, tenants and visitors. Now, the Hills Network will enhance such connections for the accelerated provision of urban lifestyles featuring increasingly convenient and responsive services and functions that Mori Building has continued to innovate and upgrade over the years.

By accessing the Hills Network digital platform via the Hills app with Hills IDs, users will be able to learn about and use various services available at Hills properties such as Ark Hills, Omotesando Hills, Roppongi Hills and others. The system will personalize and optimize services by utilizing data on user attributes, usage of specific properties and facilities, and location. In addition, for the upcoming Toranomon-Azabudai and Toranomon Hills Area projects, the Hills Network will deploy various cutting-edge technologies to integrate facilities, services and user data to realize an unprecedentedly seamless Hills life, in which the whole complex becomes a workplace/living place. Furthermore, other Hills properties eventually will be linked seamlessly together in the new system to create an advanced cultural and economic zone in Tokyo.

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COVID-19 Cuts Jobs, Boosts Stocks, Widening Economic Gap in Japan

The coronavirus pandemic has brought significant economic impacts in Japan, with the widening gap between the rich and the poor being a prime example. The pandemic has cost many jobs, especially in the dining and travel industries, while stock and other asset markets are booming on the back of global monetary easing. At Isetan department store in Tokyo's Shinjuku district, which posts the highest sales of all department stores in Japan, a jewelry buyer calls strong sales last summer "mysterious." "Despite a lack of exuberance at the store, we experienced very high sales," the buyer said, recalling the situation after the government lifted the country's

first state of emergency over COVID-19 last May. Main customers were the store's wealthy regulars and the so-called "new rich," including young managers of information technology firms and YouTubers who increased their earnings by taking advantage of the pandemic.

Such customers apparently had already chosen what to shop during the stay-at-home period and just wanted a final check of shapes and weights of the goods at the store. Jewelry worth several million yen was sold on the fly, the buyer said. Sales of luxury import cars priced over 10 million yen and higher were also brisk. Sales totaled 22,712 units in 2020, surpassing year-earlier levels. "Buying things whenever they want is what we call rich people," said a person involved in the auto industry. "Situations around them do not necessarily affect them." Massive stimulus and monetary easing measures by Japan, the United States, Europe and elsewhere to bolster pandemic-hit economies have sharply boosted asset prices. Such measures briefly lifted the 225-issue Nikkei Stock Average above the 30,000 line for the first time in over 30 years. Cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin also surged, prompting some market participants to be alert against potential asset-inflated bubbles. Nomura Research Institute estimates wealthy households -- which hold net financial assets of more than 100 million yen -- totaled 1.33 million as of 2019.

Hiroyuki Miyamoto, a partner and chief consultant at the Tokyo-based think tank, said the company is likely to make a similar estimate for 2020 because higher stock prices offset the economic impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the pandemic took a toll on nonregular workers, many of whom work in service sectors. "I couldn't have imagined a year ago that I would come to such a place," a 49-year-old unemployed man said in December as he received food from an aid group at a park in Tokyo's Ikebukuro district. The man lost his job at a restaurant where he had worked for years. The number of regular employees rose 360,000 in 2020 from a year earlier, but that of nonregular workers dropped 750,000, according to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications data. The result indicated that companies adjusted employment by cutting nonregular staff to survive the pandemic-hit economy. Ryutaro Kono, chief economist at BNP Paribas Securities (Japan) Ltd, said the unstable nonregular employment is one of the reasons for the slow economic recovery in recent years. If consumer spending becomes sluggish as nonregular workers cut expenditures on fears of being laid off in recessions, "The recovery of the Japanese economy will continue to be lackluster," Kono warned.

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SOUTH KOREA: Internet Use Jumps in 2020 amid Pandemic

The average amount of time South Koreans spent using the internet reached over 20

hours per week last year, 2.7 hours more than the time spent the previous year amid the stay-at-home trend driven by the pandemic, a report showed Wednesday. South Koreans used the internet 20.1 hours a week on average last year, compared with 17.4 hours the previous year and 16.5 hours in 2018, according to the report from the Ministry of Science and ICT that surveyed 60,000 people over the age of 3. The report found that 79.1 percent of respondents used the internet on the go last year, down 20.7 percentage points from the previous year, highlighting the reduced outdoor activity amid the pandemic. Use of online services from social media to banking, however, grew overall as the stay-at-home economy boomed last year. The average time internet users spent on social media stood at 65.8 minutes a week last year, compared with 53.9 minutes the previous year.

The online shopping usage rate reached 69.9 percent last year, up 5.8 percentage points from 2019, while the average monthly online shopping use rose to five times from 3.3 times over the same period. The average cost of online shopping purchases also increased to reach 166,780 won (US\$148) last year, up 52,617 won from the previous year. The online banking usage rate rose to 76.5 percent last year from 64.9 percent in 2019, with that of the 60s age group rising sharply to 50.5 percent from 26.9 percent over the same period. The report also found that ownership of laptops and tablet PCs soared last year as the country opted to introduce more remote education services as preventative measures against the virus. The share of 10- to 19-year-olds with tablet PCs soared 23.8 percentage points on-year to 35.7 percent last year, while those with laptops in the same age group rose 14.1 percentage points to 39.8 percent.

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Korea to Extend Online Religious Activity Support amid Pandemic

South Korea's ICT ministry said Wednesday it will extend support for online religious activities until next month due to continued COVID-19 infections across the country. The Ministry of Science and ICT first introduced support for such activities in April last year, such as providing network data and technical assistance to religious organizations, to discourage in-person meetings to prevent COVID-19 infections. Under the support measures, the ministry also plans to provide 100 gigabytes of data for small merchants over two months and cover data costs for online education content for low-income household students. South Korea's daily new coronavirus cases reached over 400 on Wednesday as the country's vaccination campaign picked up steam amid sporadic cluster infections.

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Parental Control Apps for Smartphones Could Breach Children's Rights Watchdog

The state human rights watchdog has recommended the state telecommunications regulator come up with measures to protect children's rights from being violated by applications that allow parents to control their children's mobile activities. The National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK) last week dismissed two teenage plaintiffs' petitions filed respectively against several app development companies and the Korea Communications Commission (KCC). They said private firms are not subject to the state watchdog's investigation by law and that there also is a limitation in holding the government responsible for the human rights infringements. The NHRCK, however, concluded that the apps could excessively restrict children's basic rights, such as the right to privacy and informational self-determination.

It advised the KCC to inspect the apps and take measures to stop them from infringing on children's rights, if needed, pointing out that the agency put in insufficient efforts as it regarded the matter as a mere conflict between parents and kids. According to the watchdog's investigation, the apps not only filtered harmful content but also authorized parents to cap screen time, track down locations, check text messages of their kids and limit news or information related to sports and travel. It said these functions allow parents to monitor children's personal lives and limit certain communications activities by them. "This can excessively restrict children's fundamental rights, including the right to privacy and freedom of information, mandated under the Constitution and international human rights norms." On a developer's claim that the parental right to educate their kids can justify certain restrictions on their rights, the NHRCK noted that children's happiness and interest should be prioritized.

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Over 20 Pct of Smartphone Users at Risk of Overdependence Survey

More than 20 percent of South Korean smartphone users are at risk of being overly dependent on the devices, a survey showed Wednesday. The Ministry of Science and ICT said 23.3 percent of smartphone users in the country were at risk last year, up 3.3 percentage points from the previous year, citing a survey carried out by the National Information Society Agency. The survey, which interviewed 15,000 people across the country on their smartphone usage, found that 19.3 percent were at

potential risk, while 4 percent were at high risk of being too reliant on the mobile devices. The survey characterized users who have weak control over their smartphone usage and start to have problems with health and daily life as being at potential risk, while grouping those that have lost control and experience severe problems as being at high risk. The majority of the respondents, 61 percent, said individuals were responsible for solving their dependency problem on the devices, followed by companies at 21.8 percent and the government at 17.2 percent. South Korea ranked as the top country in terms of smartphone ownership among adults at 95 percent, according to the U.S.-based Pew Research Center.

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S. Korea Hosts Online Health Care Trade Fair, Seeks to Expand Exports

South Korea kicked off a virtual trade exhibition for health care businesses Wednesday to beef up the exports of biohealth products amid the new coronavirus pandemic. Around 500 overseas buyers plan to participate in the Global Medical Equipment Plaza Online (GMEP) 2021, which doubled from the previous year's event, according to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA). The virtual trade meeting will run through March 26. Some 200 South Korean health care companies will join the event, showcasing a wide array of goods ranging from digital health care products to dental equipment. "The number of participating buyers increased as the brand reputation of South Korea's medical products has improved amid the COVID-19 pandemic," KOTRA said in a statement. "The pandemic gave an opportunity for South Korea's medical instrument industry to leap a step forward." Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea's exports of biohealth products shot up a whopping 54.4 percent on-year in 2020, reaching US\$14 billion, led mostly by the high demand for COVID-19 test kits. Of the volume, exports of medical instruments shot up 37.9 percent. It marked the first time for the biohealth segment to be included in the country's top 10 export goods.

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South-East Asia

CAMBODIA: Launching Online Child Protection Campaign

Cambodia on Wednesday launched an online child protection campaign called "Kit Kou Kon", aiming at raising awareness of the danger of digital platforms on children

and providing useful tips to parents about preventing and solving related problems. Minister of Post and Telecommunications Chea Vandeth said research showed that 26 percent of the Internet users in Cambodia have experienced online harassment and a majority of them are children. He said online harassment towards children is increasing rapidly around the world, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, children have changed their study environment and have used the Internet more often. "In order to ensure that Internet connectivity and usage are safe and beneficial to Cambodian children, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPTC) has launched the campaign to provide useful tips and information to parents, guardians, teachers and the public about protecting children from online risks," he said in a video clip marking the campaign launching. Vandeth said that people can follow Kit Kou Kon's and MPTC's Facebook pages to receive actionable advice on how to protect their children when they go online. The Southeast Asian nation has seen a rapid rise in Internet users in recent years.

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THAILAND: Economic Stimulus Campaigns Benefit 32.4 Million People

An estimated 32.4 million Thais throughout the country have benefited from the government's economic stimulus campaigns, a senior official said Monday. The 32.4 million Thais have been eligible recipients of varied economic stimulus campaigns, which have seen a total of 147.8 billion baht (about 4.79 billion U.S. dollars) of cash be injected into the economy since last month, according to the Ministry of Finance's spokeswoman Kulaya Tantitemit. Those campaigns include the "We Win" campaign, "We Travel Together" campaign and the co-payment campaign under which the government has offered to provide partial payment for goods or services purchased by eligible recipients. She said an estimated 1.2 million retail stores, food stalls, restaurants, service shops and public transport firms have joined in these campaigns.

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VIETNAM: Lâm Đồng Province Seeks to Promote Its Online Marketplace

Lâm Đồng authorities have earmarked VNĐ7 billion (US\$305,000) over the next five years to promote the province's e-commerce platform. By 2025 they want 70 per cent of all purchases by locals to be made through the website, issue electronic invoices and have 50 per cent of communes, wards and townships to have e-commerce businesses. The province also wants 80 per cent of local businesses'

websites selling products. The money earmarked is for propaganda, training to improve e-commerce skills, helping businesses adopt e-commerce, and improve the quality of businesses' management. The province Department of Science and Technology will help businesses develop e-commerce by organising training courses, co-ordinating with large e-commerce platforms such as Lazada to promote local products, encourage businesses to sell on lazada.vn, build websites for businesses for free, develop an online brand for the province's key products, according to the People's Committee. The Department of Industry and Trade plans to build an e-commerce platform to sell the province's specialities to help local businesses. According to the Department of Industry and Trade, the provincial administration seeks to create favourable conditions for e-commerce, and it is paying off with the number of businesses selling online increasing all the time.

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Nearly 60 Million Subscribers Only Use Voice and Message Services Nationwide

Nearly 60 million mobile phone subscribers in Việt Nam are using only voice and message services, reported the Việt Nam Telecommunications Authority (VNTA) under the Ministry of Information and Communications. VNTA statistics revealed that Việt Nam had 132,52 million mobile phone subscriptions by December last year. Of which, mobile subscribers only using voice and message services were 58.68 million and those using data are 73.8 million. With nearly 60 million subscribers using traditional telecommunications services, this is clearly a fertile market for telecom businesses to develop subscribers using data services. In fact, not all subscribers using these traditional telecommunications services are using feature phones (an earlier generation of mobile phones), but most use smartphones but do not use data. This can be demonstrated through VNTA statistics that the number of feature phone users was only 12 million in October last year.

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HÀ NỘI Targets to Be in the "Top 5" in Digital Transformation Nationwide by 2025

The Hà Nội Department of Information and Communication has just drafted and submitted the city's digital transformation programme by 2025. The programme was submitted to the municipal people's committee. The programme aims to both develop a digital government, economy, society and form digital technology businesses that can go global. Specifically, Hà Nội aims to be in the group of five leading localities in the country in digital transformation, information technology, and

indices of competitiveness, innovation, and cybersecurity by 2025. It will be in the leading group in Southeast Asia in data science and artificial intelligence (AI). Regarding the development of digital government, its goal is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of operations with 100 per cent of administrative procedures eligible to be provided online at level 4, which can be performed on many different means of access, including mobile devices. Regarding digital economic development, the city will improve the competitiveness of the economy with its digital economy proportion in GRDP at about 30 per cent. The labour productivity growth rate will be 7 - 7.5 per cent. Hà Nội also targets to complete the city's innovative start-up ecosystem. Regarding digital social development, it will strive to narrow the digital gap by covering broadband infrastructure to over 80 per cent of households, 100 per cent of communes, wards and towns; universalising 4G/5G mobile network services and smartphones; and make broadband available at a low cost to everyone. The proportion of the population with an electronic payment account is targeted to pass 50 per cent. To achieve the above goals, the city will deploy a number of tasks and solutions, focusing on three main pillars including: digital government, digital economy and digital society.

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HCM City to Urbanise 5 Suburban Districts by 2030

HCM City should develop a master plan to urbanise its five outlying districts of Hóc Môn, Bình Chánh, Nhà Bè, Hóc Môn, and Cần Giờ by 2030, a former legislative chief has said. Nguyễn Thị Quyết Tâm, ex-chairwoman of the city People's Council, said even after those new five urban districts are formed, it was still important to promote the application of science and technology in agriculture in the urban districts. Võ Phan Lê Nguyễn, vice chairman of the Nhà Bè People's Committee, said in recent years his district has significantly urbanised, and it would strive to increase average incomes and improve healthcare and infrastructure to become a full-fledged urban district. It plans to become an urban district by 2025, he said. Priority would be given to improving Lê Văn Lương, Nguyễn Hữu Thọ and Huỳnh Tấn Phát streets to improve the traffic situation in the district, he added. It targets development of "green and sustainable" urban areas, and strict management of lands along rivers, canals and other water bodies. The Department of Natural Resources and Environment has issued a land-use plan for the next five years for the district to effectively use its land resources.

Nhà Bè will speed up construction of the Nhơn Đức - Phước Kiển new urban area and housing on Nguyễn Hữu Thọ and Nguyễn Bình streets, and develop "green" tourism in Long Thới and Nhơn Đức communes, according to Nguyễn. Dương Hồng Thắng, chairman of the Hóc Môn People's Committee, said the road infrastructure remains poor in his suburban district. Many roads even lack drainage, medical

services are overloaded and schools and cultural establishments have not kept up with urban requirements, he said. The district is soliciting investment in roads in 23 areas covering more than 2,600 hectares, mostly farm lands, and there are already 20 interested investors, he said. Hóc Môn too plans to develop a roadmap to become an urban, modern district by 2030. Lê Minh Dũng, secretary of the Cần Giờ Party Committee, said with its mangrove eco-systems and world biosphere reserve status the district aims to develop urban eco-tourism. “Cần Giờ also has an ambitious goal of becoming a city within HCM City by 2030.” Dr. Võ Kim Cương, former deputy chief architect of the city, said whether they live in suburban or urban districts people are most concerned about what would benefit them in terms of living standards.

Lê Hoàng Châu, chairman of the HCM City Real Estate Association, said transformation of the five suburban districts into urban districts would benefit all (the State, businesses and residents). For instance, the change in land-use purpose from agricultural to non-agricultural would bring higher investment efficiency as one hectare would bring the city revenues of VNĐ55 million a year in the case of the former but up to VNĐ400 billion (US\$17.21 million) in the case of the latter. The Department of Home Affairs has submitted a plan to turn the five suburban districts into urban districts in 2021-30 to the municipal People’s Committee. Hóc Môn, Bình Chánh and Nhà Bè will become urban districts (or cities within HCM City) by 2025 and Củ Chi and Cần Giờ by 2030. They have seen rapid urbanisation in recent years, with the creation of many new urban areas, construction of expressways and improved lifestyles. Hóc Môn spreads over more than 109 square kilometres and has a population of nearly 463,000. The corresponding figures are 252sq.km and 711,000 for Bình Chánh, 100sq.km and 208,000 for Nhà Bè, nearly 435sq.km and 468,000 for Củ Chi and 704sq.km and 73,000 for Cần Giờ.

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South Asia

INDIA: NIUA’s Plan to Aid Digitisation of ULBs Under NUDM

Under the Centre’s National Urban Development Mission (NUDM), the urban local bodies (ULBs) in the country are en-route to the digitisation of services and the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) has devised an action plan to aid civic bodies to digitise their operations. Work on the plan has also commenced. With an aim to create citizen-centric governance to fulfil the vision “minimum government, maximum governance” of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs launched the NUDM on February 23, 2021. Therefore, to strengthen urban governance, provide people service digitally for their convenience, and induce transparency in the system, the ULBs across the countries are adopting technology

interventions to operate digitally. As per NIUA's plan, all the 44,000 ULBs across the country will go digital in the coming four years i.e by 2024. Addressing the launch of the NUDM on February 23, NIUA from its official Twitter handle tweeted, "Centre for Digital Governance @NIUA_India will anchor the National Urban Digital Mission (NUDM) launched today." Centre for Digital Governance @NIUA_India will anchor the National Urban Digital Mission (NUDM) launched today.#TransformingUrbanIndia <https://t.co/vW2KfwKvi8>. As reported by Jagran, NIUA will operate NUDM that will create a shared digital infrastructure for urban India focussing on public, process and platform. These three pillars of the digital infra will provide overall support to cities and towns. According to NIUA's plan, all the civic bodies shall adopt a digital platform and shall extend some services completely online. Moreover, some arrangements have to be implemented the same everywhere. Therefore, the civic bodies will be able to watch each other's working and simultaneously can be monitored by the Centre. On NUDM, the Smart Cities Mission tweeted, "NUDM will improve ease of living for citizens by creating an ecosystem that delivers accessible, inclusive, efficient & citizen-centric governance, catering to the needs of India's 4400 towns and cities."

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Banaras Tops Smart City Rankings Released by MoHUA

Banaras leads the way in Smart City rankings of 100 smart cities recently released by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) on January 15, 2021. The holy city of Banaras won over cities like Bhopal, Surat and Ahmedabad who are known to be the top scorers in the annual rankings. Also, Nagpur, the city that secured the top rank March 2020 rankings and 28th rank in May 2020 rankings dropped to 44th rank in the latest list released. Banaras tops Smart City rankingsThe smart city rankings came as good news for Banaras as the city scored 57.61 in the previous rankings of 2019 and had to satisfy with 14th rank. However, this time it secured the first rank with a score of 85.25. The smart city rankings released by the ministry were based on a few parameters like the number of projects taken up in a city, the amount of funds utilised, progress of the projects, etc.

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Namami Gange Transforming the Urban Riverscape

Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals recognizes the importance of ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water. It encompasses a range of values for water, with sub-goals focused on water quality, equitable access, and efficient use by various sectors, improved governance, and the protection and

restoration of water-related ecosystems, including rivers. Water flows through and connects all SDGs and is a fundamental prerequisite to the achievement of all 17 SDGs, write Rajiv Ranjan Mishra, Director General, National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India, and Shivani Saxena, Environment Planner, NMCG. For Indian cities which continue to expand and develop creating an additional load for water extraction and pollution on urban rivers, there is a specific need to address the impact of the development activities within the city on the river as well as the impact of the river on the city. The dynamism of a river shifts and emerges, both with time and flow. Embodying the social, cultural and economic conditions that influence the urban landscape, rivers act as products and producers of urban growth. In the case of Ganga, it symbolizes interdependency, continuity and permanence within its urban environments, spatially anchoring and physically linking the urban fabric. Therefore, effective management of this limited resource is only possible through an integrated approach to urban planning and a paradigm shift in understanding the interactions between a city and a river.

The approach necessitates an understanding of what it is to be a river. While enumerating the many functions, meanings and identities a river hold, a simple and tangible understanding could be a 'River sustains a Habitat', a habitat that nurtures and enriches biodiversity. A healthy river will in turn support a healthy water system inter-alia supporting a healthy liveable city. Rivers have had a long history of anthropogenic interventions and their impacts have been seen across continents. The major contributors of these impacts are 'humans'. A never before seen vista by nature during the COVID crisis, drove home the truth that when left alone, our rivers will heal themselves, biodiversity will return and waters will run clean. The urban drivers of river health, though well documented, have not found much traction with city planners, a view reinforced when planning their growth, cities often do not consider rivers as a part of their urban contexts. Any river flowing through a city cannot be looked at in isolation, without highlighting its regional and local linkages. The increase in the pollution load of Ganga is linked with growing urbanization where 10 big cities are contributing almost 60 per cent in terms of municipal wastewater load. Tributaries such as Yamuna, Kali, Hindon, are carrying their fair share of pollution loads as well. Namami Gange, an integrated river rejuvenation program recognizes these urban drivers of change and has been working towards negating these impacts through supportive and transformative activities. It is further felt that for cooperative federalism, cities themselves should acknowledge river as part of their boundary and evolve integrated river management as part of their city planning processes.

