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1、Government Policy and Legislation

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New Lobbying Rules Needed to Strengthen Trust

Governments need to revamp lobbying rules to make them fit for the 21st century, according to a new OECD report. Lobbying rules need to reflect new realities, including rapid technological change, global competition for influence and calls for increased transparency, integrity, and access. Lobbying in the 21st Century: Transparency, Integrity and Access analyses trends and developments in OECD countries over the past decade to improve lobbying practices since the 2010 OECD Recommendation on Principles for Transparency and Integrity in Lobbying, the first international standard to address transparency and integrity risks related to lobbying practices. The report shows that countries have made strides in providing transparency, integrity and access, but at different speeds and in a continuously evolving lobbying landscape with new challenges.

While lobbying is an important part of the policy-making process, it remains, in many cases, too open to abuse, with grey areas, loopholes, revolving doors, and incomplete information and scrutiny, says the report. Rules also need to evolve to take into account the evolution of technology and digitalisation. More transparency is needed on the use of social media in lobbying. The Canadian Register of Lobbyists and the EU Transparency Register are the only frameworks requiring lobbyists to disclose information on the use of awareness-raising, grassroots, and social media campaigns as a lobbying tool. Spending on lobbying is also highly concentrated among just a handful of industries. When vested interests dominate, lobbying can have a detrimental impact on competition, productivity, innovation and growth as well as fairness and trust in institutions.

The report finds that in most countries there is limited transparency on both the targets of lobbying activities across governments and who is conducting the lobbying. Less than half of OECD countries know who is lobbying their governments as the work is often done indirectly or by proxies. Only three OECD countries (Australia, Canada and the US) have rules on lobbying and influence in domestic affairs by foreign governments. More transparency is needed on who funds research, think tanks and grassroots organisations, as well as on the use of social media as a lobbying tool. While transparency of political finance is high, some grey areas remain, such as the funding of digital advertisements for political parties and candidates. Improving integrity is essential, says the report. Public officials and private lobbies need more robust integrity rules. Governments must do more to ensure that public officials interact with lobbyists with impartiality and in the public interest. A more comprehensive and clearer set of rules is needed for lobbyists and companies to ensure integrity in influencing public decisions.

More also needs to be done to include citizens and businesses in decision making. Stakeholder participation in the policy-making process has increased overall over the past decade, but more meaningful engagement, greater transparency and better communication are needed. The report Lobbying in the 21st Century: Transparency, Integrity and Access is available at https://www.oecd.org/governance/lobbying-in-the-21st-century-c6d8eff8-en.htm. Register to watch the virtual conference on Lobbying in the 21st Century: Transparency, Integrity and Access taking place from 12.00 to 15.30 on Thursday 20 May 2021. For more information, journalists should contact the OECD Media Office (tel. + 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.

From https://www.oecd.org/ 05/20/2021

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A New Energy Policy to Accelerate Asia’s Energy Transition

ADB’s Energy Sector Group Chief Yongping Zhai outlines the rationale behind updating the energy policy to help the bank’s members develop clean, green, and resilient energy systems that foster economic growth. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) aims to help its developing member countries (DMCs) provide clean, green, reliable, adequate, and affordable energy for inclusive growth through a comprehensive energy policy that ensures environmental, social, and economic and sustainability.

The current energy policy, which was approved in June 2009, rests on three pillars:

- promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy;
- maximizing access to energy for all; and
- promoting energy sector reform, capacity building, and governance.
-

The policy has been instrumental in guiding $42.5 billion in energy sector support across all DMCs from 2009 to 2019. This has enabled them to build much-needed basic energy infrastructure helping to achieve universal access to affordable energy, improving energy security, and supply reliability. The 2009 policy has also guided investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency projects, facilitating the transition to a clean and green low-carbon economy. But given the fundamental changes in the energy sector, the ongoing global energy transformation, and rising concerns over climate change, ADB is now updating its energy policy with a new version expected to be considered by the Board of Directors in the fourth quarter of 2021. ADB's Energy Sector Group Chief Yongping Zhai explains the rationale and process of updating the policy.

1. Why is ADB updating its energy policy?

There have been many fundamental changes since ADB approved its existing policy more than a decade ago. Most significantly, the Paris Agreement was adopted at COP 21 in 2015, bringing together all nations to combat climate change with enhanced support for developing countries.

The central goal of the Paris Agreement is to strengthen the global response to climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees. The Paris Agreement requires all countries to put forward and continually strengthen their best efforts through nationally determined contributions (NDCs). ADB's Independent Evaluation Department conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the current energy policy and its implementation during 2009–2019. The evaluation concluded, and ADB Management agreed, that although the 2009 energy policy was relevant during the period, it no longer adequately aligns with the global consensus on climate change, the ongoing global transformation of the energy sector, recent changes in DMC energy strategies, or ADB's institutional priorities under Strategy 2030.

There has also been significant progress in technology development in the past decade, during which the levelized cost of electricity of renewable energy declined dramatically. Between 2010 and 2019, the cost of photovoltaics declined by 82%, onshore wind by 40%, and offshore wind by 29%, according to the International Renewable Energy Agency. Photovoltaics and wind are becoming more competitive while it is more expensive to build new coal-fired power plants in many countries. In addition, emerging technologies such as energy storage, smart grids, hydrogen,

carbon capture and storage, and the internet of things are maturing to support renewable energy integration into the grid and distributed energy systems. There have also been remarkable improvements on the demand-side in end-use equipment energy efficiency.
All of this means we must assess the current energy policy through the prism of these developments and prepare new strategic directions to meet the needs of developing countries in Asia and the Pacific.

2. How will the new energy policy fit into ADB's long term strategy?
In July 2018, ADB adopted a new long-term strategy to respond effectively to the region's changing needs. Strategy 2030 focuses on achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific while continuing to focus on eradicating extreme poverty. The strategy identified seven priorities: addressing remaining poverty and reducing inequalities; accelerating progress in gender equality; tackling climate change, building climate and disaster resilience, and enhancing environmental sustainability; making cities more livable; promoting rural development and food security; strengthening governance and institutional capacity; and fostering regional cooperation and integration. The new energy policy will guide ADB's energy sector operations, aiming to help members develop clean, green, and resilient energy systems which foster economic growth and provide secure and affordable modern energy services.

ADB energy sector operations will support the seven operational priorities through innovative, green, and cross-sectoral approaches, including solar pumps for irrigation, green jobs for women, renewable energy for clinics and schools, electric vehicles for transport, energy efficient water supply systems, and smart buildings in cities, among others. Regional integration in the energy sector will be further enhanced through ongoing subregional platforms and initiatives such as the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program, and the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation. ADB will also support deployment of advanced technologies to help the region "build back better" and foster a green recovery from COVID-19.

3. What will be the new policy's stance on fossil fuels and coal in particular?
The low-carbon energy transition will be a big challenge in Asia because most countries have depended on fossil fuels for a long time—and coal in particular. Coal has historically played an important role for many Asian countries, providing affordable energy to develop their economies and enable universal energy access. In 2018, coal generated almost 60% of electricity in Asia and it plays an outsized role in larger countries. For example coal generated around 73.5% of all energy produced in India, 66.5% in the People's Republic of China, 56.4% in Indonesia, 52.1% in the Philippines, and 44.6% in Malaysia. Coal-fired power stations often have a lifespan of more than 30 years while the average age of Asia's coal plants is about 12 years. This means that phasing out coal will be a complex and enduring process. On the

other hand, it is impossible for any country to rely on a single source for affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy in the near-term. Therefore, a well-balanced energy mix with an increasing share of renewable energy will be necessary for the foreseeable future in most Asian countries.