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Utilities Adopting Digital & Minimising Manual

With the COVID crisis affecting the economic activities drastically, digital became the only resort for government and private industries to keep operations alive. Besides aiding continuation, technology has also enabled the government and private sectors to be resilient. On this note, R Lakshmanan, Executive Director, Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) Ltd. addressed the Digital Governance Cloud and AI Summit. Speaking on business continuity during the lockdown, he said, “As REC is concerned, in the past 10-12 years, we have invested a lot in strengthening e-governance and digitisation and that paid us during these challenging times, especially in the last week of the previous financial year.” REC was operating through the e-office in lockdown. On the business side also, “We were able to keep up with the disbursing targets of the previous financial year. Now we are heading to digitise all our semi-automated or manual processes to minimise the manual processing, he added. Further, he said, “Smart metering is a key transformation”. Such an intervention will bring changes in the way utilities are doing business and in the consumer experience as well. So, it is essential that utilities must embark on smart metering for their own financial viability and sustainability as well as giving the end consumer better service delivery. However, there are a few key aspects to it: firstly, as it is a complete change in business it is very critical that the utilities understand the complete dynamics of it as it involves various IT aspects, communication aspects, primary metering related aspects and more, wherein the utilities need to partner with firms to ultimately deliver the solution.

Secondly, the competency skill set which is available in the discom is again an important aspect. Apart from this, it involves a lot of capex. So in that space, models which are evolving like hybrid models look very practical. Such models take care of the risk of private partners as well as some amount like 25-30 per cent of the project cost is put in as the upfront from the utilities’ side and the balance 70 per cent is spread out, he told. Concluding his address, Lakshmanan said, “We are working with rural areas in Bihar. The State has released a policy that it will shift to complete prepaid metering over the next three years. So, we are working with EESL in Bihar to implement solutions. So, it is very important that utilities move in this direction as this minimises manual functioning. Initially, it will be more of data collection but once we have enough data then AI solutions can be implemented to forecast the demands and improve service delivery.”

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Digitisation Aiding NTPC’s Operations

As a massive preventive move to safeguard the citizens from the COVID pandemic, the Government of India imposed a nationwide lockdown. To overcome the challenges raised by this, the government and the private organisations took the digital route. Expressing his views on the significance of technology, Manish Kumar

Srivastava, Executive Director – IT, NTPC Ltd., addressed the Digital Governance Cloud and AI Summit. He opened his address with a brief on NTPC's business continuity during the lockdowns and cited an example of a one of a kind challenge during the lockdown. He said that once PM Modi asked us to switch off the lights for a few minutes. It was a big challenge for the NTPC as the power supply of almost 1/3rd of the nation had to be dropped all of a sudden and then had to be ramped up within a few minutes. NTPC met the challenge successfully and there was no disruption of power across the country. Speaking on the shift to digital, Srivastava said, "We did the shift from the physical office to the virtual space within a day. On March 23rd evening, the PM announced the lockdown and on 24th our virtual workspace was up and running. We have adopted Microsoft's MS 365 Azure platform and thereafter we have performed all the meetings without any disruptions. We have also conducted interviews online. Also, we have conducted over 1000 e-learning programmes during this period." He added that earlier when the education programmes were conducted physically, the number of attendees was 50 to 60. However, after adopting the online platform, the number of attendees varied from 150 to 950. Apart from this, "As we do a lot of procurement and we have numerous vendors, we have developed a vendor procurement portal through which a vendor from anywhere can easily submit his invoice along with the documents and the entire procurement process was automated and made online. The system not only provided transparency but vendors were also satisfied," he said.

On adoption of technology, he said, "NTPC is a progressive and productive organisation and we have a glorious operation record for the past 45 years. We adopted ERP solutions in 2006 and our digital transformation journey started way back in 2016... Since our core work is the generation of power which is operating the various power plants, there is a lot of requirement which has come from the OT side. So, we have adopted advanced processing systems which have made our working more agile, efficient and flexible." Summing up his address, Srivastava said, "The cost has reduced due to the paperless office and also payments are being made online. More importantly, it boosted motivation in the workforce. And, we are much closer to each other than we were in the physical world."

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Transforming Villages Through 'Model Gaon' in NCR

'Model Gaon', an innovative concept to make the village self-sufficient, is becoming popular around the National Capital Region (NCR). Volunteers of Model Gaon are educating the villagers to become self-reliant in Noida and nearby regions by roaming around in the villages, writes Puja Banerjee of Elets News Network (ENN). Model Gaon is the brainchild of a senior IAS officer of Uttar Pradesh, Dr. Heera Lal, currently serving as the Additional Mission Director of National Health Mission, to

create awareness about transforming villages into model gaon. The aim of this mission is to reach more than one lakh villages in Uttar Pradesh and create awareness about inclusive and sustainable development of villages that is financially viable, socially equitable and eco- friendly. Dr. Heera Lal said, “Under the mission, 25 point agenda is being worked out which includes encouraging villagers about cleanliness, increasing education rate, promoting yoga, suggesting ways to increase income, building solar villages, connecting everyone with fast internet, making villages self-reliant, preventing malnutrition and growing plantations.” The concept was started from the state capital and is gaining momentum. Villagers around the National Capital Region (NCR) have found it interesting and worth implementing. Explaining how volunteers are working in NCR, Saurabh Lall, Chief Executive Officer of Model Gaon says, “Our team is trying to involve villagers in defining and understanding local issues of development and creating a village manifesto, which will help in setting an agenda for development in villages. They will then empower rural communities by identifying and developing socially active changemakers, who will lead the transformation of their villages into model gaon.” The road to self-reliant India passes through the villages, so it is very important to develop the villages. This dream can be realised by turning agriculture into agribusiness and developing villages. Model Gaon is aiming to establish an agenda of development in villages and villagers through a village manifesto and to develop changemakers who will work towards all round development of villages.

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Sri Lankan-born Creately Lauded by Top Software Reviewer G2

Sri Lanka’s own Creately was recently tapped as a top-five contender in the List of Best ANZ Sellers for 2021 by industry benchmark site G2. Additionally, G2 also tapped Creately as a Leader in the Diagramming segment. The world’s largest software marketplace and review platform, G2.com features over 100,000 reviews and over five million visitors. G2’s Best Software Awards rank the world’s best software companies and products based on authentic, timely reviews from real users. A visualization and collaborative software company headquartered in Melbourne, Australia, which runs most of its research and development and operations out of Sri Lanka, Creately was founded by a small team led by Chandika Jayasundara in 2008. Since then, Creately has grown to become a leader in the online diagramming and visual collaboration segment. The platform currently has over 5 million users worldwide and is used by some of the biggest organizations across the world, including Netflix, Amazon, NASA, Disney and many more. What started out as a small team in Colombo has now transformed into a global operation with distributed teams in Sri Lanka, Australia, UK, India and Singapore.

Creately competes with tech behemoths like Microsoft in the online visualization

space and has established itself as a major player in the market that is constantly innovating and disrupting the industry. Creately's novel approach to collaboration seeks to change the way organizations work together, putting communicating through visuals at the heart of everything they do. "We are thrilled to be recognized by G2 and others for our growth and innovation in this space. As we move forward, we focus on moving up the value chain in providing even more value for our customers who use Creately as their central visual command center for projects they run. Even now, most organizations suffer from miscommunication and collaboration blocks that we can easily unlock with visual tools like Creately. We are super excited for what's next," stated Chandika Jayasundara, the CEO of Creately in response to this award. 2020 has been transformational for Creately, with the sudden increase in remote teams brought about by the remote working challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Creately saw an opportunity to significantly improve the experience of distributed teams and decided to reimagine how teams communicate and collaborate with each other.

Envisioning this new challenge, in July 2020, Creately introduced several major new features to their platform including, in-app video conferencing, live mouse tracking and synced change previews to enable teams to succeed in the new reality of working from home, especially in terms of real-time collaboration. This resulted in an increasing number of users choosing Creately as their default app for team collaboration. Consequently, the platform was recognized by G2 as the Momentum Leader for Fall 2020, High Performer- Mid Market, High Performer-Enterprise, and Leader- Fall, and most recently was listed among the top 5 of the G2's List of Best Selling Products in the Australia & New Zealand region for 2020. This is a significant achievement for Creately, which compares its growing brand influence in the same group of Billion Dollar valued companies Atlassian, Canva, Xero and Sublime (the other awardees in the list).

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Web Development Trends That Will Dominate in 2021

As consumer demands change with the times, the digital pathways we embark on also evolve to accommodate these shifting needs. Web development has been at the forefront of establishing powerful digital presences that make many experiences possible at one's fingertips. From shopping to research, much is possible. Therefore, it makes sense to understand the technologies powering the web, and the tools developers use to make it all happen. In other words, here are some web development trends that are bound to gain momentum this year, owing to heightened popularity, streamlined systems, or a combination of both.

JavaScript

Trends may come and go, but there's one trend that is bound to be a constant in the world of web development – and that is the use of JavaScript. Well established in the web development arena, its extensive libraries, frameworks and developer communities are a go-to source for building the most impressive web applications the world has today. Add to this its aptitude to work harmoniously with HTML and CSS (which are equally important for functional web applications) and you have a programming language that is bound to remain an everlasting trend.

TypeScript

Based on JavaScript, TypeScript is an up and coming framework that allows for cleaner, error-free code. Focusing on static type definitions for objects, TypeScript enables validation checks that are more accurate, as opposed to using JavaScript alone. With many projects both enterprise and open-source jumping into the TypeScript bandwagon, this framework is a promising one for web development in 2021.

Svelte

Although not high in terms of demand as that of React and Angular, Svelte is still a highly valuable point of interest in the web development space of 2021. This is because Svelte compiles codes during build time, resulting in apps that load much faster and offer increased performance. With a stable release being made only in early January of 2021, Svelte may have a long way to go – but it has already made a solid start.

Deno

An all new server-side scripting tool which also supports TypeScript, Deno offers an environment that forgoes the many security vulnerabilities otherwise found in Node.js. Making the best of some latest JavaScript features, Deno also offers enhanced debugging tools for maintaining high performance and functionality. As web development trends change with shifting consumer demands, the technologies powering the same include a combination of long-standing tools, as well as new contenders. As developers enhance their skills to build stronger code that facilitates optimal performance, it's important to stay abreast of changing economic climates as well. While programming languages such as JavaScript are evergreen in the world of web development, others such as TypeScript are also gaining popularity for a variety of good reasons. This also applies to frameworks and server-side scripting, as Svelte and Deno respectively are gradually increasing in popularity among the developers who have begun to rely on these newfound services.

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eCommerce in 2021: Trends That Are Bound to Gain Traction This

Year

From online marketplaces to AI, numerous trends are shaping today's eCommerce market. But what your business needs to prosper in the online dimension ultimately boils down to individual requirements – and any gaps that need to be filled. Here are a few such trends, that are sure to gain momentum as the year progresses. Online marketplaces. Sure, a regular online web presence is essential to establish your brand and its range of products and services. But a shopping cart website alone isn't going to suffice, if you want to ensure a timely and streamlined customer journey. A lot of work needs to happen behind the scenes, and these include numerous key tasks ranging from inventory management, to shipping and returns. In other words, your eCommerce site is only the means and the platform for users to reach and purchase your products online. A seamless supply chain that's combined with your customer's overall journey is essential to deliver impressionable customer experience – there's none of this in the absence of even one component. Therefore, a great platform to reach out to is online marketplaces, such as Amazon and eBay. This is especially beneficial for newer, smaller brands that have less bandwidth in terms of inventory and logistics – since online marketplaces offer reliable shipping and return systems that merchants will automatically qualify for, once they start selling. Self-service. After 2020, every customer touchpoint is being pushed to become autonomous, wherever possible – and for obvious reasons. Although self-service kiosks were long since a trend, the technologies running these have been significantly upgraded to enhance the level of accuracy and relevance provided, in addition to autonomous customer care. AI-powered chatbots are one such development, which are now embedded into existing customer service systems to assist customers with common quandaries – together with maximum speed and accuracy.

While AI is used to power self-service in the customer care department, it also helps propel personalized recommendations – without users ever having to search for what they need, since their items of choice approach them instead. Data analytics. Understanding what your customers like and dislike isn't necessarily a newfound trend, but it's an important one that will always stay in vogue. The data analytics market is a hotbed for advancements as well as constant buzz from technology experts and business leaders alike. From organizing big data to implementing data science, no stone is left unturned in the mission to provide answers for some of our most pressing questions. If you haven't already, consider integrating a business intelligence solution for your business operations – and one that connects companywide to reveal perceptive insights. Not only reserved for corporate giants, today's BI solutions are available for smaller players too, and can be scaled up or down as required. More and more people are relying on eCommerce to meet their daily needs, especially after what transpired in 2020. Those who weren't fond of online shopping have also jumped into the bandwagon, and given the height of convenience, the trends influencing these consumer habits are only bound to

continue.

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Sri Lanka Can Achieve a Greener and More Prosperous Future

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

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

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

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

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Innovation Center Talks on Activities to Support Local Startup Ecosystem

The Innovation Center of Azerbaijan, together with other organizations, is conducting various events to support them in bringing the number of countrywide start-up projects to 500, a source in the center told Trend on Mar.3. According to the source, the center annually holds more than 10 hackathons (forums for developers, during which specialists from different areas of software development (programmers, designers, managers) jointly solve any problem for a while) on various directions, the purpose of which is to support local startups in the development of their projects. "For our part, we provide startups with financial assistance, organize meetings with local and foreign investors. Despite the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are trying to continue our support in the online format," the center's experts said. Besides, the source noted that in order to bring the number of start-up projects in Azerbaijan to 500, the 500 Startup company will provide all the necessary opportunities to the participants - from creating the idea to financing the project and bringing it to foreign markets. "In addition to increasing start-up projects, Azerbaijan needs the development of specialists in this industry. In our country, the number of start-up projects doesn't exceed even a hundred, and therefore, in addition to creating projects, we need to raise specialists in this industry," the experts stressed.

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Azerbaijani Nar Receives More Online Requests Via Digital Channels

During the coronavirus-related quarantine period, Azerbaijan's Nar mobile operator served its subscribers through various communication channels in an enhanced mode, Nar Director General Gunnar Pahnke said, Trend reports. Pahnke made the remark at a press conference. "In 2020, the operator's 777 call center received more than 2.5 million requests and the average request processing time was 20 seconds," Pahnke said. He noted that 85 percent of subscribers who applied to the call center highly appreciated the quality of the services provided. "The online chat service of the Nar+ application, which allows performing many operations related to the account, has received more than 195,000 requests," Pahnke added. Nar director-general stressed that the number of online calls through the operator's digital channels has increased for the first time across all networks, ranging from 100 to 400 percent. More than 205,000 subscribers' requests were promptly resolved through the official pages of the mobile operator in social networks.

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Azerbaijan's Nar Eyes to Expand IT Infrastructure in Liberated Lands

To create a high-quality IT infrastructure, the Azerbaijani Nar mobile operator installed mobile stations in the territories of Azerbaijan liberated from Armenian occupation. This was announced at a press conference of the mobile operator dedicated to the results of 2020, Trend reports. Nar's technical department had already started planning the placement of equipment in these territories last year. The mobile operator has completed all design and planning work on the expansion of the Nar network. Currently, Nar network is already available in some territories. The mobile operator is presently working on planning the expansion of its infrastructure on these lands. It also plans a budget and works towards attracting investments.

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Setting of New 4G Stations Increases Number of Nar Users in Azerbaijani Regions

Azerbaijan's Nar mobile operator company continued to improve its network infrastructure in 2020, the company's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Gunnar Pahnke said at a press conference on the results of last year, Trend reports on Mar.12. According to Pahnke, in total, over 150 new base stations were installed during the

year. Thus, the number of 4G stations increased to 2,700, and 3G base stations - to 2,800. "Currently, about 84 percent of all Internet on the network is provided through base stations with LTE-A technology," said Pahnke. He stressed that due to the setting of the new base stations in the country, the number of 4G users has grown by 33 percent. "A significant growth in this indicator (52 percent) accounted for the share of users in the regions," added the CEO. 'Azerfon' LLC (Nar trademark) started its operations on March 21, 2007, and within a short period of time became one of the leading companies of the telecommunications and mobile communication industry of Azerbaijan. Being the first operator in the country to introduce the 3G technology, Nar provides the customers with a wide 4G network coverage. With a large network of over 8700 base stations, Nar provides more than 2.3 million subscribers with the highest quality services.

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Azerbaijani Ministry to Support IT Companies in Development of Digital Transformation

Azerbaijani Minister of Transport, Communications and High Technologies Rashad Nabiyev met with representatives of big companies in the country, involved in the sector of information and communication technologies (ICT), the ministry told Trend. During the meeting the parties discussed the development trends of the ICT sector in Azerbaijan. The minister also considered the proposals of the companies' management to create conditions for modern digital development. The possible problems and the ways to solve them were discussed during the meeting. "During the meeting, the parties also talked about the prospects for the development of digital transformation and innovative initiatives, the role and support of the ministry in this activity," the ministry added. "Moreover, the role of the ICT sector during the pandemic and the future development of this sector were discussed." "The heads of the companies spoke in detail about the problems of the sector and thanked the minister for the attention to this sphere," the ministry said.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 03/15/2021

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Azerbaijan Names Number of State Entities to Pass to G-Cloud System in 2021

Azerbaijan's AzInTelecom LLC will hold meetings with 36 Azerbaijani state entities, for which the transition to G-Cloud is envisaged, in 2021, a source in the company told Trend on Mar.18. According to the source, in order to ensure the execution of the Azerbaijani President's decree 'On creation of government cloud' (G-Cloud) and the decree of the Cabinet of Ministers 'On the concept of government cloud' and 'On

measures for providing 'cloud' services, a plan for the transition to a 'government cloud' was approved. "The meetings will be aimed at discussing regulatory, financial, technical, and other issues related to the transition plan," added the source. On March 16-18, 2021, within the above decree, meetings were held with representatives of the ministries of the defense industry and justice.

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TURKMENISTAN: Interested in Developing Projects with IOM, Using Digital Technologies

Turkmenistan is interested in developing joint projects with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) using digital technologies, both at the national and regional levels, Trend reports with reference to Turkmenistan's State News Agency. During an online meeting with an IOM representative, Turkmen officials said the country is ready to develop cooperation with the IOM, including in the field of orderly and safe labor migration. The online meeting was held between Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov and IOM Regional Coordinator for Migration for Central Asia, Head of IOM Missions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan Zeynal Hajiyev. The parties discussed a plan of joint activities for the current year in such areas as countering human trafficking and assistance to migrants, as well as technical cooperation and border management. The results of joint activities for the past 2020 were also discussed, and priority areas of cooperation for the coming period were outlined. As earlier IOM told Trend, Turkmenistan takes substantial measures to plan and deploy assistance to migrants.

"Countering risks of irregular migration and combatting trafficking in persons is the subject of the two NAPs on Countertrafficking. One of them was successfully implemented and the second one is in the progress. These plans focus on the creation of Turkmenistan the national referral and assistance mechanisms to support the victims of human trafficking," IOM had said. "Importantly, under the NAPs the parties cooperated to provide direct material and reintegration assistance to victims of trafficking and ensure preventive measures conducting information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration around the country and supporting operation two counter-trafficking/migration hotlines," said IOM. Recently Turkmenistan adopted Socio-Economic Response Plan to the Acute Disease Pandemic that includes migrants as one of the vulnerable groups that are susceptible to the consequences of the pandemic and resulting economic downturn, according to IOM. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and following the discontinuation of the commercial air flights, Turkmenistan organized a series of return flights to assist its stranded population to get back home. Special quarantine zones for the returnees were organized that aimed at the prevention of spreading the disease inside the country, said the organization. IOM said that last year IOM and MFA cooperated to

provide monetary assistance to a number of Turkmenistan's students that could not return home as the result of COVID-19. This was one of the examples of successful cooperation that provided targeted assistance to the real migrants affected by the pandemic.

From <https://en.trend.az/> 03/03/2021

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Sub-4% Jobless Rate Not Inconceivable

Reserve Bank of Australia governor Philip Lowe believes an unemployment rate below four per cent is not inconceivable, but it's a long way off. The recovery in employment has been "V-shaped" with a welcome decline in the jobless rate to 6.4 per cent. "Job vacancies, job ads and hiring intentions remain strong," Dr Lowe told the Australian Financial Review Business Summit in Sydney on Wednesday. "This suggests that the unemployment rate will continue to trend lower, although this trend could be temporarily interrupted when JobKeeper comes to an end later this month." He said the unemployment rate needed to be below five per cent to drive wages growth higher. "How low below five is hard to tell and I certainly hope, and it's not inconceivable, we could sustain an unemployment rate in Australia starting with a three," he said in answer to a question. "We are a long way from that."

He said Australian will learn lessons from other countries that are likely to get there before Australia. However, he said the Australian economy's recovery has been materially better than expected. The economy expanded by 3.1 per cent in the December quarter after a 3.4 per cent increase in the previous three months. "They reflect the success that Australia has had on the health front, the very large fiscal and monetary policy support, and the flexibility of Australians in getting on with their lives and businesses," Dr Lowe said. "As a result, we are now within striking distance of recovering the pre-pandemic level of output." Dr Lowe noted the recent action in global bond markets has interest rate increases priced in Australia as early as late next year and again in 2023.

"This is not an expectation we share," he said, reiterating that he does not expect to lift the cash rate from its record low 0.1 per cent until 2024 and when inflation is predicted to be sustainably within the two to three per cent target. Wages growth also needs to materially higher. "I also want to emphasise that the monetary stimulus is not just about achieving an inflation rate of two-point-something," he said. "It is just as much about achieving the maximum possible sustainable level of employment in Australia. "Unemployment is a major economic and social problem and the (RBA) board places a high priority on a return to full employment." He said a full recovery of the economy requires a further lift in business investment to boost productivity and

provide a firm basis for stronger growth and wages. The governor said low interest rates were one of the factors contributing to the rise in housing prices. "I would like to reiterate that the RBA does not target housing prices, nor would it make sense to do so," he said. "There are various tools, other than higher interest rates, to address these concerns, leaving monetary policy to maintain its strong focus on the recovery in the economy, jobs and wages."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/10/2021

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Another Drop in Jobless Rate Expected

Economists are expecting more good news on the jobs market this week with a further decline in the unemployment rate. But it will remain way above what is deemed to be full employment and far from a level to satisfy the Reserve Bank. Economists expect Thursday's labour force report for February will show another 30,000 people joined the workforce in the month, bringing the jobless rate down to 6.3 per cent from 6.4 per cent in January. This compares with the spike to 7.5 per cent last July during the depths of the recession and a pre-pandemic rate of 5.1 per cent a year ago. Addressing a conference last week, Reserve Bank governor Philip Lowe said strong job advertising and vacancies suggest unemployment will continue to trend lower. However, he warned this trend could be temporarily interrupted when the JobKeeper wage subsidy ends this month.

Commonwealth Bank economists expect the winding back of JobKeeper could see 100,000 people lose their job. ANZ economists expect the rate of improvement in unemployment will be more gradual from here, reaching 5.8 per cent by the end of 2021 and five per cent by the end of 2022. Dr Lowe said the unemployment rate needed to be below five per cent to drive wages growth, and in turn inflation. He said it was certainly possible that full-employment would now mean a jobless rate in the low 4s and was not inconceivable that a rate starting with three was sustainable. Unemployment briefly hit four per cent twice in 2008 just before the global financial crisis erupted. Dr Lowe reiterated the central bank intends to keep the cash rate at a record low 0.1 per cent until inflation is sustainably back in the two to three per cent target range, something he doesn't expect to occur until 2024.

He may return to these topics when he opens the Melbourne Business Analytics Conference on Monday. His colleague, assistant governor for financial markets Christopher Kent, will address an Australian Finance Industry Association forum on Wednesday. The central bank will also release the minutes of its March 2 board meeting on Tuesday and when the Australian Bureau of Statistics will issue weekly payroll jobs figures and capital city house prices for the December quarter. Meanwhile, Australian shares look set for a soft opening on Monday after Wall Street finished mixed with tech stocks suffering a renewed hit. The local market had posted

its best week in over a month on Friday with the S&P/ASX200 index having finished 0.8 per cent up at 6766.8. However, Australia share futures subsequently eased three points to 6767. On Wall Street, the Dow Jones Industrial Index did strike its fifth consecutive record high as investors bought shares in anticipation of a strong recovery in the US economy. The Dow rose 0.9 per cent to 32,778.64 and the S&P 500 gained 0.1 per cent to 3,943.34, but the Nasdaq Composite dropped 0.6 per cent to end at 13,319.87.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/15/2021

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Clean Energy to Solve Grid Security: Study

Clean energy and battery technology are capable of providing grid security that has traditionally been the role of fossil fuels, a new study says. The research from The Australia Institute has "surprised" energy policy lead Dan Cass who says it proves coal power is not the linchpin as it was once argued to be. "Clearly, batteries will be the most important technology keeping the grid secure as coal fired power stations retire," he said. "The last refuge of the coal lobby has been that coal power is vital to keep the grid secure and this study shows that is not the case." For an energy grid to function securely, it needs to keep frequency and voltage within safe limits, the study outlines. Historically this has been the role of coal, gas and hydro power stations, and it suggests new technologies can provide 'fast frequency response' and voltage control to keep the grid secure.

Mr Cass said he expected the study to show clean technology was capable but would be expensive "like solar was 10 years ago". "You're always looking into the future and then you realise the future has already arrived ... batteries are already here doing frequency control services, and cheaper than coal and gas every did," he said. Key findings in the report show batteries and demand response provided more than a third of all frequency control markets in the last quarter of 2020, despite comprising just 0.5 per cent of the grid's generation capacity. It states EnergyAustralia's newly announced 350 MW battery is likely to be able to provide at least three times the inertia capacity of the closing 1,480 MW Yallourn coal power station. As well as addressing the technical challenges of grid security and reliability, Mr Cass hoped the economic argument for cheap clean power would help overcome political hurdles.

"I'm hopeful that even in political parties where there's some resistance to change, they'll see the case is so compelling that it is now time to redesign the grid for the emerging technologies," he said. The research was written by leading energy economist Professor Bruce Mountain and battery expert Dr Steven Percy from the Victorian Energy Policy Centre. "Renewables already create the cheapest electricity in the market and the last leg the fossil fuel industry had to stand on was the security

services they have historically provided," Professor Mountain said. "Now we can see that even those services are being delivered in a more reliable and affordable way by renewable energy and that trend will only accelerate in the future." A discussion paper by Mr Cass summarises the findings and implications for the NEM redesign project, which state energy ministers are due to debate in June 2021. "Coal power stations are closing and being replaced by clean energy but there is no national plan for replacing the security services that are provided by coal," he said. The research was commissioned to assist the Energy Security Board's redesign of the NEM.

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/28/2021

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Health Union Pushes Labor on Public Jobs

The Health Workers Union has threatened legal action after its push to force a future Labor government to rule out funding private health providers was crushed. The right-faction union attempted to derail the ALP's special platform conference with a last-minute injunction following complaints its numbers should be increased. HWU secretary Diana Asmar ramped up her threats at the online meeting of delegates on Tuesday, reserving her right to challenge any decision made in court. "This is not a proper, constitutional national conference," she said. Health spokesman and left-faction heavyweight Mark Butler won overwhelming support to delete controversial parts of the HWU motion. The initial motion noted private health providers should not be subsidised or supported.

"With a health system that depends so clearly on private general practitioners, private clinicians, in part private hospitals and private health insurers, I simply can't support a statement like that," Mr Butler told the conference on Tuesday. The HWU also wanted a future Labor government to not award contracts in private health without guaranteeing the pay, conditions and jobs of public workers. "Why can't we say yes we believe in our public system, we will protect it, we will not sell it to the highest bidder, we will not sell out our public health workers," Ms Asmar said. Mr Butler also opposed part of the motion about contracting in state and territory hospitals. But he encouraged the union to continue its campaign on that issue through Labor's state branches. The federal frontbencher's amendment made a clear commitment to public provision as a central pillar of health policy. Mr Butler was supported 352 votes to 22.

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NEW ZEALAND: Fund Looks to Future Proof Kiwi Recovery

Conservation Minister Kiri Allan is welcoming a new initiative encouraging

philanthropic contributions to save our national icon, the kiwi. Speaking at the launch of the Kiwis for kiwi Endowment Fund, which aims to raise \$20m over the next five years to support kiwi conservation, she said the taonga species faces multiple pressures. “Kiwi populations are declining at a steady rate of two per cent a year and cover only a fraction of their former range; we want to flip that around to a two per cent increase. “Loss of habitat, introduced predators, and increasingly, the impacts of climate change are taking their toll. Right now, only six per cent of chicks in the wild survive to adulthood. “Fortunately, we have turned a corner toward restoring kiwi to their former range so that one day we’ll see kiwi in our backyards.

“We have a Kiwi Recovery Plan with the ambitious goal of 100,000 kiwi by 2030, Government has committed \$19.7 million of Jobs for Nature funding towards restoration projects, and Kiwis for kiwi are working closely with iwi and hāpu, community groups, private landowners and businesses so that kiwi go from endangered to widespread. “The Kiwis for kiwi Endowment Fund will allow philanthropists to contribute directly to ensure all species of kiwi are abundant for our tamariki and mokopuna. “The endowment fund will help grow important kiwi restoration programmes as we all continue to work to secure the future of our national icon,” Kiri Allan said. Former Prime Ministers Sir John Key and Helen Clark are joint patrons of the fund. Background About the Kiwis for kiwi Endowment Fund The Kiwis for kiwi Endowment Fund allows philanthropists who are passionate about the survival and longevity of our national icon to contribute to help save the kiwi in powerful and purposeful way.

Kiwis for kiwi is aiming to raise a base fund of \$20m over the next five years which will enable them to maintain their support of kiwi conservation efforts and create momentum for future growth of the kiwi population. Sir John Key and Helen Clark have chosen to support this initiative because they believe that if all New Zealanders work together, we can save our national icon for future generations. For more information about the fund and how to donate to it, visit www.endowmentfund.kiwi. About Kiwis for kiwi Kiwis for kiwi is the national kiwi charity that, in partnership with the Department of Conservation, works alongside community-, iwi- and hāpu-led kiwi conservation projects all over New Zealand to protect the kiwi population and take our national icon from endangered to everywhere. For more information, visit www.kiwisforkiwi.org.

Kiwi facts We have just under 65,000 kiwi in New Zealand. Only a quarter of wild kiwi live in safe habitat protected by predator control. Kiwi are still declining nationally, as most populations are unprotected from predators. Stoats are responsible for most kiwi chick deaths on the mainland Without predator control, only 6% of chicks survive to adulthood. With adequate management, this can increase up to 60%. Adult kiwi can have an average lifespan of 30-40 years, but dogs and ferrets can reduce that to 12-13 years. Kiwi currently stand a much better chance of survival in areas where predators are controlled or absent. Where work is being done to protect kiwi, the

numbers are increasing. There are well over 100 community-led and iwi-led kiwi conservation projects in New Zealand, with the momentum continuing to grow. Combined they protect over 200,000ha of kiwi habitat (at last estimate). \$19.7 million of Jobs for Nature funding is being invested in kiwi conservation activities. The funding will enable the scaling up of community kiwi restoration projects and create more predator-free land for kiwi.

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5、 Public Finance

Asia-Pacific

OECD Annual Inflation Picks Up to 1.5% in January 2021 While Euro Area Records Sharp Increase to 0.9%

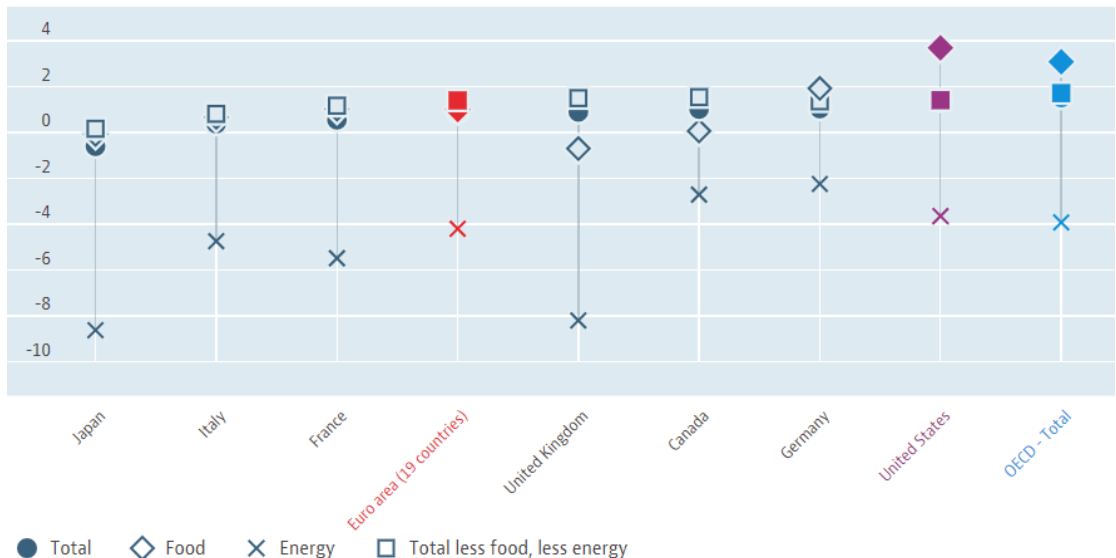
3 Mar 2021 - Annual inflation in the OECD area picked up to 1.5% in January 2021, compared with 1.2% in December 2020. Following a rebound between December and January, the annual decline in energy prices was less pronounced in January (minus 3.9%) than in December (minus 6.5%), while food price inflation slowed slightly to 3.1%, compared with 3.2% in December. OECD annual inflation excluding food and energy, also increased slightly, to 1.7% in January, compared with 1.6% in December.

Consumer prices, selected areas

January 2021, percentage change on the same period of the previous year, %

Inflation (CPI)

Total / Food / Energy / Total less food, less energy, Annual growth rate (%), Jan 2021



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World Bank Bond Expands Support to COVID-19 Resilience Through the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development or IBRD) has issued a US\$100 million 5-year bond which both supports IBRD’s ongoing sustainable development and COVID-19 activities and adds a new feature to support similar efforts by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). As countries confront the economic challenges of the pandemic, which has affected millions of children worldwide, the issuance will channel an amount equivalent to half of the total proceeds, US\$50 million, to UNICEF. This frontloading of financing to UNICEF will support its pandemic response programs for children around the world over the 5-year period. “This World Bank bond serves as an example of how the private sector can share financial risks to achieve positive development impact,” said David Malpass, World Bank Group President. He added, “We are grateful to our investors for joining this effort and demonstrating how investors can participate in the global response to COVID-19, through this unique opportunity to scale up resources available to UNICEF to expand its programs. The bond also spotlights impact investor support for World Bank Sustainable Development Bonds and the potential for finding new ways to collaborate for impact.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated deep inequalities within and across countries worldwide,” said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director. “Keeping children at the heart of recovery efforts and focusing on innovative partnerships will enable us to reimagine children’s futures and secure more equitable societies.” “Making real headway in alleviating social challenges requires new ways of doing things. We’re excited to innovate in the financial space and our institutional and private clients have shown overwhelming support for investments that can further their social missions,” said Jim O’Donnell, Head of Citi Global Wealth.

	Summary Terms and Conditions
Note	CAR 129
Issuer	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (“IBRD”)
Size (Aggregate Nominal Amount)	US\$100 million
Trade Date	February 25, 2021
Settlement	March 4, 2021

Date	
Scheduled Maturity Date	March 4, 2026
Issue Price	100%
Bond Coupon	1.291% paid semi-annually from and including September 4, 2021 up to and including the Maturity Date
IBRD Portion	Amount equal to 50% of the Aggregate Nominal Amount
UNICEF Portion	Amount equal to 50% of the Aggregate Nominal Amount
Receipt Condition	IBRD's obligations to pay any amounts in respect to UNICEF is conditional upon IBRD having received equivalent amounts from UNICEF.
Payment Condition	Each payment obligation of UNICEF will be conditioned on and limited to the amount of the UNICEF Donation from private individuals in 18 target countries. If the condition precedent is not satisfied in respect of any payment, UNICEF's payment obligation will be reduced by such amount necessary for the condition precedent to be satisfied in respect of the relevant payment.
ISIN	US45906M2M29
Registrar and Transfer Agent	Citibank, N.A., London Branch

From <https://www.worldbank.org/> 03/04/2021

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Smart Cities Market Worth \$545.7 Billion by 2027

According to a new market research report titled, "Smart Cities Market by Application (Smart Utilities, Smart Transportation, Water Management, Waste Management, Smart Healthcare, Smart Lighting, Smart Education), Component (Hardware, Software, and Services), and Geography- Global Forecast to 2027", published by Meticulous Research®, the smart cities market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 22.9% from 2019 to 2027 to reach \$545.7 billion by 2027. A smart city is an intellectually connected city that uses various emerging technologies such as IoT, AI,

and data analytics to collect and analyze utilization data and use insights gained to manage assets, resources, and services efficiently. Over the years, smart city technologies have become a common part of the urban population. It involves innovative solutions to make life more efficient, controllable, economical, productive, integrated, and sustainable. Thus, smart cities are expanding mainly due to the rising need for smart living. The growing government initiatives for urbanization management, the emergence of artificial intelligence, and the growing need for resource management for sustainable development are the key factors driving the growth of the smart cities market. However, significant initial investment requirements and the COVID-19-induced global economic downturn are expected to pose serious challenges to the smart cities market's growth.

Government initiatives for managing the rising urban population to drive market growth

Managing the ever-increasing urban population is one of the most pressing issues for governments around the world. Today, over 4 billion people, or more than 50% of the global population, live in cities. Globally, the urban population is expected to reach 68.4% by 2030. With a growing urban population, government and private sector organizations worldwide are working towards innovative solutions for systematic and sustainable growth. Smart communication technologies like ICT, IoT, AI, and Big Data are being applied to reduce the crime rate and facilitate seamless transportation & healthcare management by providing real-time data. The smart cities market is mainly segmented by application (smart transportation, smart utilities, smart education, smart healthcare, smart public safety, governance, smart lighting solutions, and smart building), component (hardware, software, and services), and geography. The study also evaluates industry competitors and analyzes the market at a country level. Have Any Query? Speak to Analyst at https://www.meticulousresearch.com/speak-to-analyst/cp_id=5087

Based on application, the smart utilities segment accounted for the largest share of the overall smart cities market in 2020. The large share of this segment is mainly attributed to the rising adoption of energy storage technologies, smart grids, and smart meters to efficiently utilize energy resources. However, the smart education market is slated to grow at the fastest CAGR during the forecast period. This is attributed to the proliferation of connected devices in the education sector and the adoption of e-learning solutions & digital technologies, such as learning management systems. Based on component, the hardware segment accounted for the largest share of the overall smart cities market in 2020. The segment's growth is primarily driven by the rising demand for connected hardware devices and the growing requirement of resource management. On the other hand, the services segment is expected to grow at the fastest CAGR during the forecast period.

Geographically, North America dominated the global smart cities market in 2020. This region's large share is mainly attributed to the fast-developing advanced

communication infrastructure and rising IoT-enabled smart cities. According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) and Siemens Corporation (U.S.), in 2020, over 63% of the mayors decided that the virtual and online city services would be their top investment priorities in the post-pandemic world. However, Asia-Pacific region is expected to witness rapid growth during the forecast period. This can be attributed to the investments by major companies and strong government initiatives. For instance, in 2020, Japan announced to invest USD 2.4 billion to develop smart city projects in Southeast Asia. Thus, the growing investment in smart city projects will create several growth opportunities for the market in the Asia-Pacific region.

From <https://www.globenewswire.com/> 03/27/2021

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ADB Returns to Panda Bond Market

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) today raised CNY2 billion (about \$307 million) from its first Panda bond issue in more than a decade. This bond represents ADB's largest-ever borrowing in an Asian local currency. The bond pays a 3.20% annual coupon and features a 5-year bullet maturity, redeeming in March 2026. It represents the first borrowing from a CNY10 billion program approved by regulator National Association of Financial Market Institutional Investors in June 2020. The offering was 1.86 times oversubscribed and widely distributed to domestic and international investors through centralized book building and auction in the China Inter-Bank Bond Market, following a comprehensive program of investor roadshows and one-on-one meetings. The issue was arranged by lead underwriter and bookrunner Bank of China, with joint leads BNP Paribas, CITIC Securities, and HSBC Bank and a syndicate of relationship banks. Proceeds of the bond will be added to ADB's ordinary capital resources and deployed to support ADB's local currency operations in Chinese renminbi. The bond was priced 21 basis points below the corresponding China Development Bank bond reference yield, and 9 basis points above Chinese government bonds.

“ADB has worked hard on our return to the Chinese domestic bond market, and is delighted with this outstanding result,” said ADB Treasurer Pierre Van Peteghem. “The availability of competitively priced local currency liquidity is critical to supporting ADB's development projects in the People's Republic of China (PRC), as announced in the 5-year country partnership strategy.” In October 2005, ADB became the first issuer in the Panda bond market with a CNY1 billion, 10-year issue, and returned for a second 10-year bond with the same amount in 2009. Since then, ADB has issued nearly CNY10 billion of offshore Dim Sum bonds and has been a pioneer in adopting new financing instruments for its operations in the PRC. ADB is a regular borrower in the mainstream international bond markets, but has also led issuances in developing Asian countries as part of its efforts to promote local currency bond markets as an

alternative to bank lending.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 03/10/2021

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The ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF): 12 Things to Know

Southeast Asia faces an infrastructure investment shortfall of more than \$100 billion a year, which may have worsened amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovative finance mechanisms supported by the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF) can play a key role in catalyzing much-needed funds from private capital to boost a green, sustainable economic recovery in the region, with infrastructure that is environmentally sustainable, low-carbon, climate-resilient, and meets the needs of local communities.

The ACGF is an ASEAN Infrastructure Fund initiative managed by ADB's Southeast Asia Department Innovation Hub. It helps Southeast Asian governments prepare and finance infrastructure projects promoting environmental sustainability and contributing to climate change goals.

The ACGF provides ASEAN countries with access to more than \$1.4 billion in loans, along with technical assistance that strengthens the regulatory environment and scales up green infrastructure investments.

The ACGF finances sovereign projects that meet its published green investment principles, combining climate and environmental indicators, financial bankability indicators, and a roadmap for attracting private capital investments.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF) was launched in April 2019 to promote green infrastructure investments in Southeast Asia. Currently in its three-year pilot phase, the ACGF is an initiative of the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund, a regional financing vehicle created by ASEAN member states and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to support infrastructure development in Southeast Asia.

Sources: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green Finance in Southeast Asia

ASEAN Infrastructure Fund: Financing Infrastructure for Growth and Development

The ACGF is the only green finance facility focused on developing and increasing climate-positive projects that is owned by the governments of a regional bloc, in this case the 10 ASEAN member countries (Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam) and ADB. ADB also manages the facility.

Source: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green Finance in Southeast Asia

The ACGF provides ASEAN member governments with technical assistance and access to more than \$1.4 billion in loans from the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund and cofinancing partners: ADB, Agence Française de Développement, the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund, the European Investment Bank, the European Union, KfW, and the Republic of Korea.