ADB will support its DMCs to reduce their dependence on coal and eventually phase out coal power generation. This will be done by setting standards and requirements such as emission intensities and minimum efficiency levels, while introducing low-carbon and climate-resilient technologies including carbon capture and storage. The updated policy will provide guidance and screening criteria on the use of fossil fuels to ensure no conflict with the broader international goals to which ADB and its DMCs subscribe.

4. What is ADB’s position on gas?

The GHG emissions of natural gas are much lower than those of coal. Gas can play a balancing role to support intermittent renewable energy and increase access to clean cooking and heating.

ADB has supported natural gas projects that are aimed at providing energy access to clean cooking and heating, and replacing coal power with more efficient and low emission combined-cycle gas-fired power. We have to ensure that gas projects avoid long-term lock-in effects, and the risk of creating stranded assets. For that purpose, ADB will make sure that gas projects are consistent with the country’s NDCs and long-term energy transition plan. The projects also need to demonstrate alignment with targets to achieve net-carbon neutrality by mid-century. Carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) technology can also be used to reduce the emissions of gas power projects.

5. How has ADB supported climate finance?

Tackling climate change, building climate and disaster resilience, and enhancing environmental sustainability is a priority under ADB's Strategy 2030. ADB has committed to deliver $80 billion in cumulative climate finance between 2019 and 2030 and will ensure that at least 75% of its projects by number will address climate change mitigation and adaptation by 2030. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, ADB recorded $5.3 billion in climate finance in 2020, of which $4.5 billion (86%) is expected to contribute to mitigation and $751 million (14%) to adaptation. ADB provided $4.5 billion from its own resources and mobilized $758 million from external resources such as ADB-administered donor trust funds, financing from multilateral climate funds including the Global Environment Facility, and bilateral financing, among others. In the energy sector, ADB’s contribution to climate mitigation was $1.9 billion, and climate adaptation was $80 million in 2020. In 2015, ADB made its initial climate finance commitment to double climate financing from its own resources to $6 billion annually by 2020, which it went on to achieve a year ahead of schedule in 2019. For more information on ADB’s climate financing, please visit ADB’s Climate Change Financing Data Library.

6. What are ADB's guiding principles as it updates the policy?

The new policy will be based on five guiding principles: securing energy for a prosperous and inclusive Asia and the Pacific; building a sustainable and resilient energy future; engaging with institutions and framing policy reforms; promoting regional cooperation to enhance energy security; and providing integrated solutions and cross-sectoral operations to maximize development impact. To secure energy for the region, ADB will promote the provision of last-mile access for power, light, clean cooking and heating to encourage DMCs to provide modern energy to all. This also enables use of energy in productive activities which leads to job-creation and business opportunities for people living in rural areas. To build a sustainable and resilient energy future, ADB will assist DMCs with tackling climate change, enhancing environmental sustainability, and building climate and disaster resilience through the increased use of renewable and low-carbon energy. ADB will support its DMCs to achieve a planned and rapid phase-out of coal in the Asia and the Pacific region, while considering the impact on people and communities to ensure a just transition with no-one left behind.

ADB will support energy sector reforms, including strengthened regulatory frameworks and the introduction of competitive markets. Strengthening DMCs' institutions will allow them to efficiently manage the sector and introduce progressive and enabling energy policies, attract private sector investment, and ensure the long-term financial viability of energy entities. ADB will promote regional cooperation through policy dialogue, knowledge sharing, and investments in cross-border energy infrastructure, including building of regional energy markets. The benefits of subregional and bilateral energy cooperation include cost savings, reduced GHG emissions, and increased energy security by enabling more diverse energy mixes. Finally, to maximize development impact, ADB will integrate its energy expertise across sectors and themes to address more complex development challenges. ADB will continue to combine finance, knowledge, partnerships in its energy operations. ADB's country-focused approach will deliver integrated energy and cross-sector solutions that provide comprehensive and magnified development impacts.

7. What is the status of the ongoing consultation process?

A series of stakeholder consultations is being held as part of the process. As of the end of April 2021, ADB had held 19 consultations with various stakeholder groups. These include with ADB members, development partners, international organizations, energy policy and technology experts, civil society organizations, and the public. The objective is to understand the energy needs of our DMCs and assess policy options to meet the Paris Agreement and the SDG 2030 Agenda, among others. Stakeholder engagement is also key to reflecting the ongoing transformation of global energy systems with innovative technologies for enhanced environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and business models. Engaging stakeholders is essential to reflecting the operational priorities of Strategy 2030, and the policies of other multilateral development banks.

We continue to seek views, advice, and inputs on the following questions, among others:

1. What emerging new technologies and innovations in the next 5-10 years may be game-changers for meeting energy access and climate goals?
2. What cross sectoral issues (for example, the energy-water-transport nexus) should be considered in the new policy directions?
3. Which needs and priorities of developing countries in Asia and the Pacific require more support and assistance from ADB?
4. What is the long-term impact of COVID-19 on the energy sector and what should our response be?

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/02/2021

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ADB Outlines Plan to Ensure "Stronger" Asia-Pacific Recovery from Pandemic

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) expressed optimism on Wednesday that the Asia-Pacific region can emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic "even stronger than before" by focusing on five areas to help achieve a "prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future." "I believe the path we have laid out will help lead our region out of these uncertain times," ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa said in remarks to the ADB Board of Governors at its 54th annual meeting. Asakawa outlined the ADB's five-point plan for the region, including the need to place ambitious climate actions at the center of development, with an increased focus on adaptation and resilience, and with full commitment to the goals of the Paris Agreement. He also stressed the need to address inequality, including the gender gap, by investing in health, education, and social protection. Another area is to promote high-quality green and digital infrastructure, enabling economies to rebuild smartly while closing the digital gap and attracting substantial private investment. Asakawa said the ADB will also focus on deepening regional cooperation and integration so that ADB developing members can seize the opportunities of renewed globalization and strengthen regional health security. He also stressed the need to strengthen domestic resource mobilization to ensure that governments can finance sustainable growth and respond effectively to future crises. "We will prioritize the quality of our assistance over quantity, meeting near-term needs with a clear vision for the future. If we stay on this course, I am confident the region will emerge from the current crisis even stronger than before," Asakawa added. The ADB said its total commitments in 2020 reached a record high of 31.6 billion U.S. dollars, with just over half supporting operations to respond to the pandemic. Enditem

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ADB Launches Plan for Pacific to Boost Urban Services and Livability

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has unveiled its approach to help Pacific countries improve their towns, cities, and water and sanitation services over the next 5 years. The Pacific Urban Development, Water, and Sanitation Sector Road Map 2021–2025 was developed in close consultation with ADB's Pacific developing member countries and reveals ADB's vision and targets for how investments, knowledge-sharing initiatives, and ADB's partnerships will improve livability and contribute to the development of safe, efficient, and reliable urban services. The report identifies the major constraints for the delivery of urban services in the Pacific, including fragile economies, limited public land, problems around long-term planning, fewer experts stemming from smaller population bases, infrastructure maintenance issues, and women and girls having less access to services and resources.

"This road map identifies constraints to urban development and presents solutions to these challenges," said ADB Pacific Department's Urban Water and Sanitation Division Director Jingmin Huang. "Supporting the greater use of available technologies, exploring knowledge solutions, institutional strengthening, encouraging private sector participation, and building social capital will help create strong and healthy Pacific towns and cities." The road map will guide the design and implementation of ADB's urban sector support across three areas: improving and sustaining urban services, such as water supply, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management; spatial planning; and climate change and the environment. It specifies ADB's current and potential investment opportunities, and ongoing and potential advisory work and capacity building.

The urban road map shows how ADB will prioritize improving the region's water supply; placing greater emphasis on citywide inclusive sanitation, hygiene, and solid waste management initiatives; supporting climate-related flood and drought management; assisting with urban planning; and promoting knowledge sharing between countries and service providers. The road map promotes integrated solutions to urban challenges and is aligned with the vision and targets of ADB's broader Strategy 2030, that sets out ADB's broad vision and strategic response to the evolving needs of Asia and the Pacific.