Source: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green Finance in Southeast Asia

The ACGF's technical assistance helps governments identify and prepare commercially viable green infrastructure projects, while its loans provide direct investments to eligible projects. The two-pronged approach helps reduce risks associated with financing green infrastructure projects, making them more attractive to private capital investors.

Source: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green Finance in Southeast Asia The ACGF provides knowledge and training programs to increase green infrastructure investments by strengthening the regulatory and institutional capacity of ASEAN governments.

Sources: Green Finance Strategies for Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery in Southeast Asia: Greening Recoveries for Planet and People

Green, Sustainability, and Social Bonds for COVID-19 Recovery: A Thematic Bonds Primer

ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green Finance in Southeast Asia

Only projects owned or guaranteed by governments of developing member countries of ASEAN can be supported by the ACGF.

Sources: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green Finance in Southeast Asia

ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility: Investment Principles and Eligibility Criteria The ACGF supports projects promoting renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable urban transport, water supply and sanitation, waste management, and climate resilient agriculture. Eligible projects should have clear climate indicators and environmental targets, financial bankability indicators, and a roadmap for attracting private capital investment.

Source: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility: Investment Principles and Eligibility Criteria

The ACGF is currently administered by a team at ADB's Southeast Asia Department's Innovation Hub specializing in financial structuring and analysis, project origination, strategy and partnerships, knowledge, and communications.

Source: ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility 2019-2020: Accelerating Green

Finance in Southeast Asia

Since becoming fully operational in October 2019, the ACGF has exceeded its targets set for the pilot phase (2019–2021). The EDSA Greenways Project in the Philippines, approved by ADB in December 2020, met the requirements for ACGF support and included financing from the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund.

Source: Philippines: Epifanio de los Santos Avenue Greenways Project

In 2019, the ACGF helped prepare the 100-megawatt Cambodia National Solar Park Project's development and bidding process, which resulted in the lowest tariff for grid-connected solar photovoltaic across Southeast Asia. The project is structured as a public–private partnership. Cambodia's national electricity utility Electricite du Cambodge provided the land and transmission access, while the private sector will provide power generation capacity. The ACGF is now providing technical assistance to help develop similar projects across Southeast Asia.

Source: Cambodia: National Solar Park Project

ADB is working with partners such as the Green Climate Fund and the Government of the United Kingdom to explore the possibility of using concessional funds to support green infrastructure in Southeast Asia. Green Climate Fund: Proposed Participation by the Asian Development Bank Through the Accreditation Master Agreement The ACGF is committed to helping ASEAN countries recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, including developing projects that will significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, generate much needed climate-friendly jobs, and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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ADB Ventures Announces Its First Investments

The Asian Development Bank's (ADB) new venture arm, ADB Ventures, has announced its first investments. ADB Ventures invests in early-stage technology companies globally that address urgent development challenges in emerging Asia and the Pacific. Euler Motors Pvt. Ltd., based in India, is an electric vehicle manufacturer and fleet operator focused on last-mile commercial logistics, accelerating India's and Southeast Asia's transition to sustainable mobility. Euler Motors has raised \$9.4 million in Series A funding with participation by ADB Ventures, Blume, Inventus, and other investors. Smart Joules Pvt. Ltd., based in India, provides energy efficiency-as-a-service for large hospitals and commercial buildings, delivering savings of up to 40% on energy costs and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Smart Joules has raised \$4.1 million in its Series A financing led by Sangam and ADB Ventures. Max I. Limited and other angel investors also participated in this round. The investments were made by the ADB Ventures Equity Fund, which is ADB Ventures' first investment fund.

“ADB Ventures will spur high-impact cleantech, agritech, fintech, and healthtech innovations in developing Asia with its ecosystem building. Our vision is to crowd-in \$1 billion of commercial investment towards the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030,” said ADB Vice-President Ashok Lavasa. The ADB Ventures Equity Fund received \$60 million in funding commitments in 2020 from Finland’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Government of the Republic of Korea, Climate Investment Funds’ Clean Technology Fund, and the Nordic Development Fund. The Fund focuses on climate and gender impact in South and Southeast Asia. “The ADB Ventures Equity Fund is the perfect vehicle for Finland to turn our development priorities into action. The Fund will catalyze private sector finance to address climate challenges, while integrating gender aspects. Finland stands together with ADB to meet the region’s development challenges,” said Finland’s Under-Secretary of State for Development Policy Elina Kalkku. “Korea’s venture ecosystem has been accelerating the transition toward an innovative digital and green economy. We look forward to working closely with ADB Ventures to promote leading clean technologies in the Asia-Pacific region and achieve mutual prosperity in the post-COVID-19 era,” said Deputy Minister for International Affairs of the Republic of Korea’s Ministry of Economy and Finance Taesik Yoon.

“We see ADB Ventures among those unique vehicles capable of mobilizing public risk capital and private sector capital, while taking advantage of ADB’s extensive operations and networks for climate innovation,” said Climate Investment Funds Head Mafalda Duarte. “ADB Ventures represents a timely complement to traditional development approaches through the involvement of the private sector in addressing critical climate change challenges. We are pleased to be working with the ADB on this important initiative that has particular relevance in the post-COVID recovery,” said Nordic Development Fund Managing Director Karin Isaksson.

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APEC Strengthens Fiscal and Budget Sustainability

Finance and central bank deputies from the 21 APEC member economies are laying the groundwork for sustainable fiscal management to boost recovery, following the extraordinary rollout of policy levers to help mitigate against the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the people and businesses in the region. “As member economies have worked to respond to the economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic, finance ministries around the region have been at the heart of government decision-making,” said Dr Caralee McLiesh, the Chair of APEC’s Finance and Central Bank Deputies’ Meeting 2021. She noted that APEC’s commitment to multilateral cooperation and consensus building make it the perfect place for finance ministries to share their experiences and learn from one another. At

the virtual two-day meeting held on Wednesday and Thursday, policymakers debated the costs and benefits of the stimulus measures that finance ministries and central banks put in place. They also identified the role they can play in driving a strong recovery, as well as addressing longer-term systemic challenges.

In her opening remarks, Dr McLiesh, who is also the Secretary and Chief Executive to New Zealand's Treasury, highlighted the importance of reinforcing supportive macroeconomic and structural policies, as well as reassessing the future of fiscal policy and budget systems to drive an inclusive and sustainable recovery. The impact of the pandemic forced member economies to change their budgets in order to respond to the pandemic, moving quickly to get money where it was urgently needed. The reduction in economic activity and the unprecedented fiscal support has also led to sharp increases in public debt in many economies. Dr McLiesh added that there was a rich discussion on the importance of policies to support women, youth, the elderly, rural areas, vulnerable groups and small and medium sized businesses through the recovery. Policies that revitalize consumer demand, revive business confidence and investment and create and retain jobs remain crucial for member economies.

"The fiscal pressures resulting from the response to COVID-19 and other long-term challenges make effective structural reforms all the more important," she explained. "Structural policies are central to addressing the underlying causes of inequality and minimizing long-term damage to human capital." In addition, policies in support of green growth and the digital economy are also important to boost recovery and sustainability. The discussion from the two-day finance and central banks deputies' meeting will be brought forward to the APEC Senior Finance Officials' Meeting scheduled for June this year. Their recommendations will be provided to APEC finance ministers when they meet later in October this year. For more information about the schedule of the APEC 2021 New Zealand meetings, visit our event calendar page.

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\$300 Million from Green Climate Fund to Support ADB's First Green Recovery Program in Southeast Asia

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) has allocated \$300 million to support the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) efforts to help Southeast Asia shape a climate-resilient, environmentally sustainable economic recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Catalytic Green Finance Facility (ACGF) Green Recovery Program aims to leverage GCF and ADB funds to catalyze financing from development partners and private capital sources to support more than \$4 billion worth of green infrastructure projects

across the region. All projects supported by the program will incorporate innovative green finance instruments and approaches. “The ACGF Green Recovery Program is designed to kickstart a cycle of low-emissions investments during the first few years of a COVID-19 recovery,” said ADB Vice-President Ahmed M. Saeed. “The program will help Southeast Asian countries design green stimulus packages and projects that will create climate-friendly jobs, boost economic growth, and help countries fulfill their pledges under the Paris Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

The program aims to help Southeast Asian countries bridge a major gap in financing green infrastructure, with the region’s annual investment needs estimated to be \$210 billion even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The gap is likely to have widened during the pandemic, as the region’s economy contracted by 4.4% in 2020, according to ADB. The Green Recovery Program will provide technical assistance and concessional loans to about 20 green infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia. Over a 30-year period, the projects are expected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 119 million tons and create 340,000 green jobs in key sectors such as sustainable transport, renewable energy and energy efficiency systems, as well as low-carbon agriculture and natural resources. “The program seeks to accelerate the flow of green capital from banks, investors, and capital markets to Southeast Asia by helping de-risk and prepare bankable green infrastructure investments,” said ADB’s ACGF Unit Head Anouj Mehta. “The program will also help countries scale up issuances of green and climate bonds to support sustainable growth in developing Southeast Asia.”

The Green Recovery Program will be implemented according to the principles of ACGF, established by the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund and managed by ADB. ACGF has published a set of green investment principles and eligibility criteria and created a pipeline of projects, including its first project approved for financing in 2020. ACGF has attracted more than \$1.4 billion in cofinancing commitments, which will support the Green Recovery Program. ADB will prioritize the use of GCF funding under the program for investment projects in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and the Philippines. GCF approved the funding for the program at its 28th board meeting on 19 March 2021. Based in Songdo, Republic of Korea, GCF is a global fund created to help developing countries address the challenge of climate change. ADB has received 12 funding approvals totaling \$948 million since becoming an accredited GCF entity in 2015.

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Access to Climate Finance Is Critical to Put Climate Actions at Center of Development and Recovery

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) called access to climate finance a key priority for Asia and the Pacific as governments design and implement a green and resilient recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Speaking at the United Kingdom Climate and Development Ministerial—one of the premier events leading up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in November—ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa said expanding access to finance is critical if developing economies in Asia and the Pacific are to meet their Paris Agreement goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change. “We can no longer take a business-as-usual approach to climate change. We need to put ambitious climate actions at the center of development,” Mr. Asakawa said. “ADB is committed to supporting its developing member countries through finance, knowledge, and collaboration with other development partners, as they scale up climate actions and push for an ambitious outcome at COP 26 and beyond.”

ADB is using a three-pronged strategy to expand access to finance for its developing members as they step up their response to the impacts of climate change. First, ADB has an ambitious corporate target to ensure 75% of the total number of its committed operations support climate change mitigation and adaptation by the end of the decade, with climate finance from ADB’s own resources to reach \$80 billion cumulatively between 2019 and 2030. ADB has also adopted explicit climate targets under its Asian Development Fund (ADF), which provides grant financing to its poorest members. ADF 13, which covers the period of 2021–2024, will support climate mitigation and adaption in 35% of its operations by volume and 65% of its total number of projects by 2024. Second, ADB is enhancing support for adaptation and resilience that goes beyond climate proofing physical infrastructure to promote strong integration of ecological, social, institutional, and financial aspects of resilience into ADB’s investments. Third, ADB is increasing its focus on supporting the poorest and most vulnerable communities in its developing member countries by working with the United Kingdom, the Nordic Development Fund, and the Green Climate Fund on a community resilience program to scale up the quantity and quality of climate adaptation finance in support of local climate adaptation actions.

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East Asia

CHINA: Allocating 931.6 Bln Yuan for Developing Balanced Education over 2016-2020

China allocated 931.6 billion yuan (about 143.7 billion U.S. dollars) for advancing the balanced development of compulsory education during the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) period, the country's finance ministry said. The country distributed a

total of 587.7 billion yuan under the urban and rural compulsory educational expenditure assurance mechanism over the past five years. In 2020, about 154 million students receiving compulsory education were exempt from tuition fees and other charges at school, while 25 million students from poor families were offered living subsidies. From 2016 to 2020, a total of 163.9 billion yuan was allocated to improve conditions of schools in poor areas including on education informatization. During the period, another 103 billion yuan was distributed to pilot districts as incentives amid the country's efforts to improve the nutritional status of children in poor areas.

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China Strengthens Debt Control for Local SOEs

China's top state-asset regulator issued a guideline Friday on strengthening the debt risk control of local state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to effectively prevent and defuse major risks. Local state-asset regulators should accelerate the establishment and improvement of monitoring and early-warning mechanisms to accurately identify debt risks of local SOEs, said the guideline released by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission. Local SOEs with prominent debt risks should be emphasized in supervision and special regulatory measures should be adopted, while constraints should be made on the size of debt and the asset-liability ratio of highly-indebted firms. The guideline also urged local state-asset regulators to prioritize work on preventing local SOEs' bond defaults and strictly prohibit them from escaping fulfilling debt obligations. It also required local state-asset regulators to ramp up control over the firms' use of debt financing funds and improve their anti-risk capability by deepening reforms.

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150 Companies Receive Financing from China's "New Third Board" This Year

A total of 150 companies have received financing from China's National Equities Exchange and Quotations (NEEQ), also known as the "new third board," so far this year. The 150 companies have issued shares worth over 7.2 billion yuan (about 1.1 billion U.S. dollars). Between March 22 and March 26, the total turnover on the board was 2.27 billion yuan. As of Friday, 7,798 companies have been listed on the NEEQ. Launched in 2013, the board aims to offer small and medium-sized enterprises a new financing channel with low costs and simple listing procedures. China has

outlined a series of reforms to better orient the NEEQ to the needs and features of small enterprises, and to support the quality growth of the real economy.

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JAPAN: BOJ Holds Negative Rates; Tweaks Monetary Easing Policy

The Bank of Japan on Friday maintained its negative interest rate and tweaked its monetary easing program as it battles to boost inflation and shore up the pandemic-hit economy. The adjustment, which marginally expands the fluctuation in long-term rates for 10-year bonds that the bank will accept, is seen as a potential forerunner to further tweaks in policy. The bank also said it would allow more flexibility in its stock purchases, dropping a target for its intervention in the Tokyo stock market, which has strongly recovered since crashing in spring 2020 as the pandemic began to bite. The bank's policies were otherwise largely left untouched after its two-day meeting, with an interest rate of -0.1 percent left intact, as well as an annual ceiling on stock purchases. Tokyo's Nikkei index tumbled 1.5 percent with selling picking up after the announcement.

The central bank is attempting to tailor its policies to respond to the pandemic and keep on track towards its longstanding goal of two percent inflation, which remains far from sight. "It is important to strike an appropriate balance between maintaining market functioning and controlling interest rates by allowing interest rates to fluctuate to a certain degree," it said. "For the time being, the bank will closely monitor the impact of COVID-19 and will not hesitate to take additional easing measures if necessary," it added. Despite a spike in infections this winter, Japan has seen a comparatively small outbreak overall with around 8,700 deaths, and has avoided imposing the blanket lockdowns seen in other countries.

At its last meeting in January, the BOJ revised its growth outlook upwards for the next two years, even as it warned that the pandemic makes forecasts more difficult. Analysts said the bank was giving itself slightly more flexibility. The decision are about paving the way for "more accommodation in the form of rate cuts if necessary, and removing unnecessary restrictions that they had placed on themselves," said Stephen Innes, chief global markets strategist at Axi "They've also put in provisions to allow themselves to handle rate rises as well. It seems fairly balanced on the whole," he wrote in a note. Tom Learmouth, Japan economist at Capital Economics, said the bank was rearranging "the furniture to prepare for (a) prolonged hold." He expects the bank policies to stay unchanged "for the foreseeable future" and said neither the new fluctuation band for long-term yields nor the removal of guidance for stock purchases would have much effect immediately.

From <https://japantoday.com> 03/20/2021

Japan Eyes Central Bank Digital Currency Experiments in 2021

The Bank of Japan (BOJ) is set to begin experimenting with its central bank digital currency later this year. BOJ said in the past that it doesn't intend to issue a digital yen, claiming that Japan's digital payments are sufficient currently. Speaking in a recent news conference in Tokyo, BOJ Governor Haruhiko Kuroda stressed the need for Japan to prepare thoroughly for a time in which it may need to issue a digital yen. He revealed the state-backed digital currency later this year will allow the BOJ to stay in line with other central banks that have stepped up their CBDC efforts. "From the viewpoint of ensuring the stability and efficiency of the overall payment and settlement systems, it's important to prepare thoroughly to respond to changes in circumstances in an appropriate manner," he stated, as reported by Reuters.

The governor, however, clarified that the BOJ will not be issuing a CBDC any time soon. The experiment will simply allow the bank to be better prepared if the need for a digital yen ever arises. In December, Japan Times reported that BOJ was set to launch a CBDC feasibility study this year. As CoinGeek reported, the bank is striving to keep pace with its neighbor China, which has been the global leader among major economies in the CBDC race. The People's Bank of China (PBoC) has been conducting airdrops in major cities including Shanghai, Suzhou and Shenzhen where citizens get to try out the digital yuan in retail payments. In its latest move, the PBoC joined forces with the UAE, Hong Kong and Thailand in a CBDC research project. The project focuses on the use of a CBDC to ease costs and inefficiencies in cross-border funds transfers.

From <https://newsonjapan.com> 03/22/2021

Diet Enacts Record ¥106.61 Tril Budget for Fy2021

Japan's Diet enacted Friday a record 106.61 trillion yen budget for fiscal 2021 to finance steps to mitigate the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic as well as rising social security and defense costs, once again forgoing fiscal consolidation. The House of Councillors passed the budget for the year starting on April 1, following its approval by the House of Representatives in early March. Both houses are controlled by the ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito. Formulating a record high initial budget for the ninth straight year means Japan, the nation with the worst fiscal health among major developed countries, is further delaying repairs to its financial position. The budget, topping 100 trillion yen for the third consecutive year, could increase further if Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga opts to form a supplementary budget to take additional measures to combat the pandemic. For fiscal 2020,

government spending totaled 175.69 trillion yen, expanding from the initial 102.66 trillion yen.

Among policy spending is 5 trillion yen earmarked for reserve funds to support the health care system and economy. The funds can be spent without further approval by the Diet. So far, the government has utilized virus reserve funds for financial assistance for restaurants and bars that comply with requests to close early to curb the infection spread, as well as for hospitals that dedicate beds to COVID-19 patients. A domestic travel subsidy program to support the virus-hit tourism industry also required funding. As in recent years, the largest chunk of the budget is allocated to covering social security services, including health care and pensions to support the country's rapidly aging population, reaching the largest-ever figure of 35.84 trillion yen. The government has predicted a natural increase in social security spending will be about 350 billion yen in the upcoming fiscal year, cut from its earlier estimate of around 480 billion yen, after lowering national health insurance outlays through drug price cuts and taking other measures.

Defense spending hit a record high for the seventh year in a row to total 5.34 trillion yen as the country tries to strengthen capabilities in new domains such as cyberspace and outer space. Expenditure for national security includes 33.5 billion yen for the development of standoff missiles capable of attacking enemy vessels from outside the ships' firing range, at a time when China is flexing its maritime muscle. To finance the budget, new bond issuances will grow by 11.04 trillion yen from fiscal 2020's initial plan to 43.60 trillion yen, with tax revenues expected to sharply shrink due to the virus impact. This will increase the debt dependency ratio to 40.9 percent from the previous year's 31.7 percent. The outstanding balance of state and local government debt in Japan exceeded 1,100 trillion yen, or well over 200 percent of gross domestic product, at the end of fiscal 2019.

From <https://japantoday.com> 03/27/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: To Invest W300B to Speed Up Growth of Online Retail

South Korea announced Thursday it plans to invest 300 billion won (\$267 million) over the next three years to speed up the growth of the digital retail segment, which has recently enjoyed an unprecedented boom amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the plan, the country will not only pave the way for online retailers to tap deeper into the overseas markets but help them adopt state-of-the-art technologies, including drones, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. Around 4,000 logistics robots will be distributed by 2023 to pave the way for full-fledged unmanned delivery services. This year South Korea plans to allow delivery robots to operate on sidewalks. South Korea will also carry out some 1,000 test runs for drone delivery

service by 2022. The government plans to establish a standardized data base of around 3 million products by 2022, which can provide a wide array of information on the goods to consumers, including on allergies.

The fund will be spent on establishing shared logistics centers for small and mid-sized companies by offering unused public-owned sites as well. Other goals include fostering some 1,200 experts through 2026 by opening new graduate and learning courses to meet the growing demand for online retail services. The trade of hazardous items online will be strictly regulated under close ties with overseas organizations as well. Seoul added it will actively participate in the negotiations at the World Trade Organization on setting international rules on the e-commerce segment and help local firms form deeper ties with global retailers. The combined amount of transactions made through online platforms here reached 130 trillion won in 2020, growing more than sixfold from 21.7 trillion won 10 years earlier, statistics showed. Online platforms also accounted for 30 percent of retail sales in 2020, growing sharply from the previous year's 24 percent amid the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing rules.

From <http://www.koreaherald.com> 03/04/2021

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S. Korea Unveils W2tr New Drug Development Program

South Korea plans to inject 2.17 trillion won (\$1.9 billion) over the next 10 years to support development of new drugs, the government announced Thursday. Some 1.47 trillion of that money will come from state coffers, while private players will invest the remaining 701 billion won, the Ministry of Science and ICT said. The goal is to debut new medicines that could generate annual sales of 1 trillion won, it added. This budget would be spent on supporting the overall development process of new drugs, from preclinical research to phase two clinical trials. The government has appointed Mook Hyun-sang to supervise the program. Mook would orchestrate research and development supports, out-licensing of drugs, drug regulatory affairs and the project's partnerships with global players. He will serve until March 3, 2024, and is allowed to seek a second term.

He previously led the government's earlier version of the program, dubbed the Korea Drug Development Fund. During his term which ended in September, Mook oversaw the commercialization of two drugs, which received approvals from the US Food and Drug Administration and the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety here. Mook also spearheaded 57 drug out-licensing cases that amounted to 15 trillion won in total value. The 10-year drug project that would run through 2030 is a joint project involving the Ministry of Science and ICT, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy and the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

S. Korea to Invest 200 Bln Won in Developing Automotive Chip Technology

South Korea plans to invest more than 200 billion won (US\$176 million) in developing automotive chip-making technology by 2022 in an effort to nurture the next-generation vehicle sector, the finance minister said Wednesday. Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said the government plans to cooperate with local automakers to find ways to ease a current supply shortage of automotive chips that may last until the third quarter. "As automotive chips are key parts of the car industry and demand for future-generation cars is high, it is urgent to ease a short-term supply shortage of such chips, enhance supply channels and preempt the market," Hong said at a meeting with government officials on innovative growth. The government plans to invest 75.7 billion won in related research and development projects this year, with the combined amount expected to reach 204.7 billion won over the 2020-2022 period.

South Korea has set the non-memory chip, bio-health and next-generation vehicle sectors as the "BIG 3" industries that it seeks to nurture for job creation and innovation-driven growth. Hong said the government will focus on investing in developing automotive application processors and other key auto chip-making technologies. The country plans to consider allowing state-run banks to offer loans with lower rates if companies seek to expand automotive chips-related foundry business. South Korea, meanwhile, also plans to expand efforts to cope with the current global shortage of automotive chips. Global carmakers have been facing trouble in securing the chips, as the automobile industry has been recovering from the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic at a faster-than-expected pace.

The plans include excluding businesspeople from the mandatory two-week quarantine when they travel abroad to secure the chips. The country said it has been simplifying customs procedures for automotive chips since February as well. The global market for automotive chips is expected to reach US\$67.6 billion in 2026, compared to \$38 billion tallied in 2020, the industry ministry said, citing the data compiled by industry tracker IHS Markit. South Korea is the world's leading exporter of memory chips, but 98 percent of its demand for automotive chips depends on overseas sources. The country said the shortage is expected to run through at least the third quarter, and vowed to expand cooperation with overseas partners, including those from Taiwan.

S. Korea to Spend 1.1 Tln Won for Level 4 Self-Driving Technology

South Korea said Wednesday it plans to spend 1.1 trillion won (US\$974 million) by 2027 to speed up the development of Level 4 self-driving vehicles and boost related technologies. At Level 4, one stage before full autonomy, the vehicle can drive itself under limited conditions and does not require human intervention. Under the plan, South Korea will support 84 projects to develop vehicle convergence, information and communication and road traffic technologies, as well as self-driving services and the broader ecosystem of self-driving vehicles. Major South Korean tech and auto companies have also been racing to develop more advanced self-driving vehicles in recent years. Telecom operator LG Uplus Corp. partnered with Hanyang University's ACE Lab and local self-driving technology company Controlworks to demonstrate an autonomous vehicle that can park on its own using LG Uplus' high-speed 5G network last year. South Korean auto giant Hyundai Motor Group has commercialized Level 2 self-driving technology and is currently planning to unveil Level 3 autonomous vehicles next year, in which the system can perform most of the driving but still requires human intervention.

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South-East Asia

PHILIPPINES: ADB Approves 400 Mln USD Loan to Help Procure COVID-19 Vaccines

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) said on Friday that it approved a 400-million-U.S.-dollar loan to help the Philippines purchase safe and effective vaccines against the COVID-19 pandemic. The Manila-based bank said the Philippines is the first recipient of financing support under the ADB's Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility (APVAX). The new loan will help the country save lives and allow Filipinos to return to "normal life as soon as possible," it added. The ADB said the project will assist the Philippine Department of Health in procuring and ensuring delivery to the country of vaccines certified by the WHO-led COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility and bilateral vaccine suppliers that meet APVAX eligibility criteria. The ADB said the project will be supported by 300 million U.S. dollars in cofinancing from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The ADB and AIIB loans will together fund the procurement of up to 110 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines for as many as 50 million Filipinos. The Philippines has one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 infections in Southeast Asia, with 607,048 confirmed cases as of March 11, including 12,608 deaths. APVAX is ADB's

9-billion-U.S.-dollar vaccine initiative offering rapid and equitable support to its developing members as they procure and deliver effective and safe COVID-19 vaccines. On March 1, the Philippines began its vaccinations of frontline health care workers using a batch of the Sinovac vaccines donated by China. The country also received last week an additional 525,600 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines from the COVAX facility. The Philippines is negotiating to buy over 160 million vaccine doses from different pharmaceutical firms this year. The government aims to vaccinate up to 70 million Filipinos of the 110 million population this year to achieve herd immunity, starting with health care workers, the elderly, and the poor communities.

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Philippine Central Bank Maintains Interest Rate at 2.0 Pct

The Philippine central bank on Thursday maintained interest rate on the overnight reverse repurchase facility at 2.0 percent. The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said its monetary board also kept interest rates on the overnight deposit and lending facilities unchanged at 1.5 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively. The BSP noted that the latest inflation forecasts have shifted higher over the policy horizon. "Inflation may breach the upper end of the target range of 2-4 percent in 2021, reflecting the impact of supply-side constraints on domestic prices of key food commodities such as meat as well as the continuing uptick in international oil prices," the BSP said in a statement. Nevertheless, the BSP said the inflation is still seen to return within the target band in 2022 as supply-side influences subside. The BSP said the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic also continues to pose downside risks to the inflation outlook. The recent surge in virus infections and challenges over mass vaccination programs continue to temper domestic demand prospects, it added. The Philippines registered 8,773 new COVID-19 infections on Thursday, the highest ever daily tally since the outbreak began in January last year, raising the nationwide count to 693,048. The country's COVID-19 death toll has climbed to 13,095.

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THAILAND: Central Bank Holds Rate as Expected, Lowers 2021 Growth Forecast

The Bank of Thailand (BOT), the country's central bank, on Wednesday held its policy rate unchanged at a record low level and slightly lowered its growth forecast for 2021 as new COVID-19 outbreak weighs on the economy. The BOT Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) held the policy rate steady at 0.5 percent, its seventh straight hold, saying economic recovery continued but downside risks and uncertainties remained high in the period ahead. Titanun Mallikamas, secretary of

the MPC, said the committee voted to maintain the policy rate to preserve the limited policy space to act at the appropriate and most effective timing. The monetary policy must remain accommodative, while fiscal measures must continue to sustain the economy, according to Titanun. The central bank said it expected the Thai economy to expand by 3.0 percent in 2021, slightly lower than its previous forecast of 3.2 percent, over concerns about the tourism industry and a new wave of COVID-19 outbreak in the Southeast Asian country. Thailand's economy is projected to grow 4.7 percent in 2022, according to the BOT. The country's tourism-reliant economy contracted 6.1 percent last year in its sharpest decline since 1998.

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VIETNAM: Needs More Than \$128 Billion to Develop Electricity in the Next Nine Years

Việt Nam needs about \$128.3 billion of investment capital to develop its electricity industry in 2021-2030, according to draft electricity planning released by the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT). On February 9, the MoIT issued a draft national electricity development planning project for 2021-2030, with a vision to 2045 or the power master plan VIII and asked other ministries and agencies to contribute their ideas. With forecasts that Viet Nam's GDP growth will reach an average of 6.6 per cent per year in 2031-2045 and 5.7 per cent per year in 2031-2045, the MoIT forecast the supply of commercial electricity to reach 491 billion kWh by 2030, and 877 billion kWh by 2045. The draft expected by 2030, the total installed capacity of electricity sources in the country would reach 137.2 GW including 27 per cent from coal-fired thermal power, 21 per cent from gas thermal power, 18 per cent from hydroelectricity, 29 per cent from wind power, solar and renewable energy and 4 per cent from the imported sources and 1 per cent from other types of energy from storage devices.

The MoIT's draft said by 2045, the total installed capacity will reach nearly 276.7 GW including 18 per cent from coal-fired thermal power, 24 per cent from gas thermal power, 9 per cent from hydroelectricity, 44 per cent from wind power, solar and renewable energy and 2 per cent from the imported sources and 3 per cent from other types of energy from storage devices. The power master plan VIII encourages the development of renewable energy and discourages hydroelectricity. Renewables made up 13 per cent of power in 2020 and are aimed to make up 30 per cent by 2030 and 44 per cent by 2045. Regarding the power grid development programme, the plan proposes to continue building the 500kV power transmission system to transmit electricity from major power source centres in the Central Highlands, south-central, north-central and central regions to the large load centres in HCM City and the Red River Delta. It also asked to strengthen the interconnected transmission grid to support the transmission of power capacity. In the draft, they also research the

application of smart grid and the 4.0 technology in power transmission to calculate and propose in the master plan. The MoIT calculated total investment capital for electricity development in 2021-2030 of about \$128.3 billion including \$95.4 billion for electricity and \$32.9 billion for the grid. For the next 15 years, the ministry calculated the need at about \$192.3 billion including \$140.2 billion for electricity and \$52.1 billion for the grid. Combining the two periods, Việt Nam needs \$320.6 billion to develop its national power system.

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Vietnam's State Budget Collection Up in 2 Months

Vietnam posted a budget collection of 286.7 trillion Vietnamese dong (12.5 billion U.S. dollars) in the first two months of this year, up 0.6 percent year on year, the country's Ministry of Finance said on Tuesday. Domestic revenue over the months rose 2.8 percent from the same period last year to 246.7 trillion Vietnamese dong (10.7 billion U.S. dollars), while the revenue from import-export activities increased by 0.3 percent to 34.6 trillion Vietnamese dong (1.5 billion U.S. dollars), and that from crude oil fell by 53.3 percent to 4.9 trillion Vietnamese dong (213 million U.S. dollars), according to the ministry. In January and February, Vietnam's budget-spending stood at 207.3 trillion Vietnamese dong (9 billion U.S. dollars), down 6 percent year on year. Regular spending stood at 161.8 trillion Vietnamese dong (7 billion U.S. dollars), accounting for the largest proportion of the country's total expenditure, and up 1.2 percent. Vietnam posted an average yearly budget deficit of 3.6 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) from 2016 to 2020, fulfilling the target of not exceeding 3.9 percent set by the country's legislature in a five-year national financial plan, said the ministry.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 03/09/2021

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PM Approves Pilot Application of 'Mobile Money'

Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc has approved the pilot application of 'mobile money', which allows the use of mobile phone credit to pay for small-value goods and services. The decision, which took effect from Tuesday, will allow some businesses to join the pilot programme for two years. The pilot application for mobile money services aims to contribute to the development of non-cash payments, improving the access and use of financial services, especially in rural, remote, border and island areas. It will also take advantage of infrastructure, data and telecommunication networks to reduce spending to develop non-cash payment channels on mobile phones, bringing benefits to users. In addition, the results of the pilot implementation of the mobile money service will be a practical basis for

authorities to review, develop and issue official legal regulations for the service in Việt Nam. According to the decision, businesses need to have licenses to provide intermediary e-wallet payment services, licenses to establish a public mobile terrestrial telecommunications network using radio frequencies or have subsidiaries with permission from the parent company to use telecommunications, network, and data infrastructure. The firms participating in the pilot programme can provide services to customers who register their mobile accounts with an identity card, citizen identification or passport. Customers must use mobile services for at least three consecutive months before registering for mobile money.

The mobile money service will be applied nationwide. However, the businesses must prioritise implementing services in rural, remote, border and island areas. Mobile money will only be applicable for domestic transactions and will not be available for cross-border services. According to the decision, customers can top-up or withdraw from their mobile money accounts at physical kiosks, similarly to bank accounts and e-wallets. They can also pay for goods and services at stores accepting mobile money. In addition, customers using mobile money services could also transfer money. The decision also stipulates a maximum transaction limit of VNĐ10 million (US\$432.94) per month for each mobile money account for all transactions including withdrawals, transfers and payments. Businesses involved in the pilot are prohibited for banking activities such as lending, raising capital or providing or using mobile money accounts for transactions for the purpose of money laundering, terrorism financing, or fraudulent practices. Experts said the launch of mobile money would promote non-cash payment while bringing convenience to people, especially those in rural areas. As local people are gradually adapting to online transactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the deployment of mobile money will be an appropriate action to promote cashless payments.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn/> 03/10/2021

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VN Hopes to Tax Overseas Sellers on E-Commerce Platforms

The Vietnamese tax watchdog hopes to tax sellers based in foreign countries but operating e-commerce businesses in Việt Nam. The Ministry of Finance recently said that the Law on Tax Management No 38/2019/QH14 regulated that e-commerce businesses and digital-based businesses and other services provided by overseas suppliers without an entity in Việt Nam must directly or authorise others to implement tax registration, declaration and payment in Việt Nam. The ministry is compiling a circular to provide detailed instructions for this regulation which was recently made public for comments. Overseas suppliers on e-commerce and digital platforms were new tax subjects that required detailed regulations to collect taxes efficiently, the ministry said. Under the draft, overseas suppliers were asked to register for online tax transactions via the e-portal of the General Department of Taxation. Overseas

suppliers could register several banking accounts to pay taxes online. After the first successful tax registration, overseas suppliers would be provided with a username and password to declare and pay taxes on the General Department of Taxation's e-portal. Ten-digit tax codes would be provided for overseas suppliers and authorised agencies. E-commerce has boomed in Việt Nam in recent years, especially in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Đặng Ngọc Minh, Deputy General Director of the General Department of Taxation, said a number of new tax regulations to take effect this year were expected to contribute to preventing tax avoidance, especially in e-commerce and digital-based businesses. The Ministry of Industry and Trade's report showed about 53 per cent of the population did online shopping made e-commerce to expand at 18 per cent in 2020 to reach a US\$11.8 billion market. E-commerce revenue was estimated to account for 5.5 per cent of the total retail sales of goods and services.

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Mekong Delta Needs \$16.5b over 5 Years to Foster Sustainable Development

Tax procedures improved the most among nine groups of key administrative procedures enterprises face, the 2020 Administrative Procedure Cost Index (APCI) has revealed. The index showed that tax procedures improved by 5.6 points. On average, a business had to pay VNĐ11,600 (US\$0.49) and took 3.8 hours to implement tax administrative procedures, the report said. The report, which looks into the time and money businesses spend on administrative procedures, was released yesterday morning by the Prime Minister's Advisory Council for Administrative Procedure Reform. It surveyed nearly 3,000 enterprises that conducted administrative procedures in the second half of 2019 in 63 provinces and cities nationwide. The report reveals the financial burden that the nine groups of important administrative procedures place on enterprises. They consist of investment; cross-border commercial transactions; business registration at early start; environment; business licence and work permit; land; construction; tax; and specialised inspection.

Per the report, a business only took 0.9 hours (54 minutes) – the shortest time among 63 provinces and cities in the country, to implement tax administrative procedures in Thái Bình Province. The report also said a business spent only 1.9 hours on tax administrative procedures in the northern key economic region – the shortest time among three key economic regions in the country while the number is up to 9.5 hours in the Mekong Delta key economic region. The improvement level in tax procedures was thanks to a large reduction in time and costs to carry out the procedures. Specifically, the processing time was reduced by 19 per cent and the cost fell by up to 79 per cent compared to 2019. The success came through applying

information and technology to handle tax administrative procedures in the digital environment and the change of the State management method from checking imported goods before customs clearance to checking imported goods after customs clearance. Additionally, the report said specialised inspection administrative procedures ranked second with the overall level of improvement increasing 5 points compared to 2019. Next, the group of environmental administrative procedures ranked third, with the overall improvement increasing by 0.5 points compared to 2019. Ranked fourth was the group of administrative procedures related to business registration, with an overall improvement of 0.2 points.

Four lessons

Speaking at the press conference, Mai Tiến Dũng, Minister and Chairman of the Government Office, pointed out four lessons from the report. The first lesson was that the top priority task of the Government, ministries, sectors and localities was to apply information and technology to handle administrative procedures in the digital environment to save costs for businesses, he said. The second lesson was Việt Nam needed to continue reducing administrative procedure compliance costs, including both official and informal costs, to create a transparent and healthy business environment, he said. A transparent and healthy business environment would offer opportunities for businesses to participate in regional and global value chains, he added. The third lesson was that changing from pre-check to post-check for imported goods was the right move, he said. The conversion was not simply a change of conditions and requirements for enterprises, but also the complete change of State-management method for each sector as well as changing enterprises' awareness of their responsibilities, he said. Lastly, the fourth lesson was the 2020 APCI reflected that a people-and-business centred administration would save costs for all of society, he added. Cutting the costs to comply with administrative procedures depended not only on institutional and infrastructure factors but also on the people who carry out the procedures, he said. To do that, officials and staff's attitudes and responsibilities towards their jobs must change to an attitude of serving the people, he said.

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Ministry Aiming to Collect Taxes from E-Commerce Sellers

The Ministry of Finance has asked digital-based businesses and delivery service companies to provide information about e-commerce sellers using their platforms and services so they can be taxed. Tax authorities have repeatedly asked e-commerce businesses to take responsibility for the tax registrations, declarations and payments of sellers via e-commerce and digital platforms. The ministry is compiling a draft circular to provide detailed instructions for this regulation which was

recently made public for comments. Tạ Thị Phương Lan, Deputy Director of Tax Administration for Small, Medium and Household Business under the General Department of Taxation said under the circular, taxation authorities would change the management of household and individual businesses. Instead of directly working with every household and individual, tax authorities will collect information about them from e-commerce businesses and supervise their cash flow of payments via online transactions.

Under the circular, e-commerce businesses must make information declarations about their sellers. E-commerce websites such as Tiki, Shopee, Lazada or Sendo and delivery service companies are responsible for providing information about sellers for tax authorities. This draft circular does not apply to foreign suppliers. The move is expected to help tax authorities to determine the real revenues of sellers. E-commerce businesses have said that they were currently studying the circular, so could not give any comment on it yet. For any individual involved in doing business on social media sites such as Facebook, local tax authorities will collect information from their pages to identify who they are and then tax the sellers. Nguyễn Thị Cúc, Chairwoman of the Tax Consulting Association, said tax avoidance from digital-based businesses with higher profits and lower costs than traditional businesses was unfair. The new circular would ensure equality between traditional business and digital-based business, Cúc said. The draft circular also stipulates the new tax collection method for large-scale household businesses. In the past, all large-scale business households were subject to lump-sum tax payments. However, the draft circular will require them to pay taxes via self-declaration based on their accounting books. Currently, large-scale business households account for about 6-7 per cent of the total of 2 million business households nationwide. Tax authorities will also require banks to provide account holders' information to aid tax collection management.

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Pensions, Social Allowances Expected to Rise 15 Percent from 2022

Eight groups of people will enjoy a 15 per cent rise in their pensions and social insurance allowances and monthly subventions from January 1, 2022 when a draft decree on the adjustments of these allowances is issued, according to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA). According to the draft document, those who have a monthly allowance of VNĐ2.3 million (US\$99.81) and below will receive an additional VNĐ200,000 each per month, while those whose monthly allowances are between VNĐ2.3 million and under VNĐ2.5 million will get an additional allowance to make their total VNĐ2.5 million each per month. The eight groups subject to the scheme include retired public officials, civil servants, labourers; retired

military personnel, police, and cypher workers, who are entitled to monthly pensions; incumbent cadres of communes, wards and towns, and non-specialist employees of communes. People receiving monthly allowances for loss of working capacity; rubber workers receiving monthly allowances; and those who are receiving monthly allowances for labour accidents or occupational diseases are also expected to enjoy the adjustments. According to the ministry, the proposed 15 per cent rise aims to make up for the escalation of prices due to inflation, thus maintaining the value of the pensions and allowances for beneficiaries, and sharing the outcomes of economic growth in 2019, 2020 and 2021 to them as there were no adjustments in pensions and social insurance allowances in 2020 and 2021. The ministry explained that the increase is suitable as it is still lower than the interest rate generated by the investment of capital from the social insurance fund in three years from 2019-2021 at about 17 per cent. It is estimated that more than 3.5 million people will benefit from the scheme, while a total increase in the payment fund in 2022 will be about VNĐ216 trillion (\$9.37 billion).

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South Asia

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

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

Dr CS Mohapatra, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, stated that "The inland waterways are now emerging as a cost-effective and an environment-friendly option for passenger and freight movement. The project with World Bank will help improve the river transport infrastructure in West Bengal and help in the economic development of the state by connecting the hinterland with markets and job centres in Kolkata's Metropolitan Area". Dr CS Mohapatra, on behalf of the Government of India; Rajdeep Dutta, Deputy Resident Commissioner, on behalf of the Government of West Bengal; and Junaid Ahmad, Country Director, India, on behalf of the World Bank inked the pact. The project will cover the five most populous districts of southern West Bengal, including its urban agglomeration – the Kolkata Metropolitan Area (KMA) where around 30 million people or one-third of the West Bengal's population live. As per Junaid Ahmad, "This operation will allow the state to invest in Kolkata's economic

productivity by making its waterways and ferry services part of an efficient and safe urban mobility strategy... Importantly, given Kolkata's strategic location, the project is also ensuring that the metropolitan area emerges as a transport and logistics hub for the sub-region, leveraging the EDFC and connecting to the north-east and the land-locked countries of Nepal and Bhutan."