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ASEAN Member States Adopt Regional Action Plan to Tackle Plastic Pollution

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) launched the ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Member States (2021 – 2025), which provides a scalable, solution-focused joint strategy to address marine plastic debris across the region. Adopted ahead of World Environment Day on June 5 and World Oceans Day on June 8, the Action Plan represents a milestone for ASEAN, signifying a renewed, bolder collective commitment through regional actions, aligned with national agendas towards tackling a critical environmental challenge. Plastic is estimated to account for 80% of all marine debris in the oceans. In six of the ten ASEAN Member States alone, over 31 million tons of plastic waste was generated in a year. While many of them are engaged in national efforts to combat plastic waste, this challenge knows no borders. Shared river systems, connected coastlines and the international trade in plastic products and plastic waste exacerbate the threat of marine debris for the entire region. The sudden increase in single-use plastics and personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 crisis has put additional stress on countries working to tackle marine plastic debris.

"Our seas and coasts are vital for our lives and livelihoods, however they are under immense pressure, especially due to marine plastic pollution, which has the potential to damage human health as well as decimate the tourism and fishing industries that are vital to the region's economies," said H.E Dato Lim Jock Hoi, Secretary-General of ASEAN. "The ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Member States is testament of our collective and forward-looking response to the challenge with the aim to support regional policies, platforms and align resources to complement existing country actions." Despite the challenges, the Regional Action Plan will be implemented over the next five years, highlighting many opportunities for Member States to catalyze, collaborate and apply long-term solutions relating to plastics usage and plastic management. The Plan includes 14 Regional Actions across four pillars of Policy Support and Planning; Research, Innovation and Capacity Building; Public Awareness, Education and Outreach; and Private Sector Engagement.

"The volume of solid waste and marine debris generated across Southeast Asia is on the rise. Coupled with expanding urbanization and a growing consuming class, the long-term effects are only just emerging," said H.E. Varawut Silpa-archa, Thailand's Minister of National Resources and Environment. "Building on the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in ASEAN Region and the ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris, the Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris will play an important role in helping ASEAN achieve this vision and protect the vital marine environments that sustain the region for generations to come. To implement this Regional Action Plan, engagement and support from multi-sectoral stakeholders are crucial."

The Regional Action Plan supports ASEAN's overall commitment to tackle the challenge by reducing plastic inputs into the system, enhancing collection and minimizing leakage, as well as creating value for waste reuse. Actions include guidelines for countries to phase out single-use plastics, harmonize regional policies on recycling and plastics packaging standards, and strengthen regional measurement and monitoring of marine debris. These coordinated measures will also enhance regional platforms for innovation, investments, and training. The Regional Action Plan was developed through extensive consultations with representatives from ASEAN, regional technical experts and the private sector. Support was also offered by the World Bank Group, through PROBLUE, an umbrella multi donor trust fund housed at the World Bank, that supports the sustainable and integrated development of marine and coastal resources in healthy oceans.

“Marine debris is a monumental challenge for East Asia and the Pacific, and needs strong collective action,” said Victoria Kwakwa, World Bank Regional Vice President for East Asia and Pacific. “The World Bank is proud to have supported the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Member States in preparing this comprehensive Action Plan as a framework for joint action and accountability. We are committed to supporting its successful implementation.” The World Bank has also undertaken extensive diagnostics, policy support, and investments across the region. This included a series of studies that was launched in March 2021, on the untapped economic potential of plastic circularity which identified that more than 75% of the material value of the plastics is lost – the equivalent of US$6 billion per year across the three countries – when single-use plastics are discarded rather than recovered and recycled.

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CHINA: Issues Guideline on Social Investment in Rural Sectors

China issued a guideline on Friday to encourage social investment in 13 major rural and agricultural sectors to boost rural vitalization. The sectors include modern planting and breeding, farm-produce processing and circulation, new type of rural services, agricultural technological innovation and rural infrastructure, said the guideline jointly released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the national administration for rural vitalization at a press conference. Efforts should also be made to create new approaches to investment, build platforms for cooperation and improve the environment of investment, according to the guideline. Stressing the advancement of rural vitalization, Liu Huanxin, vice minister of agriculture and rural affairs, urged rural and agricultural authorities to cooperate with financial institutions to provide better financial services. Along with the country's policy banks, the ministry and the administration are also exploring financing modes for projects aimed at improving the rural living environment, Liu said.

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China to Extend Pro-employment Policies

China will extend some of its pro-employment policies until the end of this year, further facilitate flexible employment, and increase financial support for sectors that continue to be impacted by the epidemic, a State Council executive meeting said. The meeting, chaired by Premier Li Keqiang on Wednesday, also passed a draft regulation on the management of earthquake protection for construction projects. With employment pressure remaining relatively high, China will continue with its job-first policy this year and maintain policy support for market entities, specifically small businesses, and also vital employment groups, the meeting said. The government will continue to refund unemployment insurance premiums to employers and increase policy support for market-based employment to help college graduates find jobs or start new businesses. Pro-employment policies such as subsidizing professional training and college graduates' internships, and supporting college graduates to seek grassroots jobs, will be extended until the end of this year. Employers of vital employment groups will enjoy tax cuts and social insurance payment subsidies, the meeting said.

The meeting decided to further facilitate flexible employment with measures like providing better social security, strengthening protection against occupational injuries, and cleaning up illegal or unreasonable charges and fines to create a better employment environment. To increase financial support for epidemic-hit industries, efforts will enhance financial services for aviation companies, cultural and tourism companies, offline retailers, accommodation and transport service providers, and manufacturers seeking industrial upgrades, among others. The meeting also called for boosting lending services for small and micro-enterprises, guiding financial institutions to ensure regional financing, and encouraging local authorities to improve the business environment and finance ecology. The draft regulation on the management of earthquake protection for construction projects has specified standards and measures concerning quake protection of newly built, renovated, or expanded construction projects. It also regulates quake protection works' maintenance for finished projects and demands strengthening quake protection for rural construction projects.

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Chinese Vice Premier Urges Policies to Spur Jobs in Old Industrial Bases

Chinese Vice Premier Hu Chunhua has called for strengthened policies to spur jobs and improve employment services in old industrial bases during an inspection tour to north China's Shanxi Province. Hu, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, visited job fairs, industrial parks, enterprises and communities in the cities of Taiyuan and Yangquan from Friday to Saturday, where he learned about details in the local job market. "Ensuring employment in the old industrial bases is of great significance to promoting the overall stability of the job market," Hu stressed. He urged efforts to support the transformation of old industrial bases, promote innovation to facilitate the upgrading of traditional industries and cultivate new business models to expand employment capacity. Targeted efforts should be made to assist older unemployed population and women, while vocational training should be strengthened to resolve the structural imbalances in employment, according to Hu. He also called for giving full play to the role of public and market-oriented employment service agencies in creating more jobs. China aims to create more than 11 million new urban jobs in 2021, according to this year's government work report.

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China Doubles Down Efforts on Virtual Currency Regulation

China has enhanced supervision over virtual currencies to further fend off financial risks and forestall speculation in virtual currency businesses. Bitcoin mining and trading-related activities will be cracked down upon, according to a statement from a meeting held last week by the financial stability and development committee under the State Council. The meeting also stressed lowering credit risks and strengthening regulations on financial activities of platform enterprises. The statement came days after three Chinese industrial associations vowed tougher restrictions on virtual currency trading. Moreover, the statement is widely regarded as an escalation of China's virtual currency regulation, as the targets for supervision have expanded from bitcoin trading to mining. This escalation is conducive to the crackdowns on hype of virtual currency transactions from the root.