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

From <https://smartcity.eletsonline.com/> 03/05/2021

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Delhi's SGDP Drops by 5.68%, per Capita Income Also Slumped: Economic Survey

Delhi's State Gross Domestic Product (SGDP) slumped by 5.68 per cent and the per capita income of Delhi dropped from Rs 3,76,211 in 2019-20 to Rs 3,54,004 in 2020-21, according to the Economic Survey tabled by the Government of Delhi in the State Assembly on March 8. As per the Economic Survey, Delhi's per capita income has shrunk due to the impact of the COVID pandemic. This is the first time since 2010-11 that the national capital's per capita income has shrunk. However, the Survey showed that the 5.7 per cent contraction in the SGDP of Delhi is still better than the national average that is expected to shrink by 7-8 per cent for the financial year. Finance Minister of Delhi Maish Sisodia, on March 8, released the outcome budget for fiscal 2020-21. The Minister said, "The financial year 2020-21 started in the shadow of COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown brought all socio-economic activities to a halt. The pandemic caused great distortion in the government's routine activities. Revenue collection slumped and the government's resources and efforts were focused on neutralising the impact of COVID-19." The economic survey projected a slump in the per capita income from Rs 3,76,221 in 2019-20 to Rs 3,54,004 in 2020-21 that translates to a drop of 5.9 per cent.

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Over Lakh Loans Extended Under ‘Stand Up India’ Scheme

Minister of State for Finance and Corporate Affairs Anurag Singh Thakur, stated that over 1,10,019 loans have been extended since the launch of ‘Stand up India’ scheme as on January 31, 2021, since its inception and beneficiaries can get a loan of Rs 10 lakh to Rs 1 crore to start or increase their business. Thakur stated this in a written reply to Rajya Sabha on March 9. Detailing the scheme, the Minister said, the Stand Up India Scheme was launched by the Centre on April 5, 2016, and subsequently extended up to the year 2025. The Scheme facilitates bank loans between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore to at least one Scheduled Caste/ Scheduled Tribe borrower and at least one woman borrower per bank branch of Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs), for setting up greenfield enterprises in the manufacturing, services or the trading sectors.

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Automating Supply Chain Finance Can Augment Payments for MSMEs

Did you know only six crore MSMEs in India account for 29 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 11 crore jobs, albeit with less than two per cent automation of supply chain financing? What does it take to keep the manufacturing supply chain moving so that 1.3 billion Indians continue to receive the goods that they need just in time? What is the oxygen that repeatedly fuels manufacturing to ensure that goods continue to flow through the supply chain? The just-in-time (JIT) supply chain model runs on JIT payments and virtually automates agility, innovation, and efficiency in manufacturing. Delayed payments choke MSME suppliers and bring the supply chain to a grinding halt, and adversely affects everyone dependent on them. The concurrent drop of MSME earnings by 20-50 per cent and the decline in India’s Manufacturing PMI Index to 50.6 during the COVID-19 pandemic prove the same. Why are MSME suppliers yet to benefit from supply chain finance automation? MSMEs in India have an offline legacy and have been historically underserved by technology. Supply chain financing automation in emerging economies, including India, is in stages of infancy. Any technology solution must first prove to MSMEs what is wrong with offline credit platforms and processes before enrolling them into a digital working capital ecosystem. Technology enablement in India’s manufacturing sector is at less than two per cent. The lack of digital identity of MSMEs and offline transactions means that there is no accurate data available to assess MSME suppliers for credit underwriting purposes. Therefore, any digital supply chain financing platform will have to invest in product development and market development.

Every formal transaction has a Unique Transaction Reference (UTR) number that is used to track and trace its status. MSMEs do not have to follow up manually with enterprise buyers to receive payments on an automated supply chain financing platform. The platform itself sends reminders to enterprise buyers on pending invoices. The B2C leg of the supply chain that connects to the end consumers in the supply chain has undergone a great transformation over the last decade. The COVID-19 pandemic also triggered a significant shift in consumer behaviour with many buyers moving from offline buying to online buying. Digital commerce platforms, apart from providing goods, are leveraging system design, process visibility, and regulatory compliance as levers of trust-building. In digital commerce, linkages across supply chain processes of purchase order generation, invoicing, track and trace of consignments, and quality assurance enable customer satisfaction and fast disbursement of payments. MSME suppliers that have exposure to digital commerce and supply chain financing platforms have begun to move ahead of offline MSMEs. An easy way for MSMEs to receive timely payments is to use digital commerce platforms. Such platforms connect related but distinct documents of the purchase order (PO), goods received notification (GRN), and the suppliers' invoice. It speeds up the invoice approval and supplier payment processes. Offline processes create asymmetries of information between enterprise buyers and suppliers. The offline to online swing in the B2C segment of the supply chain has had a powerful impact on the B2B segment of the supply chain. An NPCI report suggests that one-third of India's households are now using digital payment interfaces for purchase transactions. With digital purchasing gaining critical mass in B2C transactions, enterprises are choosing to procure goods from MSME suppliers through digital processes to make their entire supply chain online.

A difference in the digital maturity levels between enterprises and MSMEs forces enterprises to switch from offline MSMEs to online ones. The reasons include: "Fit-for-audit" GST compliance. Convenience in filing input tax credit. Faster turnaround time. The digital maturity differential further widens the digital divide and causes more damage to the fabric of supplier relationships. Businesses that sell to consumers have a front-facing role in the supply chain. They need to maintain data to file their GST returns. It requires enterprise buyers to maintain GST-compliant invoices of all their suppliers. MSME suppliers can send their invoices in a GST-compliant format to their buyers with minimum effort on digital supply chain financing platforms. Smoother GST compliance sets the tone for faster invoice approval and faster payments. Offline processes for supply chain collaboration significantly reduce MSME suppliers' ability to pitch their innovation to enterprise buyers in critical times. Faced with the risks of supply chain disruptions, enterprise buyers are increasingly interested in mapping supplier capabilities. For example, in the event of a lack of a supplier's digital transactional footprint, an enterprise buyer may opt for another MSME supplier with data of record. These factors can adversely affect purchase order generation, revenue streams, and prolong the cash cycles of MSME suppliers.

When an MSME supplier switches to digital working capital platforms to get paid, enterprise buyers access historical data on collaborations with them. Enterprises can check the time frames without any transactional history, explore the reasons, and map the MSME supplier's capability. Smooth collaboration leads to fast payments. While banks and NBFCs are the lenders of the last resort, MSME suppliers are better off depending on the lenders of the first resort; enterprise buyers. Large enterprise buyers consider MSME suppliers' cost, quality, delivery, and creditworthiness before awarding contracts. Supplier creditworthiness assessments have gained more traction with enterprise buyers. It has happened due to numerous suppliers invoking the force majeure clause in epicentres of the pandemic. Offline working capital management systems require manual credit underwriting. The sheer volume of data, the slow velocity of credit risk analysis, and the variety of less reported financial metrics make credit risk management risk-prone; therefore slower, and costlier.

The logic applies to both enterprise buyers and BFSI institutions. The real cost of credit will have a markup over the risk premium for lending to a sub-prime entity in addition to the nominal cost of credit. Online credit underwriting is more accurate than the offline one. It makes enterprise buyers and banks more confident about offering credit to an MSME that ticks all boxes of their criteria. MSME suppliers have to pay lower rates of interest on early payments through online working capital platforms than offline credit sources. At the heart of our efforts to make an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat for 1.3 billion Indians is the need to secure the pipelines connecting enterprise buyers to MSME suppliers. For every B2C transaction, there are five to seven transactions in the B2B supply chain that involve enterprise buyers and MSME suppliers that make in India. The B2B supply chain and its finance in India are far too big and far too important to be at the mercy of offline processes and platforms of MSME credit. MSME financing automation is a need to have, and the time is now.

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

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

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

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Central-West Asia

Azerbaijan Discloses Banks' Demand at Foreign Exchange Auction

The Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) sold \$41.9 million to the local banks at the foreign exchange auction held with the participation of the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ) on March 9, 2021, Trend reports citing the country's CBA. The demand from banks at the auction decreased by 5 percent compared to the previous indicator and was fully met. Following 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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SMEs with Start-Up Certificate in Azerbaijan to Be Exempted from Income Taxes – Minister

Small and medium-sized business enterprises (SMEs) with start-up certificates in Azerbaijan will be exempted from paying taxes on income and profit from innovation activities for 3 years, the country's Minister of Economy Mikayil Jabbarov wrote in his Twitter page, Trend reports on Mar.17. Noting that the share of micro, small and medium-sized business enterprises in procurements is 2.3 billion manat (\$1.3 billion), Jabbarov also tweeted that in the future, broader participation of the SMEs in public procurements will be encouraged. Earlier, the minister said that the business environment in Azerbaijan will be further improved and measures will be taken to ensure that SMEs take an important position in the formation of the country's GDP, as well as to encourage their participation in the public procurements.

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VAT Refund Project in Demand in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani Media Analysis Center has conducted a survey within the project on "VAT refund" and bonus cards introduced in 2020, the Center told Trend. Some 58.3 percent of respondents make various payments through the accumulated funds, 24.7 percent continue to save the amount on their cards, 5.3 percent - cash out and 11.7 percent do not use the VAT refund service. Moreover, 51.2 percent of respondents said that the availability of bonus cards does not affect purchases in any way while 48.8 percent of survey participants prefer stores where such cards are available. The survey results show that respondents more often use bonus and discount cards for purchases of food, clothing and footwear, as well as household appliances. Among 676 respondents some 44 percent were women, 56 percent - men.

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Azerbaijan Gradually Eliminating Impact of Aggregate Demand and Economic Activity on Inflation

No noticeable changes have been observed in the balance of inflation risks since the recent meeting of the Board of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA), Trend reports on March 19 with reference to the CBA. "In the mid-term forecast, factors that have a downward and upward impact on inflation continue to balance each other," the bank said. The bank stressed that the improvement in the international situation, in particular, the upward trend in oil prices, maintains currency stability. The restrictive influence of aggregate demand and economic activity on inflation is gradually being removed. Such factors as the trend of rising prices in the world food market and administrative regulation of prices exert an increasing influence on inflation. "Further decisions on the parameters of the interest rate band will be made taking into account the actual and projected inflation, the dynamics of core inflation and the

processes of economic recovery,” the Central Bank of Azerbaijan said. “Depending on the macroeconomic situation, the possibility of continuing the process of easing monetary policy will be assessed.” The Board of the CBA made a decision on March 19 to keep the discount rate at 6.25 percent. At the same time, the lower limit of the interest rate band was set at 5.75 percent while the upper limit at 6.75 percent. The next decision of the board of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan on the parameters of the interest rate corridor will be announced on April 30, 2021.

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Azerbaijan to Fully Implement New-Generation Cash Registers by Late 2022 - Minister of Economy

Over 24,000 new-generation cash registers have been installed in trade and public catering facilities in Azerbaijan, the country's Minister of Economy Mikayil Jabbarov wrote in his Twitter page, Trend reports on Mar.19. According to Jabbarov, the process of installing the new-generation cash registers is planned to be completed by the end of 2022. Earlier, the minister said that the introduction of up-to-date cash registers has contributed to achieving transparency in trade turnover.

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KAZAKHSTAN: Banking Sector Faces Pressure from Global Economic Slowdown

Kazakhstan's banking sector, like many other sectors, faced pressure which undoubtedly affected its development amid the global COVID-19 pandemic and the entailing global economic slowdown, a source in the country's National Bank told Trend. According to the source, in 2020, there was a recorded active transition of banks to a digital service format and the market strengthening the possibilities of online services. "The implementation of remote customer service and the provision of banking services through remote channels have become one of the top priorities for the financial sector. The current situation contributes to the growth of e-commerce, cashless payments, and the popularization of innovative ways of obtaining services," the source said. In 2020, the banking sector focused on strengthening the functionality of remote banking. "For example, at the end of the year, the share of online transactions in the structure of non-cash transactions of the population made up 81 percent, having grown by 10 percent since 2019 (when the share of online transactions was 71 percent)," noted the source. Overall, according to the source, in 2020, the population carried out 2.9 million non-cash transactions in the amount of 35.3 trillion tenge (\$84.4 billion), which is more than double the indicators of the results of 2019. Thus, the positive dynamics of the growth of non-cash payments

remain on the market." In order to speed up the market transition to remote customer service in April this year, the National Bank launched a test remote identification service for its customers, the source stressed. "The industrial commissioning of the service took place on October 1, 2020. At the end of the year, the number of participants was 13 banks. In total, more than 3.7 million banking services were processed through this service," added the source.

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UZBEKISTAN: Gross External Debt Forecasted to Reach USD 28.3 Bln by Year End

Uzbekistan's gross external debt is projected to reach \$28.3 billion (45.3% of GDP) by the end of 2021, Trend reports citing Kabar. According to the Ministry of Finance, despite the growth dynamics, the public debt remains moderate, at a level safe for macroeconomic stability. It is noted that in 2020 the growth of public debt was due to the attraction of external borrowings to finance additional budget expenditures to overcome the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the net maximum volume of newly signed agreements on attracting internal and external borrowings on behalf of the state and under the guarantees of the republic should not exceed \$5.5 billion.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Cash Deals Costing Aust Taxpayers \$50b

Businesses doing cash deals are costing the community up to \$50 billion in unpaid taxes, the Australian Taxation Office has revealed. More than 60,000 businesses have failed to lodge returns under the taxable payments reporting system for 2019/20, contributing to a budget black hole of almost three per cent of Australia's annual gross domestic product. The system is a black economy measure designed to identify contractors, particularly in the construction industry, who don't report or under-report their income. The black economy refers to those operating entirely outside the tax system who fail to report taxable income by understating takings or accepting cash 'off-the-books' payments. The ATO estimates about 280,000 businesses need to lodge a taxable payments annual report for 2019/20. Businesses who have not yet lodged need to lodge as soon as possible, to avoid penalties as forms were due to be lodged by 28 August, 2020, and are overdue.

ATO assistant commissioner Peter Holt says it's not just businesses that pay

contractors in the building and construction industry, with some firms not realising they need to lodge an annual report - depending on payments received for deliveries or courier services. "Many restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, pharmacies and retailers have started paying contractors to deliver their goods to their customers," Mr Holt said. "These businesses may not have previously needed to lodge a (report). However, if the total payments received for these deliveries or courier services are 10 per cent or more of the total annual business income, you'll need to lodge."

From <https://au.news.yahoo.com> 03/01/2021

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RBA Rates Steady, Commits to Bond Buying

The Reserve Bank of Australia has left its key interest rates unchanged following its monthly board meeting, while remaining committed to its bond buying program aimed at keeping borrowing costs low. The cash rate remained at a record low 0.1 per cent, where it has stood since last November. Central bank governor Philip Lowe said the economic recovery is well under way and has been stronger than was earlier expected. "The current monetary policy settings are continuing to help the economy by keeping financing costs very low, contributing to a lower exchange rate than otherwise, and supporting the supply of credit and household and business balance sheets," Dr Lowe said in a statement. The board also left its three-year bond yield target and the rate for its term funding facility for banks at the record low 0.1 per cent.

Dr Lowe reiterated that the board will not increase the cash rate until inflation is sustainably within the two to three per cent target range, conditions it does not expect to be met until 2024 at the earliest. "For this to occur, wages growth will have to be materially higher than it is currently. This will require significant gains in employment and a return to a tight labour market." However, financial markets have recently appeared sceptical of such an outlook, with interest rates, or yields, on government bonds factoring in rate hikes before the end of 2023. Global bond yields have risen sharply in recent weeks on the view that the world economy will recover from the COVID-19 induced recession quicker than first thought, fuelling inflation. Such market action runs at odds with what the RBA and other central banks are trying to achieve through massive bond buying programs, otherwise known as quantitative easing, aimed at keeping market interest rates, and in turn borrowing costs, low.

"The bank remains committed to the three-year yield target and recently purchased bonds to support the target and will continue to do so as necessary," Dr Lowe said. "Also, bond purchases under the bond purchase program were brought forward this week to assist with the smooth functioning of the market." He added that the bank is also prepared to make further adjustments to its purchases in response to market conditions. The bank does not have a target rate for other bond maturities.

Commonwealth Securities senior economist Ryan Felsman said the RBA has assumed a 'whatever it takes' approach because it wants to keep borrowing costs ultra-low for households, businesses and governments, crucial for hiring and investment. "And the board wants to keep a lid on the Aussie dollar, which hit 80 US cents last week," Mr Felsman said. "A stronger currency could drag on Australia's international competitiveness, weighing on export income, stifling the economic recovery." At last month's board meeting, the RBA unexpectedly announced it will purchase an additional \$100 billion in government and state bonds when an existing program ends in mid-April.

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Labor Yet to Decide Fate of 2024 Tax Cuts

Anthony Albanese wants to see the state of the budget in May before deciding whether to make scrapping legislated tax cuts in 2024 an election policy. A federal election is expected later this year or in early 2022. The opposition leader said when the tax cuts were debated towards the end of 2019, Labor warned of the problems of making policy so far in advance. "It is really a triumph of hope over experience to say you know what the economy will look like in 2024/25," Mr Albanese told the Australian Financial Review Business Summit on Wednesday. "That has been proven to be absolutely correct." These tax cuts, the third stage of the Morrison government's personal tax cutting agenda, are worth some \$140 billion. The tax cuts were passed before the economy went into a recession last year and when the budget was forecast to be in surplus.

As of December, the budget was now in a \$197.7 billion deficit in 2020/21 due to lost revenue and the implementation of stimulus measures to fend off the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The mid-year budget review also showed the budget was still expected to be in a \$66 billion deficit in 2023/24. Treasury's prediction for 2024/25 won't be known until the May 11 budget. "That is the problem with governments making decisions so far in advance in the absence of proper analysis of where the economy is when those changes come in," Mr Albanese said. "I think it was wrong to do that then." He said Labor did try to take the stage three tax cuts out of the legislation when it was before parliament because it wasn't known what condition the economy was going to be in. "Wasn't that the truth," he said. "The 'back in black' mugs are a collector's item these days, but the fact is, the government said the budget was in surplus ... the ultimate triumph over economic fact."

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Australian Resources Exports Nudging \$300b

Australia's resources and energy exports are forecast to reach a record \$296 billion in 2020/21, despite the global economic downturn driven by COVID-19. The latest Resources and Energy Quarterly report, produced by the federal Office of the Chief Economist, says the outlook for the sector has strengthened due to China's quick rebound from the downturn and government stimulus. Production constraints in many countries have seen prices gain momentum in early 2021. Iron ore, LNG and base metals have reached multi-year highs, while there has been some restoration to coal prices. As well, lithium exports - which were worth an estimated \$1 billion in 2020/21 - are set to rise more than five-fold in real terms as interest booms in electric vehicles and electronics. Nickel exports are expected to almost double, while copper exports are set to increase by almost one third over the same period.

Revenue from these three commodities combined are projected to reach \$28 billion by 2025/26. Moderating prices for the major commodities are expected to see earnings drop slightly, while Australia's export volumes remain strong. In real terms, export earnings are forecast to fall three per cent to \$288 billion in 2021/22, before stabilising over the next four years. Australia's iron ore earnings are forecast to rise by over a third to \$136 billion in 2020/21, before declining to \$104 billion in real terms in 2025/26. Metallurgical coal earnings are forecast to recover in line with higher prices, projected to reach \$31 billion in 2025/26 while thermal coal export earnings are forecast to soften to \$15 billion in 2020/21. Gold export earnings are set to reach \$29 billion 2020/21, before declining over the next four years.

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NEW ZEALAND: Are You Ready for the New Top Personal Tax Rate 39% ?- NZ International Tax & Property Advisors

From 1 April 2021, individuals earning over \$180,000 in an income year will have to pay 39% instead of the 33% tax rate. If you are earning more than \$180,000, especially from providing your own labour, you may wish to review your existing structure and tax affairs to ensure it's meeting your financial and non-financial goals in the long run. The new top rate applies to individuals (including bonus payments, back pays and redundancies) on amounts over \$180,000 in an income year, and the PAYE, resident withholding tax and other withholding tax rules are being updated to reflect this. It will only apply when total income is more than \$180,000 so there is no change for those earning less than that. The change in tax rate is expected to affect the top 2% earnings of the New Zealand population. A few other employment-related tax rates have also been modified in conjunction with the new tax rate:

A new Fringe Benefit Tax (FBT) rate of 63.93% for all-inclusive pay over \$129,681 will be added. An Employer Superannuation Contribution Tax (ESCT) rate of 39% will

apply when an employee's income and Kiwisaver contributions are over \$216,00 per year. Accordingly, you might want to consider: Paying for vehicle allowances instead of providing motor vehicles for your high-earning employees to reduce the FBT bill. Paying your employees, including bonus, prior to 1 April 2021, so income can be taxed at 33% instead of 39%. Where salary is less than \$205,000, consider reducing salary and increasing Kiwisaver contributions to make use of the 216,00 threshold. If a company has retained earnings and imputation credits available, dividends could be paid before 1 April. The additional tax payable would be 5%, compared to the 11% that will apply from 1 April 2021. Effects on provisional tax should be considered.

NZ International Tax & Property Advisors is a Chartered Accountant firm providing accounting, tax, property consulting and training services to locals, migrants and businesses. Our professional team has over ten years of experience in Big Four, Mid Tier and boutique cross border tax Chartered Accountant firms specialising in cross border tax for migrants and expats, taxation on land transactions, IRD disputes and resolutions and small and medium business tax. We can explain what this change might mean to you or your employees and assist with tax planning before 31 March 2021.

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Budget 2021 Date Announced

Budget 2021 will be delivered on Thursday 20 May, Finance Minister Grant Robertson announced today. "My focus continues to be on making sure spending is targeted at the areas and people that need it the most. "We will manage the books carefully including ensuring we are getting value for money in all areas of Government spending and reprioritising spending where appropriate. "We will also continue the balanced approach to invest in strong public services and addressing issues like housing, while keeping a lid on debt," Grant Robertson said. This year's Budget will focus on the Government's overarching objectives for this Parliamentary term which are: continuing to keep New Zealand safe from COVID-19, accelerating the recovery and rebuild and addressing key issues like climate change, housing affordability and child poverty. Wellbeing Objectives, which are now a requirement under changes made to the Public Finance Act, underpin budget decisions. These objectives continue the evidence based focus started in the Wellbeing Budget, and build on those we used in 2019 and 2020.

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\$3 Million to Support Low-Waste Marae-Based Initiative

A \$3 million grant from the Community Environment Fund to Para Kore's oranga taiao (healthy environment) project demonstrates the potential of te ao Māori approaches and grass roots partnership to support environmental progress," says Secretary for the Environment Vicky Robertson. "This funding will support Para Kore's Whakapapa ki a Papatūānuku project to scale up the delivery of an amazing marae-based education and training programme that supports whānau, hapū and iwi to reduce waste in their rohe. "The project will run for four years with the long-term goal of empowering people to design waste out of their communities – on their own terms. This is achieved through an empowering and inclusive approach featuring wānanga (workshops), waste audits, installation of reuse equipment and on-going mentoring.

"We are honoured to be partnering with Para Kore as they expand and take their special mahi to more communities." said Vicky Robertson. "This is a big step forward for Para Kore. This grant will enable us to support even more marae and organisations across Aotearoa to reduce their waste," says Para Kore's General Manager Jacqui Forbes. "Our innovative, educational programme is delivered from a Māori worldview and helps to 'de-normalise' the throwaway, linear, industrialised systems which are so harmful to people and Papatūānuku. "It's important to support the transmission of knowledge so that it is appropriately centralised around Māori communities. Para Kore works to normalise te ao Māori practices which includes strengthening our connection with the environment and caring for the natural world.

"In the face of extreme environmental degradation, the need to draw on and build mātauranga Māori is essential. As such, Para Kore realises the need to engage in our whakapapa to inform how we carry out our responsibilities," concluded Jacqui Forbes. The Community Environment Fund empowers New Zealanders to make a positive difference to the environment. It supports projects that strengthen environmental partnerships, raise environmental awareness and encourage participation in environmental initiatives in the community. Since 2009, Para Kore has worked with marae to increase the reuse, recycling and composting of materials. The programme operates in 541 marae and other organisations in 17 regions throughout North Island and the top of South Island. The Government also supports Para Kore through the Waste Minimisation Fund.

From <https://livenews.co.nz> 03/29/2021

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Tourism Fund to Prioritise Hard-Hit Regions

The Minister of Tourism is to re-open a government fund that supports councils to build infrastructure for visitors, with a specific focus on regions hardest hit by the loss of overseas tourists. "Round Five of the Tourism Infrastructure Fund will open for applications next month," said Stuart Nash. It last allocated funds in November 2019.

“I have updated the criteria for projects to be prioritised by the fund. It will now better reflect the reality that jobs and businesses in some regions, particularly the South Island, are harder hit by the loss of international tourists than other regions. “All councils will still be eligible to apply if they lack adequate revenue sources to cater for visitors, for example if they have a small ratepayer base. Community groups with council backing can also apply.

“I have already identified that five regions face greater uncertainty given their reliance on overseas visitors. For this reason, applications from Kaikōura, MacKenzie – Aoraki Mt Cook, Queenstown Lakes, Fiordland and South Westland districts will be prioritised. “Other regions are still welcome to apply. All applicants will be asked to demonstrate the need for support with visitor infrastructure. “The projects will provide much-needed local employment as tourism towns work to diversify their economies. The new infrastructure will also ensure the quality of the visitor experience is improved for when tourists return in greater numbers. “The Tourism Infrastructure Fund was established in 2017. It has helped councils build and maintain important assets like public toilets and showers, carparks and footpaths, waste disposal and water treatment facilities, freedom camping sites, picnic shelters, jetties and boat ramps, bike stands and mountain bike hubs. “Round 5 funding will ensure government investment in visitor projects can continue while we work to open quarantine-free travel with Australia, and other international connections when it is safe to do so. The final size of the funding pool is still to be determined but is expected to be in the vicinity of \$13 million,” Mr Nash said.

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6、 Private Sector

Asia-Pacific

Asian Transport Outlook Data to Support Larger and More Sustainable Transport Sector in Asia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has released a first batch of data as part of a new regional knowledge platform to guide sustainable transport development in Asia and the Pacific. The Asian Transport Outlook (ATO) will support the planning and delivery of transport sector assistance by ADB, as well as transport policy and initiatives by Asian governments, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Paris Agreement, and other international agreements. “This first batch of information reminds us of the challenges faced by economies in Asia and the Pacific in developing the transport sector as they start to look at the period beyond

COVID-19,” said ADB Vice-President for Knowledge Management and Sustainable Development Bambang Susantono. “We are now getting data that detail the shortages in transport infrastructure and transport services experienced by ADB members. This will help ADB, its member governments, and other stakeholders to build back the transport sector in Asia and the Pacific in a more sustainable manner in the coming years.” The ATO collects, organizes, and shares data on the transport sector in economies using more than 400 indicators. The first batch of information includes data for 234 indicators on the status of transport infrastructure, transport activity, access and connectivity, road safety, climate change, air pollution, and health, as well as socioeconomic conditions. The ATO will also document the institutional frameworks, policies, and financing of transport in these economies.

More batches of data on the transport sector will be released in the coming months. The ATO is developed on behalf of ADB by the Partnership on Sustainable Low Carbon Transport (SLOCAT), the leading global multi-stakeholder partnership on sustainable, low carbon transport. “The ATO will help ADB and SLOCAT in mobilizing the transport community in support of evidence-based action on transport in Asia,” said SLOCAT Secretary General Maruxa Cardema. “The coming years will be decisive in determining whether we are meeting the objectives of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. The manner in which the transport sector in Asia develops is key for both processes and the ATO will tell us whether we are on track.” The ATO is a multiyear program with the potential to serve as the primary knowledge base on transport in Asia. To make this a reality, ADB will make ATO data freely available to all and is encouraging transport planners and policymakers to make use of ATO data in their work. To enhance the success of the ATO, ADB is calling on all organizations working on transport in Asia to freely share their data. ADB approves about 40 transport projects per year. Over the last 3 years, the average combined annual commitments were in excess of \$5 billion.

From <https://www.adb.org/> 03/08/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Xinjiang's Alashankou Port Sees Surging Cross-border E-commerce Business

The customs of Alashankou Port said over 7 million cross-border e-commerce packages, with a value of over 15 million U.S. dollars, have been exported via the port so far this year. The daily average of cross-border e-commerce packages exported via the port has exceeded 110,000 since the cross-border e-commerce business was launched in the inland port in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in January last year. Alashankou Port is the nearest railway port

in China to the European Union. Cross-border e-commerce packages exported through Alashankou Port are mainly toys, furniture, clothing and daily commodities.

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China's Zhejiang Sees Surging Online Retail Sales in Jan.-Feb.

Zhejiang Province, an e-commerce heartland in east China, reported a robust increase in online retail sales in the first two months this year. The online retail sales of the province in the period reached 246.8 billion yuan (about 38.05 billion U.S. dollars), up 48.5 percent from the same period last year, data from the provincial department of commerce showed. Residents in the province, home to the e-commerce giant Alibaba, spent 138.4 billion yuan on online shopping from January to February, up 54 percent year on year. Clothes, shoes and bags, home decorations, as well as computers, communication and consumer electronics ranked in the top categories in terms of online sales.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 03/18/2021

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Foreign Businesses Eye Great Potential in Chinese Market

Foreign-invested companies are remaining bullish on the Chinese market with the country's effective curb of COVID-19, emerging economic drivers and greater opening-up. Foreign direct investment into the Chinese mainland, in actual use, expanded 31.5 percent year on year to 176.76 billion yuan (27.17 billion U.S. dollars) in the first two months of the year, the latest data from the Ministry of Commerce showed. Many foreign-invested companies are eyeing great potential in the Chinese market's consumption growth. Amorepacific Corporation, a leading beauty and cosmetics conglomerate in the Republic of Korea has already signed up for the 4th China International Import Expo (CIIE) this year, a major fair for global companies to expand their businesses in China. At last year's CIIE, Amorepacific doubled its exhibition area from the previous year to 500 square meters. As an important leading market in beauty trends, China boasts huge potential in domestic demand, and the CIIE has served to open up the space for consumption, said Charles Kao, president of Amorepacific China.

Currently, Amorepacific offers a wide range of products and services from skincare to color cosmetics at more than 5,200 stores in over 370 Chinese cities. Jaeho Yeon, senior vice president of Shanghai-based Amorepacific China R&D Center, leads a team of 60 people that focus on studying Chinese consumers' demands, cosmetics habits and feedback on products to flexibly cater to the local needs. "In the next five

years, we'll continue to increase our investment in China and double the scale of the R&D team," said Jaeho Yeon, adding that Shanghai has an active consumer market with great talent reserves. For Carrier Global Corporation, a global provider of high-tech HVAC and refrigeration solutions, China's emerging economic drivers, such as the digital economy, bring new opportunities. Thanks to China's early resumption of work amid stringent COVID-19 control and prevention, the company maintained its performance in the Chinese commercial air-conditioner market last year compared with 2019.

"We are eyeing new opportunities as more large-scale data centers are being built in China, which require precise and stable temperature and humidity control," said Robert Chiang, VP, Engineering, Carrier Global Technology & Components, and Shanghai R&D Center. The systematic solutions Carrier designs for the data centers can greatly reduce energy consumption, Chiang noted. "China is a market worth long-term investment, and we will continue to ramp up our investment in the country," Chiang said, adding that as a U.S.-based company, Carrier has seen the benefits of China-U.S. economic and trade cooperation over the many years doing business in China. The company will continue to invest in commercial air conditioning, increase investment in cold chain technology and expand R&D investment in digital technology, Chiang added. On Wednesday, Standard Chartered Bank (China) Ltd. became the first foreign-invested bank to cooperate in a pilot cash-pooling service for multinational companies that integrates domestic and foreign currency management to facilitate the use of cross-border capital.

"The implementation of the pilot significantly enhances the flexibility and convenience of cross-border cash flows for multinational groups," said Ye Jiwei, head of transaction banking at Standard Chartered China. "It is yet another milestone for China in steadily promoting the opening of capital markets to facilitate trade and investment." Standard Chartered Bank has continued to increase its investment with China's economic growth. The bank has announced that it will invest 40 million U.S. dollars to set up a Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Center. Jerry Zhang, executive vice-chairman and CEO of Standard Chartered Bank (China) Ltd., said China's determination to open up its market to the world and its continued actions have caught the world's attention. The new development paradigm of "dual circulation" in which domestic and overseas markets reinforce each other, with the domestic market as the mainstay, has brought a wide range of opportunities for international banks like Standard Chartered, Zhang noted.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 03/19/2021

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China Launches Patent Transfer Plan to Support SME Innovation

China has launched a three-year plan to offer monetary incentives to provincial-level regions that have made achievements in fostering patent technology transfers from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The plan was unveiled in a recent notice jointly released by the Ministry of Finance and the National Intellectual Property Administration. It aims to support SME innovation, helping promote the utilization of their patented technologies and prevent them from lying dormant. Provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities with well-developed schemes, proper measures, strong execution and outstanding achievements in transferring patent technologies will each be awarded 100 million yuan (about 15.3 million U.S. dollars), according to the plan. The monetary incentives can be used to further help SMEs acquire and materialize patent technologies and carry out intellectual property pledge financing.

From <http://www.news.cn/> 03/25/2021

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JAPAN: Companies Go High-Tech in Battle Against Food Waste

Japanese companies are ramping up the use of artificial intelligence and other advanced technology to reduce waste and cut costs in the pandemic, and looking to score some sustainability points along the way. Disposing of Japan's more than 6 million tonnes in food waste costs the world's No. 3 economy some 2 trillion yen (\$19 billion) a year, government data shows. With the highest food waste per capita in Asia, the Japanese government has enacted a new law to halve such costs from 2000 levels by 2030, pushing companies to find solutions. Convenience store chain Lawson Inc has started using AI from U.S. firm DataRobot, which estimates how much product on shelves, from onigiri rice balls to egg and tuna sandwiches, may go unsold or fall short of demand. Lawson aims to bring down overstock by 30% in places where it has been rolled out, and wants to halve food waste at all of its stores in 2030 compared with 2018.

Disposal of food waste is the biggest cost for Lawson's franchise owners after labour costs. Drinks maker Suntory Beverage & Food Ltd is experimenting with another AI product from Fujitsu Ltd to try to determine if goods such as bottles of oolong tea and mineral water have been damaged in shipping. Until now, that's been a time-consuming human endeavor. With the new AI, Suntory hopes to gauge when a damaged box is just that, or when the contents themselves have been damaged and need to be returned. Suntory aims to reduce the return of goods by 30-50% and cut the cost of food waste and develop a common standard system that can be shared by other food makers and shipping firms. Japan's notoriously fussy shoppers are showing signs of getting on board, especially as the coronavirus pandemic hits incomes.

Tatsuya Sekito launched Kuradashi, an e-commerce firm dealing in unsold foods at a

discount, in 2014 after seeing massive amounts of waste from food processors while working for a Japanese trading firm in China. The online business is now thriving due partly to a jump in demand for low-priced unsold foods as consumers became more cost conscious amid the COVID-19 pandemic. "Sales grew 2.5 times last year from a year before, while the amount of food waste has doubled since the coronavirus cut off food supply chain," Sekito told Reuters. Kuradashi has a network of 800 companies, including Meiji Holdings Co, Kagome Co and Lotte Foods Co, who sell it a total 50,000 items including packs of instant curry, smoothies and high-quality nori. "Japanese shoppers tend to be picky but we attract customers by offering not just a sale but a chance to donate a portion of purchases to a charity, raising awareness about social issues," Sekito said.

Membership numbers jumped to 180,000 in 2021 from 80,000 in 2019. Others have also joined forces with food firms in developing new technological platform to cut food waste as part of global efforts to meet sustainable development goals (SDGs). NEC Corp is using AI that can not only analyze data such as weather, calendar and customers' trends in estimating demand but also give reasoning behind its analysis. NEC has deployed the technology to some major retailers and food makers, helping them reduce costs by 15%-75%. NEC hopes to share and process data through a common platform among makers, retailers and logistics, to reduce mismatches in supply chains. "Reducing food waste is not our ultimate goal," said Ryoichi Morita, senior manager overseeing NEC's digital integration. "Eventually, we hope it can lead to resolve other business challenges such as minimizing costs, fixing labour shortages, streamlining inventory, orders and logistics."

From <https://japantoday.com> 03/03/2021

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Japanese Firms Cooperating in Covid-19 Vaccination Programs

The Japanese private sector has been increasingly cooperating for the mass inoculation of the COVID-19 vaccine, such as offering their facilities as inoculation venues or dispatching personnel to local governments. On March 5, a mock mass vaccination was held in the hall of the Aeon Town Yukarigaoka shopping center in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture. The hall is within walking distance of a station on the Keisei Line, and is also accessible by bus. It has parking for about 2,200 cars. Sakura Mayor Sango Nishita said, "We are grateful to be able to use a facility in such a highly populated area." Aeon Co., which operates commercial facilities nationwide, has decided to provide spaces like this in about 20 municipalities, including Hino in Tokyo, and Zama in Kanagawa Prefecture. The facilities are being offered free of charge, except for utilities and other costs. The company is in discussions with about 260 other municipalities. "The facilities are well-equipped with ventilation systems. We would like to contribute to the community," an official at the company said.

Megabanks and other financial institutions are also expected to cooperate in providing municipalities with facilities they have in various locations. Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group will offer several training and recreational facilities, mainly in Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. There are also moves to make company personnel available where needed. Drugstores, for example, could dispatch pharmacists to where there is a shortage of personnel to fill vaccine syringes. Tomod's, which operates drugstores in the Tokyo metropolitan area, has decided to make about 50 of its employees available. Persol Tempstaff Co., a human resources company, will undertake call center services and other work covering a wide range, including the distribution of coupons to be submitted at the time of vaccination, venue management and data entry. Nippon Travel Agency Co. has decided to take on about 90 projects, including reception, reservation management and call center operations. A spokesperson said, "We would like to make use of the know-how we have accumulated in our own business."

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 03/13/2021

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Major Telecoms Preparing Array of 'Flying Base Stations'

Major telecommunications companies are making efforts to use "flying base stations" in the sky to send and receive the radio waves that are needed to support cell phones on the ground below. When the Great East Japan Earthquake hit the nation 10 years ago, some base stations were damaged, and disaster-stricken areas were blacked out, making cell phones unusable over wide areas of the nation. In the event of disasters, the flying stations are expected to cover the role normally played by base stations on the ground to provide an environment in which immediate communication is possible, thereby preventing the damage from getting worse. Major cell phone company KDDI Corp. conducted a training session using a helicopter-borne base station in Sendai on Feb. 25. The portable base station, weighing about 7 kilograms, was placed on a helicopter in the training session, and successfully sent radio waves from the sky.

The company hopes the base stations in the sky will allow people to communicate not only in disaster-hit areas, but also on distressed ships and in other situations. It also hopes they will be used to search for people in need of rescue by receiving signals emitted by those people's cell phones. "Disaster preparedness has developed over the past 10 years. We want to make it possible for people to use our services with greater peace of mind," said Yasuo Okouchi, general manager of the Operations Division of KDDI's Technology Sector. In the March 2011 disaster, 29,000 base stations of major mobile operators in the Tohoku and Kanto regions were knocked out. This was more than 20% of the total of 132,000 stations in the regions. In 2019, a power outage in Chiba Prefecture caused by a typhoon resulted in a prolonged communications disruption. Major telecom companies are working to

develop technology to ensure that communications as a lifeline will not be interrupted even in times of disaster. An unmanned aerial vehicle with a 78-meter wingspan is being tested by HAPSMobile Inc., a subsidiary of SoftBank Corp. It can stay aloft for several months at 20 kilometers above the ground using solar cells on its wings, sending radio waves to an area of ground with a 200-kilometer diameter.

The firm calculates that 40 stations will be enough to cover all of Japan. They are expected to be put into practical use after fiscal 2023. "We can provide a communication environment for depopulated areas as well," Ryuji Wakikawa, director of HAPSMobile, said. Last month, NTT Docomo Inc. signed a memorandum of understanding for joint research with European aviation giant Airbus SE and Finnish telecommunications giant Nokia Oyj for similar projects. In the aftermath of the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes, SoftBank sent communication relay equipment aloft on a balloon. When an earthquake hit Hokkaido in 2018, KDDI dispatched a base station aboard a ship to cover the disaster-hit area from the sea. Such telecom giants also are developing small drones to carry flying base stations. In June last year, the Radio Law was partially revised to allow the operation of drones for use as base stations. "Mobile phone reception is important in our daily lives today, and it is important to keep mobile connections alive by various means," Toyo University Prof. Isao Nakamura said.

From <https://the-japan-news.com> 03/27/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: To Brief Firms on 'Netflix Law'

The South Korean government will discuss with providers of online services to set up detailed guidelines for the country's "Netflix Law," industry sources said Sunday. The Ministry of Science and ICT will hold a meeting this week with officials from Google, Facebook, Netflix, Naver, Kakao and Wavve. The companies are expected to use the session to clarify terms in the revised Telecommunications Business Act, which could potentially disrupt their business activities in the country. Dubbed the "Netflix law," the law became effective Dec. 10, allowing the government to ask large online content providers to take measures to provide stable services in the country. It also stipulates that foreign providers should have local representatives and be equipped with proper payment systems. The new law applies to online companies that account for 1 percent or more of the country's average daily data traffic in the last three months of a year, or firms with more than 1 million daily users.

The regulation, however, has been accused of ambiguity. In December, the Korea Internet Corporations Association, which represents major local tech companies, raised questions regarding the credibility of the internet traffic data the government uses to determine which companies are subject to the law. The association argued

that the Electronics and Telecommunications Research Institute's data, which summarizes data collected from local telecommunications providers, could be biased in favor of local telecommunications firms. The participants of the meeting are expected to discuss specifics regarding payment systems that the law requires internet providers to support. An ICT Ministry official said it will gather feedback from the participating companies as well as opinions from experts in the industry and academic circles to ensure the proper application of the law for the mutual benefit of customers and businesses.

From <http://www.koreaherald.com> 03/07/2021

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S. Korea's Information Security Industry Expands amid Pandemic

South Korea's information security market grew to hit nearly 12 trillion won (US\$10.6 billion) last year on the back of increasing demand for online services amid the pandemic, the ICT ministry said Sunday. Total sales of the industry, which includes digital and physical security sectors, reached 11.9 trillion won in 2020, up 6.4 percent from the previous year, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT, citing a report from the Korea Information Security Industry Association. The ministry said sales in the network security system development sector rose 9.7 percent on-year to reach 825.91 billion won last year, while that of security management system development jumped 11.1 percent to 345.05 billion won over the same period. Sales from physical security sectors also rose, with that of security camera manufacturing rising 8.3 percent to 1.32 trillion won. Exports of the overall information security industry rose 8.8 percent to hit an estimated 1.9 trillion won last year, while the number of information security firms stood at 1,283 in 2020, compared with 1,094 the previous year. The ministry said the popularity of digital services and the growing importance of their security amid the pandemic led to better-than-expected growth for the industry's sales and exports last year.

From <https://en.yna.co.kr> 03/14/2021

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S. Korea's Data Industry Hits over 19 TIn Won in 2020

South Korea's data-related technology industry expanded to be worth over 19 trillion won (US\$16.76 billion) last year, a report showed Tuesday, as the country seeks to develop the industry as part of its digital New Deal initiative. Sales from the local industry reached an estimated 19.27 trillion won, up 14.3 percent from the previous year, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT, citing a report from the Korea Data Agency. By category, sales from data provision services reached 9.38 trillion won last year, followed by data consulting and related services at 7.44 trillion won.