Financial institution members, payment institutions and other agencies shall not use virtual currency to price products or services, read an announcement of Chinese industrial associations of internet finance, banking, and payment and clearing. Also, internet platform enterprises shall not provide services for virtual currency-related business activities. It is also not allowed to underwrite insurance businesses related to virtual currencies or bring virtual currencies into insurance liability coverage, according to the announcement. Virtual currency, a type of specific virtual goods represented by bitcoin, has no monetary properties. For example, it has no legal tender status, said Dong Ximiao, chief researcher with Merchants Union Consumer Finance Company Limited. Participating in illegal bitcoin trading and speculation activities may lead to huge property losses for investors and affect China's financial stability and social order, Dong said, adding that such activities must be rectified.

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China's Top Legislator Stresses Implementing Rural Vitalization Promotion Law

China's top legislator on Thursday stressed the full implementation and popularization of the law on the promotion of rural vitalization to drive high-quality agricultural development and ensure the well-being of rural residents. Li Zhanshu, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), made the remarks when addressing a symposium on the implementation of the law, which will go into effect from June 1. Calling it a basic, comprehensive law concerning agriculture, rural areas and farmers, Li said the law is aimed not only at boosting economic growth, but also at promoting the full upgrading of the agricultural sector, while achieving progress and development for rural areas and farmers in an all-round way. Li stressed efforts to apply tailored measures for rural industrial development, while ensuring food security and improving rural residents' livelihoods. He also raised other requirements for implementing the law, such as preserving fine traditional rural culture, strengthening ecological conservation and safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of rural residents. People's congresses at all levels should work out supporting rules and regulations in a timely manner and use various means to interpret and popularize the law among the public, Li said. The NPC Standing Committee, China's national legislature, adopted the law in April.

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JAPAN: LDP Renews Push to Revise Constitution

Japan's governing party is renewing its push for its long-cherished goal of revising the country's pacifist constitution, saying effective anti-coronavirus measures such as lockdowns aren't possible without an emergency clause in the charter providing enforcement and the limiting of private rights. The powerful lower house of parliament, controlled by the governing party, on Tuesday approved revisions to a national referendum law that would lay the groundwork for a possible future vote on a charter revision. Constitutional amendments, however, remain a long shot because the hurdles are extremely high. The bill, which facilitates voting in a referendum, now goes to the less powerful upper house for expected approval by mid-June. The U.S.-drafted constitution has never been revised since it took effect in 1947 during the U.S. occupation of Japan after its World War II defeat. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's conservative Liberal Democratic Party has long viewed the constitution as a reminder of Japan's humiliating defeat and made constitutional revision a key party platform. The party strengthened its efforts for a revision under Suga's predecessor, Shinzo Abe, known for his nationalistic historical views and his support for a paternalistic society led by the emperor.

Abe proposed changes to the constitution, which renounces the use of force in settling international disputes, to officially give the country's Self-Defense Force the status of a full-fledged military, though experts say it isn't necessary because the SDF is already accepted internationally as the country's military. Critics say the amendments proposed by the governing party reflect its view that Japan should be a "normal nation" with a full military, a stronger government and a society in which individual basic rights can be compromised for the national interest in times of emergency. Abe failed to achieve the amendments during his eight years in office, even when the governing bloc controlled the two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament needed to propose a revision ahead of a national referendum. The party and its coalition partner lost their supermajority in the upper house in 2019. The governing party, however, has expanded the role of Japan's military and campaigned for changes to the war-renouncing Article 9 of the constitution, citing security threats from North Korea and China's increasingly assertive territorial claims in regional seas.

Public opinion in recent polls has been divided over revision of Article 9, one of most contentious issues in the amendment debate. Surveys show many Japanese care more about the economy and jobs. With the government facing strong criticism of its failure to get the coronavirus under control despite repeated declarations of states of emergency, Suga and governing party lawmakers are insisting they cannot enforce more effective, binding measures because of constitutional limitations. In a message on Constitution Day on May 3, Suga said passage of the revised referendum bill is "a first step" to constitutional change. Public interest in emergency preparedness is growing, and having constitutional definitions of the roles of the state and the people in a crisis is crucial, Suga said. Public support for antivirus measures with more teeth has been growing amid fear of the continuing pandemic. Experts and government officials say emergency measures that were toughened earlier this year to allow authorities to issue binding orders restricting business hours are inadequate because measures aimed at the general public remain non-binding.

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Rights Group Urges Japan to Update Law on Changing Gender

An international rights group on Tuesday urged Japan to change a law that it says puts “abusive and outdated” burdens on transgender people seeking to have their gender change legally recognized, including sterilization surgery and a psychiatric diagnosis. The report by New York-based Human Rights Watch said such requirements are inhumane, unnecessary and discriminatory. “Tokyo officials should embrace public opinion and local-level policies and update the law to reflect current medical and legal perspectives,” Kanae Doi, the group's Japan director, said in a statement. The report comes as activists in Japan push for the passage of an equality act, which would remove such barriers as well as legalize same-sex marriage. The legislation faces resistance from conservative members of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s ruling party.

The Japanese public has slowly shown increased support and awareness of sexual diversity, but there are still a lack of legal protections for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Pressure to conform still forces LGBTQ people in Japan to hide their sexual identities out of fear of discrimination at school, work and even from their families. The current law dating to 2004 has several requirements for a transgender person to have their gender change legally recorded in official documents, including being older than 20, unmarried and not having any children under the age of 20. Most burdensome, activists say, is the requirement that they also must remove their reproductive organs or have reproductive organs that don't function.

Human Rights Watch said these requirements contradict Japan's international human rights obligations and are opposed by the World Health Organization and other medical organizations. The group said the medical requirements are especially problematic and are based on an outdated notion that a transgender identity is a mental disorder. The required surgery forces transgender people to undergo “lengthy, invasive and irreversible medical procedures" to get legally recognized, it said. Hiroyuki Taniguchi, a law professor at Aoyama Gakuin University, said the law is “designed to force transgender people into the existing legal system rather than ensuring them to live according to their own gender identity.” More than 9,600 people in Japan have legally changed gender since 2004 including about 950 in 2019, according to the latest available Justice Ministry data.

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SOUTH KOREA: Seeking to Join Depa, Promote Digital Trade

South Korea held a public hearing on Tuesday on its bid to join a global pact on the digital trade sector that covers a wider array of issues beyond conventional free trade agreements. The hearing came as South Korea plans to join the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), which centers on expanding ties in the digital trade segment among its members, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. The DEPA, which currently covers Singapore, New Zealand and Chile, came into effect in January this year. Through the pact, the member countries are expected to speed up the growth of the financial technology and e-payment segments. "The DEPA, which seeks so-called open plurilateralism, is expected to include more members through the Asia-Pacific region," the ministry said in a statement. "South Korea's participation in the agreement will help the country expand its digital network." South Korea plans to continue making preparations to join the agreement throughout this year.

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S. Korea to Lay Out Guidelines for AI Service Development

South Korea's ICT ministry said Thursday it will create guidelines and verification processes to create trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI) services in a move to address potential social problems. AI services have recently faced growing calls for more responsible development and management of the technology over concerns that the technology could harm users. Earlier this year, an AI chatbot, created by Seoul-based startup Scatter Lab, was scrapped amid mounting criticism over its data collection process and the chatbot's use of discriminatory language against sexual minorities. Last month, the country's data protection watchdog fined the company 103.3 million won (US$91,000) for illegally using personal information of its clients in the development and operation of the chatbot. The Ministry of Science and ICT said it will also push for a verification system run by the private sector for AI services that meet technological and ethical standards. The ministry said that the move will also ensure that companies notify users of the extent of the AI service's use and that it will consider additional measures that will allow users to request explanations from the AI service's actions or results. The announcement comes after South Korea published ethical standards for AI in December last year to provide the framework for the safe use of the technology, such as ensuring human dignity and the public good.

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P4G Seoul Summit Opens, S. Korea Unveils Plans to Contribute More to Global Green Projects

A major global summit on climate and sustainable growth got underway in South Korea on Sunday, with the host country seeking to play a bigger role in the field. The two-day 2021 P4G Seoul Summit is taking place both online and offline with the theme of "Inclusive Green Recovery towards Carbon Neutrality." President Moon Jae-in is chairing the session, to be joined by more than 60 foreign leaders and heads of international organizations, largely via video links. Speaking during the opening ceremony at Dongdaemun Design Plaza (DDP) in Seoul, Moon announced Seoul's plans to expand support for developing nations, including a significant increase by 2025 in its official development assistance (ODA) associated with climate and green projects. "We will also create a Green New Deal Trust Fund worth US$5 million at the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI)," he said, referring to the organization based in the South Korean capital.

He added that South Korea will offer $4 million in new grants to P4G for the sake of its sustainable operation. P4G stands for Partnering for Green Growth and the Global Goals 2030, a multilateral initiative for inclusive solutions to challenges in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. Moon also made public South Korea's bid to host the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28) in 2023. He reaffirmed the country's commitment to further raise its carbon emission reduction target as part of efforts achieve the goal of going carbon neutral by 2050 and to halt official financial support for construction of new overseas coal-fired power plants. "South Korea will play a responsible role as a bridging nation between developing and advanced nations, going forward as well," the president stated. The P4G summit is the second of its kind following the inaugural meeting held in Copenhagen in 2018.

The Leaders' Session is scheduled to begin later in the day, featuring a series of pre-recorded video speeches by 34 heads and high ranking officials of states and 20 international organization leaders from the Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Americas and other regions. They include British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurria are also among the participants. Moon and some other participants, including John Kerry, U.S. special presidential envoy for climate, will present their views during the Leaders' Dialogue forum to be steamed live on Monday night. They plan to adopt the Seoul Declaration to sum up the results of their discussions. Cheong Wa Dae noted that 2021 marks the first year for implementing the Paris Agreement and South Korea's carbon neutrality goals. It is especially meaningful that South Korea is hosting its first environment-focused multilateral summit amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the presidential office added.

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South-East Asia

CAMBODIA: Drawing Up Plan for Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery

Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen said that the Southeast Asian country has been drawing up a three-year plan for post-COVID-19 economic recovery. Delivering a speech at the 26th International Conference on "The Future of Asia" via video conference on Thursday, Hun Sen said Cambodia is committed to turning the COVID-19 crisis into the opportunity for more in-depth reforms, aiming at building stronger and more resilient economic and social system against any future crises. "In this regard, the Royal Government of Cambodia has been preparing and planning to launch the Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan 2021-2023, with the objective to revive economic growth back to the growth potential with sustainability and inclusiveness," he said. The prime minister said Cambodia would focus on ensuring safety, managing impacts, stabilizing and promoting the revival of potential businesses, especially the hard-hit sectors, and speedily creating jobs. The prime minister also highly valued China for providing COVID-19 vaccines to the country, which has been playing a vital role in the Kingdom's fight against the pandemic and efforts to boost economic recovery.

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MYANMAR: Approving 15 New Investment Projects

The Myanmar Investment Commission approved 15 new projects including a program with large investment capital in power generation, the state-run media reported on Friday. New investment projects were given greenlight for electricity generation, livestock, manufacturing and other services sectors and proposals of increasing in capital of two existing projects were approved at the commission's meeting, with investment capital of over 2.7 billion U.S. dollars and 15.3 billion kyats (9.8 million U.S. dollars) and 2,473 employment opportunities, the report said. The approved projects include a project to generate electric power from LNG with investment capital of about 2.5 billion U.S. dollars, and the electricity generated by the project will be sold domestically and is expected to support the goal of 100-percent nationwide electricity from the national grid by 2030. According to the state-run media, Singapore, China and Thailand are three largest investors out of 51 countries and regions as of April 30 this year. Power sector topped the list with 26.57 percent of total investment, followed by oil and gas sector with 25.72 percent and manufacturing sector with 14.61 percent, the report said.

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Myanmar Plans to Increase Investment Enterprises Efficiency to Boost Country's Economy

Myanmar's Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations on Monday held its first coordination meeting to increase investment enterprises efficiency in a bid to boost the country's economy. The meeting also aimed to coordinate the implementation of policies and procedures for the promotion and facilitation of investment set by the ministry and to effectively coordinate the implementation of loans and assistance from regional economic cooperation and development partners. "Under the leadership of the ministry, efforts are being carried out to develop and publish the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of Department Cooperation Team in collaboration with the relevant departments," said Union Minister U Aung Naing Oo at the meeting. "Efforts are needed to draw the systematic plans to carry out the ministry's responsibilities in coordinating for receiving international loans and assistance for the development of basic infrastructure," he added, stressing that active participation is needed in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and regional cooperation. Myanmar recently approved 15 new projects including a program with large investment capital in power generation.

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SINGAPORE: Tightening Pandemic Control Measures amid Rising Covid-19 Infections

Singapore Tuesday rolled out a slew of tightened measures against COVID-19, in line with the local and global COVID-19 situation. Starting from 2359 hours May 7, all new travelers arriving from higher risk countries or regions will be subject to 21-day Stay-Home Notice (SHN) instead of 14 days at dedicated SHN facilities, said the Ministry of Health in a statement. Moreover, from May 8 to May 30, up to 50 percent of employees who are able to work-from-home are allowed to return to the workplace, down from the current 75 percent. The size of social group will be reduced from the current up to eight persons to five persons. The cap of eight distinct visitors per household per day will also be reduced to five distinct visitors per household per day. The number of locally transmitted COVID-19 cases and unlinked community cases has continued to increase recently, with a total of 60 new cases being identified within the community in the past week. "We will remain vigilant and continue to monitor other higher-risk settings and activities such as indoor sports halls and personalised services such as massages, spas, and facials. If the community cases situation does not improve, we will consider taking further actions on these higher-risk settings and activities," said MOH in the statement.

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VIETNAM: Plan for Implementation of UKVFTA Adopted

Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính has approved a plan for the implementation of the UK-Việt Nam Free Trade Agreement (UKVFTA). The plan aims to assign tasks and responsibilities to agencies and organisations and decide on measures to implement the deal fully and effectively. The Government leader requested ministries, sectors and localities to step up the dissemination of information about the UKVFTA as well as the UK market, build laws and institutions, enhance the competitiveness and develop human resources, and improve social welfare, environmental protection and sustainable development policies, along with carrying out regular tasks. It is necessary to popularise information about the agreement and the UK market to relevant people, especially farmers, fishermen and workers via different means of communications to raise their awareness of the deal's commitments as well as work that must be done for effective enforcement. The PM also asked ministries, sectors and localities to hold trade and investment promotion programmes in the UK, and continue perfecting institutions to enforce the agreement, improving the competitiveness of industries and businesses, especially micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises. Attention should be paid to helping Vietnamese enterprises join production networks and value and supply chains involving British businesses to take advantage of the agreement, while encouraging British-invested companies to connect with domestic partners to develop supply chains. The plan also aims to promote mutual recognition of assessment results of conformity with the UK, especially for Việt Nam's key exports.

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South Asia

INDIA: Establishing Data Resilience for a Hybrid Cloud Strategy

There is no doubt that the pandemic has forced Indian organizations to put their digital transformation journey into high gear to address the evolving business needs and the changing landscape. According to a recent study by Dell Technologies, almost 95 per cent of business leaders in India believe that the pandemic has fast-tracked at least some digital transformation programs last year. Moreover, to maintain business continuity, organisations in the country are investing in multiple cloud environments which are featured among the top five technology priorities over the next one to three years, writes Srinivas Rao, Senior Director, System Engineering, Dell Technologies. Owing to the recurring investments by organisations in multiple cloud environments, a hybrid cloud strategy is rapidly becoming the IT strategy of choice largely due to its ability to offer enterprises the best of private and public clouds, along with edge technologies with greater choice and flexibility.