The industry's total workforce stood at 366,021 last year, up 6.2 percent on-year, while those who directly work in data-related fields reached 101,967, up 14.5 percent over the same period. The report estimated that the industry requires an additional 12,114 workers by 2025, with data developers most in need. The latest report comes as South Korea last year launched its digital New Deal program, which aims to spend 58.2 trillion won in key tech industries to create over 900,000 jobs by 2025. Under the initiative, the country aims to establish a broad database that collects data from private and public networks and utilize the data to develop new technology, such as artificial intelligence.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Launching Enterprise to Make Batteries to Power EVs

Indonesia on Friday launched a business enterprise that will produce batteries to power electric vehicles. Called PT Indonesia Battery Holding, the new venture was formed by four state-owned enterprises, namely mining holding MIND ID, metal miner Aneka Tambang (Antam), oil and gas giant Pertamina and electricity monopoly PLN. Each company owns a 25 percent of stake. "I think this is a long journey since a year ago when we made a transformation," the country's State-owned Enterprises (SOE) Minister Erick Thohir said at a press conference in Jakarta. "With the EV batteries, Indonesia will be stronger and more friendly to the green economy," the minister said. Deputy SOE minister Pahala Mansury said that Indonesia Battery Holding was expected to produce 140-gigawatt hours (GWh) worth of batteries by 2030. Of the total of production, 50 GWh will be exported. Thohir said that Indonesia Battery Holding was currently partnering with Chinese battery manufacturer and technology company Contemporary Amperex Technology (CATL) and South Korean chemical company LG Chem. The two firms will invest to make batteries for EVs. CATL and LG Chem, he said, will produce batteries for electric cars, while the Indonesian firms will produce batteries for electric motorbikes. Thohir said that the government will open up more opportunities to other parties.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 03/26/2021

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THAILAND: To Cut Quarantine Period to Support Pandemic-Hit Economy

Thailand announced Friday that it will reduce the mandatory quarantine period for people entering the country to 10 days from two weeks in its latest effort to support

the ailing tourism sector and economic recovery. The relaxation, starting April 1, will not apply to visitors coming from countries with cases of COVID-19 variant strains, according to the Center for the COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA). A CCSA meeting chaired by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha also agreed on Friday that starting from October, visitors from countries with no known variants of COVID-19 may not have to undergo quarantine. The country is also considering cutting the quarantine period to seven days for vaccinated tourists starting next month, according to the CCSA. On Friday, Thailand extended its emergency decree nationwide for the 11th time to the end of May as "interagency cooperation and integration" are still needed to stem the spread of COVID-19 in the country, the CCSA said. A shorter quarantine is expected to help attract more foreign tourists to the country, where the tourism sector accounts for more than 15 percent of the economy. The sector is seen as a key to Thailand's economic recovery. Thailand welcomed about 40 million foreign visitors in 2019, but only 6.7 million trickled in last year. The Southeast Asia's second-largest economy contracted 6.1 percent year on year last year in its sharpest decline since 1998.

From <http://www.xinhuanet.com> 03/19/2021

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VIETNAM: Government Gives in Principle Approval to Industrial Park Projects

The Government has given the green light to a number of industrial park projects in the central province of Nghệ An and the northern provinces of Nam Định and Vĩnh Phúc. The Hoàng Mai 1 Industrial Park project in Hoàng Mai township in Nghệ An received in principle approval under Decision No 276/QĐ-TTg and will have a duration of 50 years. Located in the Southeast Nghệ An Economic Zone, the project covers 264.77 ha and has total investment of VNĐ750 billion (US\$32.4 million). In other decisions, Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc approved in principle the construction and trading of infrastructure at the Mỹ Thuận Industrial Park in Mỹ Lộc and Vụ Bản districts in Nam Định and the Thái Hòa-Liễn Sơn-Liên Hòa Industrial Park (first phase) in Lập Thạch District in Vĩnh Phúc. Mỹ Thuận will cover 158.48 ha and have total investment of over VNĐ1.6 trillion (\$69.19 million), while Thái Hòa-Liễn Sơn-Liên Hòa will sit on 145.27ha and have total capital of VNĐ774.82 billion (\$33.5 million).

From <https://vietnamnews.vn/> 03/02/2021

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More Than 18,000 New Firms Set Up in First Two Months

More than 18,000 new businesses were established in the first two months of 2021, a year-on-year decline of 4 per cent, according to the Ministry of Planning and

Investment. The number of employees registered by the newly-established enterprises rose 9.7 per cent to 173,000. The months saw an addition of VNĐ720.4 trillion (US\$32.24 billion) in total registered capital, up 12.4 per cent. The average level in registered capital per enterprise surged 46.4 per cent to reach VNĐ18.5 billion in the period. About 11,030 enterprises resumed operations in the first two months, down 7.6 per cent while 33,611 others were dissolved, up 18.6 per cent. In February alone, as many as 8,038 new businesses were set up with a combined registered capital of nearly VNĐ179.74 trillion. The number of new firms represented a year-on-year drop of 12.3 per cent while the amount of capital surged 85.6 per cent. The number of workers registered by these businesses reached almost 57,000, down 22.1 per cent.

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City Seeks Private Investors for Metro Lines

HCM City wants to attract more private investment instead of relying on official development assistance (ODA) to build its remaining metro lines, but experts have said that it faces a difficult challenge. Dr. Vũ Anh Tuấn, director of Việt Đức Transport Research Centre, said the city was facing hurdles finding private investors for the metro lines. “Investors are hesitant because these metro projects are all done on a massive scale and require a huge amount of capital, while revenue from ticket sales is not enough to cover operating costs,” he said. Moreover, a lack of a legal framework on private-public partnership (PPP) investment in traffic and railway projects has added to the problem, according to Tuấn. Dr. Huỳnh Thế Du, lecturer at Fulbright University, said it was important to learn from the experience of other countries such as South Korea and China, which initially relied on advanced technology and foreign loans for their first railway lines. Later, they focused on domestic private investment and technology, which lowered the costs greatly. Most of the metro lines in HCM City are being funded by ODA loans.

For example, the first metro line with a total investment of VNĐ43.757 trillion (US\$1.9 billion) is being built with an ODA loan from Japan of VNĐ38.265 trillion, and reciprocal capital of VNĐ5.492 trillion. Total investment for metro line 2 is VNĐ47.891 trillion, of which ODA is VNĐ37.487 trillion from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), German KfW Development Bank (KfW) and European Investment Bank (EIB). The reciprocal capital is VNĐ10.404 trillion. The first phase of metro line No 5 will be funded by ODA loans from the ADB, KfW, EIB and the Spanish government. “The problem with the use of ODA loans is the delay in disbursement procedures, which prolongs the projects and increases the public debt,” he said.

Solutions

Tuấn said that administrative procedures must be minimised and favourable

conditions created for investors both at home and abroad under public-private partnerships. Because of the massive investment needed, the state must undertake the construction of infrastructures such as tunnel structures, elevated roads, stations and depots. It will need to raise capital by selling bonds and creating a public transport development fund from various sources (such as fee collection for driving in the downtown area, and tolls for road use, fuel charges and others). The private sector could purchase train carriages and the operating systems. Over the next decade, HCM City will need about VNĐ924 trillion (\$42 billion) for 85 transport infrastructure projects, including 55 roads and bridges, seven waterway transport, eight railway and 15 road works. In particular, the city needs \$833 million in private investment for its metro lines. This includes the sections of metro line No 2 between Bến Thành Market and Thủ Thiêm and between Tham Lương and Tây Ninh Bus Terminal. Metro line No 3A extending from Bến Thành Market to Tân Kiên Terminal in Bình Chánh District will require \$3.02 billion. Metro line No 3B from Cộng Hoà Crossroads to Hiệp Bình Chánh will cost \$1.88 billion, while metro line No 4 between the Thạnh Xuân and Hiệp Phước urban areas will also run through multiple districts and cost \$3.53 billion. Line No 4B between Gia Định Park in Bình Thạnh District and Lăng Cha Cả Terminal in Gò Vấp District will require \$1.33 billion.

All of them are expected to be built under the public-private partnership investment mode, but the city has yet to find private funding for them. According to HCM City's Management Authority for Urban Railways (MAUR), the Export-Import Bank of the Republic of Korea has recently asked the city government for permission to conduct an investment study for the second phase of Metro Line No 5. This line will connect the Bảy Hiền intersection with the new Cần Giuộc Bus Station and Đa Phước Depot, under the PPP mode. The bank said it would provide funding for the project's pre-feasibility study, which will cover technical, financial and legal aspects, according to MAUR. The city plans to build a total of eight metro lines running a total 220 km with total investment of nearly \$25 billion. It also wants to build urban areas along the metro routes and underground spaces around metro stations to save land and ensure public transport. With a population of about 13 million, the country's largest city has been struggling with traffic congestion for years. The number of personal vehicles has surged, with 825,000 cars and more than 8 million motorbikes, while public transport remains underdeveloped.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 03/06/2021

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Việt Nam Speeds Up Development of Supporting Industries

The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) will pay greater attention this year to the implementation of projects manufacturing products in supporting industries, as many opportunities have appeared for Việt Nam to bolster production and exports. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a blow to the country's economy and manufacturing

sector, triggering a constant shortage of materials along with difficulties and congested delivery for finished products. To address the problems, many Vietnamese firms are seeking domestic partners in material production and supporting industries, in a bid to save cost and time as well as improving quality. A host of free trade agreements (FTAs) have created optimal conditions for an influx of investment into Việt Nam as investors try to access preferential tariffs. Foreign enterprises operating in Việt Nam have taken the initiative in restructuring production value chains or switching to supporting industries, according to the MoIT. In addition, businesses in the field raised their quality and sharpened their competitive edge. Việt Nam ranked eighth in the 2021 Agility Emerging Markets Logistics Index, up three places compared to 2020. The index is an annual snapshot of industry sentiment and a ranking of the world's 50 leading emerging markets by size, business conditions, infrastructure, and transport connections.

This year, the Việt Nam Industry Agency under the MoIT will review manufacturing projects, especially major endeavours in industrial products for export. It will team up with agencies to attract investment, bolster global production chains, and capitalise on trade agreements. It will also carry out procedures for infrastructure investment for two centres facilitating industrial development in northern and southern regions, along with working with localities that possess advantages in this regard, to discuss appropriate policies. These centres will help supporting industries boost innovation and technology transfer, improve productivity and quality, increase added value in their products, and take part in global supply chains. Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc signed Resolution No 115 last year on measures to further propel supporting industries, setting out development goals for the next decade. Vietnamese enterprises must be able to produce highly-competitive support products, meeting 45 per cent of essential needs for domestic production and consumption and accounting for about 11 per cent of industrial production value by 2025.

About 1,000 enterprises are to be capable of direct supply to assembly enterprises and multinational corporations, with domestic enterprises to account for about 30 per cent by 2025. By 2030, support products will meet 70 per cent of demand and account for about 14 per cent of industrial production value. Some 2,000 companies are to be capable of supplying directly to assemblers and multinational corporations by 2030. Vietnamese businesses operating in supporting industries have developed in both quantity and quality in recent years, with improved production capacity and increasing engagement in global production chains. In a recent report submitted to the National Assembly Standing Committee and legislators, the Government cited statistics showing that companies in supporting industries account for nearly 4.5 per cent of all manufacturing and processing businesses and have created more than 600,000 jobs, equivalent to 8 per cent of the workforce in the manufacturing and processing sector. Their net revenue now tops VNĐ900 trillion (US\$38.9 billion), or about 11 per cent of the sector's total. Some Vietnamese enterprises boast relatively good capacity in producing moulds, bicycle and motorbike components, electrical

cables, plastic and rubber components, and tyres, meeting domestic demand and the requirements of foreign importers. The report noted that supporting industries play a decisive role in restructuring the economy, improving workplace productivity and skills, and promoting the competitiveness and quality of Vietnamese goods and the economy.

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Policies to Support Firms Should Be Practical

Policies to support firms to overcome the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic should be more practical to ensure companies really benefit. According to the Việt Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), from the outbreak of the virus to the end of last year, about 95 documents were issued to support enterprises and residents with four major packages including VNĐ250 trillion in credit support, VNĐ180 trillion in tax deferrals, VNĐ16 trillion in preferential loans with zero rate and VNĐ62 trillion in social welfare. However, the efficiency of these policies was not as high as expected due to complicated procedures and requirements which deterred firms from applying for the support policies, some business associations said. Agreeing it was necessary to launch a so-called second economic stimulus package, Phạm Xuân Hòa, former Deputy Director of the Banking Strategy Institute, said that policy-makers must renovate their thinking in raising policies to ensure the support really benefits firms in the new normal.

Policies should aim to simplify criteria and requirements as well as ensuring fairness in access among those who were subjects to the assistance. Policy-makers needed to understand what were the problems enterprises were encountering so that could raise practical solutions, Hòa said. Interest rates should also be strongly reduced to support enterprises, Hòa said. Vĩnh Phúc Province Enterprise Association proposed further cuts in taxes, specifically value-added tax from 10 per cent to eight per cent over the next three to five years and corporate income tax from 20 per cent to 13-15 per cent. According to Nguyễn Xuân Tốt, President of Thái Nguyên Province Association of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, the tax deferral policy did not help much as the majority of enterprises suffered from declines in revenue and even losses. Vũ Thị An, Director of C&A Tax Consultancy Company, said the tax support policies remained modest, mainly tax deferral, adding that it was understandable in the context of limited national financial capacity. An also said that enterprises should not expect too much from tax reduction and exemption policies. The better way to support enterprises would be reducing the number of time-consuming inspections, An said, adding that they should only be carried out when there were signs of violations. VCCI's survey found that 87.2 per cent of enterprises were suffering from negative impacts of the pandemic.

From <https://vietnamnews.vn> 03/22/2021

Private Banks Hold the Upper Hand Thanks to Its Readiness to Invest into Risky Segment

The five banks with the highest return on asset and the return on equity in 2020 were all private ones. Besides, while joint stock banks like VPBank, Techcombank and ACB had assets equivalent to only a third or fourth of that owned by state-owned banks such as Agribank and BIDV, their profits were equal or even higher. Techcombank and VPBank were two of the most profitable banks in 2020. Analysts say it is easy to understand why the private joint stock banks have been able to keep up with or even surpass the State-owned lenders. Analysts say most Vietnamese banks still heavily rely on interest income to earn profits. Meanwhile, the credit market shares of some private lenders have consistently risen in recent years while State-owned banks have been headed in the opposite direction. This is based on the firm financial foundation the former have built, which has enabled them to grasp growth opportunities. State-owned banks own huge assets of VNĐ1,180-1,550 quadrillion each but are unable to increase their capital to meet adequacy norms.

A report by the State Bank of Việt Nam said the four State-owned lenders, Agribank, Vietcombank, Vietinbank, and BIDV, accounted for 41.8 per cent of the banking sector's total assets as of last June. But since they have been unable to increase their capital correspondingly, they have been forced to slow down to ensure their capital adequacy ratio (CAR) remains at acceptable levels, which has allowed private lenders to race ahead. CAR is the ratio of a bank's capital in relation to its risk-weighted assets and current liabilities. It is decided by central banks and bank regulators to prevent commercial banks from taking excess leverage and becoming insolvent in the process. Statistics from Việt Dragon Securities Company show that while the State-owned banks still have the largest credit market shares, they have been shrinking somewhat in recent years, while those of private lenders have been on an upward trend. MB, Techcombank, VPBank, and ACB achieved the highest credit growth rates last year and thus also the highest profit growth.

MB, for instance, achieved credit growth of 23 per cent and made a profit of VNĐ10.69 trillion, an increase of 6.5 per cent from the previous year. Private banks also have a higher risk appetite and thus invest in corporate bonds and are willing to provide unsecured consumer loans and lend to the property sector, all of which are highly profitable. In fact, large purchases of corporate bonds in 2020 enabled them to remain afloat when the Covid-19 pandemic was raging and brought the economy to a standstill. Some major developers have acquired stakes in private banks, which has caused them to increase lending to property companies and, thus, their profits. Private banks' cost of funds has gone down substantially in recent times, another factor in improving their profit margin. This has come about since they have been

able to reduce various fees, thus attracting non-term savings. Efforts to change their customer profile and credit portfolios, adopt new technologies, diversify sources of revenue, and cutting expenses have also helped improve profit margins.

On the other hand, State-owned commercial banks have to compulsorily lend at low interest rates to priority sectors like infrastructure, and have been instructed by the Government to cut interest rates to support businesses affected by the pandemic. Agribank, for instance, has been carrying out no-profit credit programmes to support rural and agriculture development across the country. Central bank makes changes to how it allots bank credit quotas. In the past the State Bank of Việt Nam (SBV) would usually set credit growth limits for commercial banks for the year based on their credit growth in the month of December (December 31) of the previous year. But this year there has been a difference after the central bank allotted credit growth quotas of 3-4 per cent for the first quarter of this year to some banks instead of allocation of credit growth quotas to the lenders for the whole year as it used to do in the past. This has caused analysts to think the SBV could change the way it allots credit growth quotas this year, possibly by assessing the operations of each bank and its capability to develop credit healthily on a quarterly basis.

What do banking sector insiders say about this? Nguyễn Tuấn Anh, director of the credit department at the central bank's Department of Credit for Economic Sectors, has revealed that the SBV has made two major changes to the way it regulates credit activities by the banking sector. The central bank has temporarily allocated credit limits for the first quarter of this year to lenders based on which they could implement their lending plans in a timely manner since it needs more time to calculate credit growth targets for the whole banking sector for the whole year. In other words, it would not allocate the credit growth quotas every three months as is rumoured but the first months of this year only. The second change is that this year the credit growth quota for a bank will be based on its credit growth for the whole of last year and not just last December. He has also revealed that this year's overall credit growth target for the banking sector is likely to be 12 per cent though the central bank would remain flexible and tweak it as necessary. Dr Cán Văn Lực, a senior economist, said in the long term the central bank should stop micromanaging lenders' credit activities and only monitor their capital adequacy instead.

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South Asia

INDIA: Impacting Livelihood of 50,000 Small Businesses - i2e1 and B-ABLE Partnership

Delhi based start-up i2e1 (Information to everyone), curates India's first digital livelihood focused skill development initiative, impacting 50,000 small businesses in partnership with B-ABLE. This partnership realizes PM's dream of generating livelihoods through the groundbreaking PM-WANI scheme by training micro-entrepreneurs and helping them set-up their PDOs. B-ABLE expertise in training and working with low-income communities and i2e1 simple yet smart technology is making this happen. The program aims to train more than 200 entrepreneurs from Aligarh and Meerut in the first month alone. Training would focus on how to use technology for a more efficient and smart way of working. Which should further induce some direct and indirect benefits of digitalization. Later this would be scaled up to 50,000 such small businesses across multiple cities. Commenting on the initiative, Satyam Darmora, Founder of i2e1 said, "Our partnership with B-ABLE, is a huge step forward in creating digital entrepreneurs with the right digital skills around the PM WANI scheme in rural India. This is a unique initiative connecting more people to local businesses and supporting our PM's vision of Hagi Unnati, Badhegi Kamayi."

Expressing his thoughts, Vishal Singh, Chief Operating Officer, B-ABLE, said "PM-WANI initiative will strengthen the urban economy by helping build a livelihood ecosystem through the extension of affordable information technology which reaches to every town and village." The set-up cost, digital literacy, and initial handholding are some key aspects that play a huge role in the adoption of the PM-WANI scheme at scale. Being one of the leading companies in the WiFi domain, i2e1 has created a smart plug-&-play PDO solution costing 1/4th of the traditional solutions in the market. and has been instrumental in shaping and demonstrating the potential of the WANI model with TRAI and other industry partners. i2e1 believes that this model can be adopted by government bodies such as MSME or NSDC as well as private organizations like B-ABLE who are focused on livelihoods. It also presents a new way of investing and impacting communities for the CSR companies interested in areas such as digital connectivity and livelihood promotion.

From <https://egov.eletsonline.com/> 03/15/2021

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Announcing New Auction for Privatization of State Property

The State Service on Property Issues under the Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy will hold a new auction on Apr.6, 2021, Trend reports referring to the ministry. According to the ministry, 65 public property facilities, including 24 small enterprises and unfinished facilities, and 41 joint-stock companies will be put up for the auction. 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).

From <https://en.trend.az/> 03/10/2021

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Azerbaijan Working on Transferring Some of Functions of State Bodies to Private Sector

Azerbaijan is developing proposals for the development of the non-oil sector, the transfer of regulatory and commercial functions of state structures to the private sector, Trend reports citing the report of the Azerbaijan Cabinet of Ministers for 2020, Trend reports. The adoption of a bill on cooperation between the public and private sectors, as well as the creation of a State Investment Holding, will also contribute to this process, the document reads. "Also, a new bill on privatization and transfer of state property to management is being developed. This bill is aimed at the privatization of large companies and joint-stock companies, increasing the efficiency of their activities through partnerships between the private and public sectors," said the report.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Insurance Industry Asked to Show Humanity

A federal cabinet minister is calling on the insurance industry to show a bit of humanity when it comes to dealing with Australians who have been struck by the east coast floods. Some people think they are fully insured, only to find out they are not covered for flood. Emergency Management Minister David Littleproud says people entered into these contracts in good faith and he expects insurance companies to do the same. "We would say to the insurance industry, 'please, you have an opportunity to build your reputation'," Mr Littleproud told Sky News' Sunday Agenda program. "We'd like to think that they would show a bit of humanity and have a social conscience." Meanwhile, he said members of the Australian Defence Force are sweeping the streets and helping NSW residents clean up. He expects the

number of ADF personnel could swell to 700 but said those numbers are at the discretion of the NSW government so there is no duplication in the process. "There are still major flooding warnings in some systems; it's still important, while the sun is shining, it is still unsafe to go near this water," the minister said. "We need to treat this seriously and will need to listen to emergency services."

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