However, this hybrid cloud strategy presents an opportunity for businesses to rethink their data protection and resilience approach. It is undeniable that hybrid cloud offers enormous potential as a way to cut costs, increase agility and reduce risk. And, when it comes to resiliency, the right decisions on the cloud is critical for organisations who want to reduce their overall spending while expanding their ability to respond to opportunities and protect their data. In order to do this, organisations need to look at a hybrid cloud strategy wherein they have the ability to innovate and create an always-on business for their customers in the most efficient way possible. There is no one size fits all solution, however, there are three broad guiding principles that could enable organisations to establish long-term data resilience for their hybrid cloud strategy:

Architecture matters

Advocate for scalable and efficient architectures, technologies and products that are built with multi-cloud in mind. Organizations must deploy solutions that provide a full range of hybrid cloud data services that simplify management of applications and data across cloud and on-premises environments to accelerate digital transformation. Along with this, assessing all hybrid cloud infrastructure components is necessary to ensure there are no surprises in the future. Furthermore, leveraging controls such as data encryption, immutability and access controls will help ensure that data is not visible to the cloud provider or an adversary in the network. Lastly, choosing capabilities that take advantage of pay-per-consumption services so that infrastructure does not become an expense when it is not in use is also a preferred path for businesses.

Develop well-defined data protection policies

Companies need to consider local data protection regulations and how those affect the data they collect. Regulatory requirements should be reviewed in the context of storing and protecting data in a hybrid cloud model. Organisations should take actions to ensure resilience in the event of a successful cyber-attack. The ability to get critical systems back in service has the potential to impact an organisation’s customers. Additionally, there is a need to understand that public clouds generally operate under a Shared Responsibility Model, which means that an organisation maintains some responsibilities for their data and workloads, while the cloud provider may also take some responsibility. Data protection and availability is one aspect of the hybrid cloud model that typically falls on the customer to implement and manage. For this reason, it’s important to ensure that the corporate data protection policies extend across the hybrid cloud strategy. It is also good to ensure that the data protection strategy is up to date with the changing technology as well as the regulatory landscape.

Partner with single data protection vendor

According to another survey by Dell Technologies, 83 per cent of the respondents in APJ revealed that they were using solutions from multiple data protection vendors.

The challenge that lies here is that these enterprises are likely investing more in time, money and staffing resources to protect their data and applications. Yet their annual data loss and downtime costs are significantly higher than those working with a single data protection vendor. Therefore, while thinking through a data protection plan for a hybrid cloud strategy, CIOs must partner with a single data protection provider that can protect data wherever it resides. To conclude, organizations generally understand that a hybrid cloud strategy has many benefits. Those who adopt the broadest data protection capabilities, develop and follow strong data governance policies, have a single data protection partner across their on-premises/public cloud, and edge environments etc. will be in a position to effectively manage and protect their data and workloads. With the evolving nature of the technology landscape, it is time for businesses to stop reacting and start anticipating. Loss of critical data has the power to cripple a business in no time and instead of relying only on traditional methods of data security, organisations need to expand their horizons and look at a holistic hybrid cloud strategy. Taking this path will help businesses remove the pressure of constantly keeping track of their data and focus more on building their business.

From https://egov.eletsonline.com/ 05/01/2021

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Central-West Asia

UZBEKISTAN: The Day of Workers of Culture and Art of the Republic of Uzbekistan Is Established

Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UzDaily.com) - As part of the agenda of the fifteenth plenary meeting of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the establishment of the Day of workers of culture and art of the Republic of Uzbekistan" was also discussed. In the Strategy of Action for the Development of the Country in 2017-2021, raising the level of culture, science, literature, art is defined as the main direction of the development of the social sphere. The priority tasks of our state are the issues of raising the level of culture of the population, in particular young people, familiarizing everyone with the best examples of national and universal culture, educating on this basis a spiritually mature, harmoniously developed personality, building modern institutions of culture and art, strengthening their material and technical base, development of theater, music, visual arts and other types of art, disclosure of the abilities and potential of young talents.

In this regard, the Law "On the establishment of the Day of Culture and Art Workers of the Republic of Uzbekistan" is another confirmation of the consistent implementation of the goals and objectives identified in the Strategy. Taking into account the proposals of the Ministry of Culture, the National Agency "Uzbekkino", the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, the Union of Writers of Uzbekistan, the Union of

Composers and Bastakors of Uzbekistan, the Union of Theater Workers of Uzbekistan, the Republican Center for Spirituality and Education, the role of culture and art in the social and spiritual life of our society, in order to support workers in this field, 15 April is established as the Day of Workers of Culture and Art of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Currently, in many countries around the world, this date is celebrated as the International Day of Culture. In particular, since 2008 in countries such as Italy, Spain, Russia, Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, Latvia and Lithuania, April 15 is celebrated as the International Day of Culture under the flag of Peace. On this holiday, our compatriots who have selflessly worked and achieved high results in the development of the sphere of culture and art, increasing the prestige of the Uzbek national culture and art at the world level, realizing the abilities and potential of young talents, will be awarded the badge "Madaniyat va san’at fidokori". According to this Law, which is of great importance in the development of folk art, improving the system of training professional personnel, talented performers in the field of culture and art, creating conditions for the recognition of samples of national art in the world arena, a corresponding resolution of the Senate was adopted.

From http://www.uzdaily.com 05/29/2021

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The Law of Uzbekistan “On the State Security Service of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan” Approved

On 29 May 2021, at the fifteenth plenary meeting of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, senators discussed the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the State Security Service of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan". As noted at the meeting, the need for the adoption of the Law is justified by the following factors: firstly, the activities of the State Security Service of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, created in January 2018, are regulated by closed decrees of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, there are no open regulatory acts; secondly, the State Security Service of the President is a specially authorized body that carries out a range of legal, organizational, security, security, operational-search, engineering and other measures in order to ensure the safety of protected persons. At the same time, certain aspects of the operational activities of the State Security Service of the President directly affect the rights and legitimate interests of individuals and legal entities.

In particular, the State Security Service of the President in the process of fulfilling the tasks assigned to it, pursuing the interests of protected persons, restricts free movement in places of security measures, the construction and reconstruction of various objects nearby and in the directions of movement and at the sites of stay of protected persons, labor activity and other actions of organizations directly involved in servicing protected persons and objects of their stay; thirdly, there is no clear procedure for the use of firearms in the performance of official duties by military personnel of the State Security Service of the President, other employees of law enforcement agencies and law enforcement agencies involved in ensuring the safety of protected persons. In this regard, the Law provides for the regulation of the following issues: - generally accepted concepts and terms used in the field of ensuring the safety of protected persons, the principles of this type of activity in order to clarify and correctly apply their content; - the category of protected persons, the protection of which is established; - status, main tasks, rights and obligations of the State Security Service of the President, issues of cooperation with other state bodies in the field of ensuring the security of protected persons; - the procedure for recruiting the personnel of the State Security Service of the President, the status, rights and obligations of military personnel;

- the specifics of active military service by employees of the State Security Service of the President, the assignment of military ranks to them and the organization of their professional training; - guarantees of legal and social protection of employees of the State Security Service of the President; - issues of providing servicemen of the State Security Service of the President with service certificates, tokens and military uniforms; - detailed conditions and procedure for the use of physical force, special means, edged weapons or firearms by employees of the State Security Service of the President; - the procedure for monitoring the activities of the State Security Service of the President. The law will contribute to the improvement of the legal framework of the State Security Service of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, bringing them in line with the current legislation and the reforms carried out in the country in all areas. The law was approved by the senators.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Pacific Missions Make Australia Top Nation

Australia has opened two new diplomatic missions in the Republic of the Marshall Islands and French Polynesia. Now with 19 missions in the Pacific, Australia has the largest diplomatic network in the region of any country. Part of the federal government's Pacific Step-up was to be represented in every member of the Pacific Islands Forum, which has been achieved. "The Australian embassy to the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the consulate-general in French Polynesia are now working to support Australia's interests and increased engagement in our neighbourhood," Foreign Minister Marise Payne said. "We continue to strengthen our cooperation in areas such as maritime security, infrastructure, climate change and women's empowerment, as well as our support for the health response to the COVID-19 pandemic and promoting the region's economic recovery."

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/04.2021

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Aust's Travel ban Set for Legal Challenge

A conservative action group's legal case against the federal government's outbound travel ban is set to be heard by a full Federal Court bench. LibertyWorks - a group that professes to support free speech, natural rights and free markets - in December launched a legal challenge to Australia's travel ban, arguing it was a "fundamental breach" of human rights. LibertyWorks argued Health Minister Greg Hunt did not have the power under the Biosecurity Act to legally enforce a ban on outbound travel. Outbound travel without a special exemption from the Department of Home Affairs - with the exception of New Zealand - has been banned for more than 12 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The non-profit group argued the outbound border could be open within weeks if it wins the case, set for a full Federal Court bench on Thursday.

"Over the course of the past year LibertyWorks has become aware of tens of thousands of Australians that have been forced to be absent from significant events that often have a sometimes tragic and personal impact on their lives," LibertyWorks president Andrew Cooper said in a statement on Wednesday. "We are aware of people missing funerals of loved ones, others being unable to leave Australia and care for sick relatives, couples that have been separated and cannot reunite, the birth of children with the father or relatives not in attendance." The group said the government retains the power to impose quarantine restrictions on inbound passengers, limiting the risk of COVID-19 transmission prompted by outbound travel. Outbound travellers could also be made aware that leaving Australia does not guarantee a right to return, given limitations on quarantine systems.

"Any individual, in the act of departing Australia, does not increase the health risk of any Australian left behind," Mr Cooper said. The NSW Council for Civil Liberties in March also called on the federal government to end the outbound travel ban, saying it had adopted an "authoritarian approach" to travel amid the pandemic. Mr Hunt last month told reporters that slashing outbound travel was important to avoid overloading Australia's hotel quarantine systems when those people seek to return. Should LibertyWorks' legal challenge fail, the outbound travel ban will remain in place until at least June 17, at which point Mr Hunt will have the option to extend it further. "The Australian Border Force operates an exemptions process ... they consider each case on its merits and I will leave the individual cases to them," Mr Hunt said. "You have the categories of critical work, of assisting the national interest and compassionate exemption ... those are the fundamentals and they should remain the basis of it."

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/05/2021

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NDIS Changes Still Set for Later This Year

The Morrison government is still planning on making changes to the disability insurance scheme this year, the responsible minister has confirmed. National Disability Insurance Scheme Minister Linda Reynolds had put legislative changes to the program on hold while consulting with the sector, but she is still working towards introducing them this year. "I'm very keen and very aware that I do need to bring forward legislation this year to improve the participant experience," she told a Senate inquiry on Tuesday. "Particularly in terms of some form of independent assessments in conjunction with changing the legislation for how people are reassessed." Senator Reynolds flagged the possibility of pushing annual assessment out to every three or five years. The Senate inquiry is solely looking at independent assessments, which had been previously announced by Senator Reynolds' predecessor Stuart Robert.

Recommendations from the inquiry will help shape how independent assessments work and the form they take. People applying for the NDIS are assessed by their own medical team to determine what level of support they require from the scheme. But Senator Reynolds says that system is currently unfair, raising concerns people with better access to doctors were receiving more from the NDIS. But by 2024/25 the federal government expects to be paying 61 per cent of the scheme, with the states dividing the rest. The NDIS is growing at about 12 per cent each year. Last week's federal budget showed the cost of participant plans in the scheme would grow to $31.9 billion in 2024/25. To be quite frank it is now a scheme that is on an unsustainable growth trajectory," Senator Reynolds said. "Together we've got to find a sustainable growth trajectory so the scheme itself endures for many generations to come." NDIS packages are built on what is deemed "reasonable and necessary" for participants. The phrase would be redefined to ensure its meaning is clearer and consistent, Senator Reynolds said.

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PM Concedes 'Step Up' Needed in Disability

Scott Morrison has conceded the woefully slow coronavirus vaccine rollout in disability residential care needs to be stepped up. The prime minister said the aged sector had been prioritised ahead of the disability sector despite the two being deemed as the most high risk. The rollout in aged care is nearly complete, more than three months after it started. But fewer than 1000 disability care residents and 1500 staff have received their coronavirus vaccine, despite being included in phase 1a. More than 25,000 people with a disability who live in supported accommodation are still waiting for their jabs. "We've got to step up the performance there, there's no doubt about that," Mr Morrison told reporters on Tuesday. "I'm working with our health officials to achieve that."

Mr Morrison said complacency could not set in despite the virus not spreading widely through Australia's disability care facilities. "That's why we do need to do more and do better when it comes to ensuring we're getting the vaccination levels up in our disabled community." The government hopes to have priority groups vaccinated by the end of June. Earlier, cabinet minister David Littleproud defended the failed vaccine rollout in disability care and falsely claimed there had been no coronavirus cases in the sector. Mr Littleproud insisted it was acceptable that fewer than five per cent of people with disability in residential care had been inoculated. "Yes, because it's part of the scheduled rollout," he told ABC radio. Mr Littleproud said the bungled rollout had been "sensationalised" by his political opponents. "There have been no cases of disability workers or people with disability," he said.

But in fact, there have been many cases, including the deaths of at least eight participants on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and one support worker. Greens senator Jordon Steele-John, who lives with a disability, said somebody must be held accountable for the shockingly low vaccination rates. "As the royal commission said, this program has been an abject failure when it comes to vaccinating disabled people," he told the ABC. "There must now be accountability among the health department, and there must be an urgent review of every single document the health department has produced in relation to the pandemic to ensure disabled people are accurately accounted for there." Senator Steele-John said health authorities needed to recognise methods for distributing vaccines among the broader community did not work for at-risk groups including people with disability. "We need to find ways of getting the vaccine to vulnerable groups rather than relying on those groups to come to the vaccine," he said. Labor frontbencher Bill Shorten described the vaccine rollout in disability care as a national disgrace.

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Labor Would Review Tax, RBA

An incoming Labor government would review the taxation system and how Reserve Bank policy and federal budget policy work together, shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers says. Labor's problem with proposed tax cuts under the coalition government has been where the money to pay for them comes from, which has resulted in the recently proposed cut for big business being shelved and legislated personal tax cuts due in three years hanging in limbo. But what Labor won't being doing is raising the GST to pay for tax cuts elsewhere, Dr Chalmers told the National Press Club during the traditional shadow treasurer post-budget speech. "We're not up for that. Nobody's beating down my door for an increase in the GST," he said. "Obviously I want to have a proper look at the tax system across the board."

While he didn't expect that to be as sweeping as the Henry Tax Review that was undertaken during the previous Labor government - which didn't look at GST either - he believes there are opportunities in tax reform. In particularly, he believes US President Joe Biden has shown leadership on the taxation of multinationals. But when it comes to the so-called stage three personal income tax cuts due in 2024/25, Labor will make a decision closer to then. At the same time, he believes it would be useful to review the operations of monetary policy at the Reserve Bank and how it works in tandem with budget policy. "I have a mountain of respect for (governor) Phil Lowe and the Reserve Bank team and the board," Dr Chalmers said. "I think the primary problem with economic policy in the last little while certainly under this government has been a failure to understand the role of fiscal policy. But I think monetary policy cannot be left out of any reconsideration of how we go about it."

Dr Chalmers used his speech to slam the government's record on wages, while racking up $1 trillion in debt with little to show for it. He says under the coalition government there has been eight years of wage stagnation, with growth the weakest on record, and the budget showed there will be a cut to real wages growth over the next four years. That is, wages will grow slower than the rate of inflation. "The real wage cut for workers is this government's act of bastardry and betrayal. This is the thanks this government gives to the workers who carried our economy through last year's crisis," Dr Chalmers said. "Josh Frydenberg has claimed Margaret Thatcher as his political inspiration. She'd be mighty proud of his record on wages." The wage price index for the March quarter released on Wednesday - a key gauge used by the RBA and Treasury to measure wages growth - rose 0.6 per cent. It left the annual rate at 1.5 per cent - at least half the rate the RBA wants to see to return inflation to some normality.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/19/2021

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Laws Would Affect Laming-Style Behavior

The government's online safety laws are in place to stamp out behaviour similar to embattled Liberal backbencher Andrew Laming's online actions, Labor has confirmed. The Morrison government's online safety plan has passed the first hurdle of parliament and is being considered by the Senate. The bill includes a scheme to prevent adult cyber abuse by providing a complaints process, which could result in the eSafety Commissioner requesting offending material be taken offline. Labor's Nita Green has used a Senate estimates hearing to see if the scheme would apply to Bowman MP Dr Laming. He has harassed two prominent women from his federal electorate over several years. The 54-year-old is back in parliament after having a month of paid medical leave to seek counselling and empathy training.

"Is this menacing, harassing online behaviour ... the type of material that Andrew Laming posted. Is that the sort of thing that the adult cyber abuse scheme is designed to stamp out," Senator Green asked communications department officials on Wednesday. Department deputy secretary Richard Windeyer said the scheme would provide a pathway for people to make complaints about online behaviour. "It's very hard to make a comment definitively around an individual case without having access to all the facts and elements of it," he said. "It is fair to say that absolutely the intention behind this new bill when it's passed is to provide an avenue for people experiencing that kind of activity to have a pathway to make complaints and have someone able to take some action." Senators were also told the majority of image-based abuse and cyberbullying complaints were made by women.

Once the bill is passed, 20 investigators will be hired to look at reports of online abuse. Labor has also used this week of parliament to try to condemn Dr Laming for still being on a committee after flagging he would resign because of his behaviour. Being on the committee adds $23,000 to his annual salary. Dr Laming has said he will not contest the next federal election. Prime Minister Scott Morrison faces pressure to expel the backbencher from the coalition party room, but has resisted because it would strip his government of its lower house majority.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/26/2021

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Land Laws Review Complete After Leppington

A review of 30-year-old land acquisition laws is complete after the federal government paid more than 10 times the value of a triangle of land for Western Sydney Airport. "That review is finalised and being considered by government," senior finance department official Nick Hunt said at a Senate estimates hearing on Thursday. Quizzed by Labor's Katy Gallagher, Finance Minister Simon Birmingham said he expected to introduce amendments to the Lands Acquisition Act in the next 12 months. The Commonwealth paid $30 million plus GST for the 12-hectare Leppington triangle in a 2018 land deal. It was later valued at $3 million. An independent review found a series of bureaucratic bungles but cleared public servants of any wrongdoing.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/27/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Backing Moves to Improve Global Access to COVID Vaccines

New Zealand welcomes and strongly supports the announcement made by the United States Trade Representative to work for a waiver of IP protections on

COVID-19 vaccines at the WTO, Trade Minister Damien O'Connor said. "New Zealand supports equitable access to COVID vaccines for all. No one is safe from the virus until everyone is safe from it, so it is in all our interest to remove any blocks to access and distribution of the vaccine," Damien O'Connor said. "New Zealand supports the waiver of IP protections on vaccines as an important part of our collective efforts to address the human catastrophe of the pandemic. "The Government has been actively engaged in discussions at the WTO on the TRIPS waiver and we welcome the US announcement and look forward to taking this forward with urgency.

"In addition to removing barriers to speedy access to the vaccine via the WTO, New Zealand continues to strongly support the COVAX Facility, which is playing a critical role to ensure vaccines reach all corners of the globe. "New Zealand has contributed $17 million in Official Development Assistance to support these efforts, and is sharing 1.668 million vaccine doses (sufficient for over 800,000 people) to COVAX for distribution to developing countries. This is in addition to our direct support for vaccine access for Pacific Island countries. "We are also working in APEC, the WTO and other fora to address other elements of vaccine supply issues including through the supply chains that are limiting the availability of vaccines regionally and globally.

"This includes our collective and urgent need to address tariff barriers, regulatory restrictions, export restrictions and enable trade facilitation measures that could facilitate swift access to vaccines and their effective distribution. We also need to do all we can to increase the manufacture, distribution and availability of vaccines. "In less than a month, on 5 June, I will chair a meeting of all 21 APEC trade ministers. I want our region to send a united message to the world that we must get all our people vaccinated as fast as possible and that trade must be a part of the solution to avoid more human suffering and economic pain," Damien O'Connor said.

From https://livenews.co.nz 05/06/2021

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Air Connectivity Scheme Helping Recovery Take Off

The Government has awarded a new round of airline support contracts through to the end of October 2021 to help keep New Zealand connected internationally and positioned for recovery, Transport Minister Michael Wood announced today. Michael Wood said the Government moved quickly to keep critical trade flowing at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to support our economic recovery. "The previous International Airfreight Capacity (IAFC) scheme was restructured in March this year to focus on staying connected with international partners and our recovery. It allows for support levels to reduce as passenger numbers rise. "Airfreight capacity is at 90 per cent of pre-COVID levels thanks to the previous scheme and its successor Maintaining International Air Connectivity (MIAC) scheme, which have helped keep trade channels open and maintain supply of time-critical goods like medicine into New Zealand.

“Since May last year, Government support has enabled more than 7,000 flights carrying over 136,000 tonnes of airfreight worth around $10 billion. “The scheme has also been critical for our Pacific partners – it recently supported the delivery of nearly 200,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses to Fiji, Nauru, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu through the COVAX Facility. “Nearly 75,000 people have returned to New Zealand on flights supported by the scheme – 53 per cent of the total number of people to pass through MIQ facilities. It’s unlikely those journeys or the freight moved would have been possible without it. “New agreements have been reached with Air New Zealand, Air Tahiti Nui, Korean Air, and China Airlines to maintain airfreight capacity with key international partners. The Ministry of Transport is negotiating with a number of other carriers and further announcements will be made in the coming weeks.

“There was a very real possibility New Zealand could have been effectively cut off from the rest of the world. Extending support to October protects our links with the rest of the globe and gives a regular schedule of air services for passengers and freight. “Securing our recovery is a key focus for the Government and we are carefully watching the international aviation market. We will consider extending support beyond October to a final date of March 2022 if necessary,” Michael Wood said. Based on forecast demand for the MIAC scheme, the Government has agreed to an additional $170 million in support to October 2021, which will be drawn from the COVID-19 support package. More information on the IAFC and MIAC schemes can be found on the Ministry of Transport website and exporters should contact their usual freight forwarder.

From https://livenews.co.nz 05/27/2021

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2、Government System and Civil Services

Asia-Pacific

New Reforms Could Help Mauritius Bounce Back Stronger from COVID-19 Crisis

Mauritius’ best strategy for economic recovery post-pandemic includes both temporary support to firms and households, and comprehensive reforms to address pre-existing structural challenges, says the World Bank’s latest economic analysis for the country. The newly-released Mauritius Country Economic Memorandum, Through the Eye of a Perfect Storm – Coming Back Stronger from the COVID-19 Crisis, says the COVID-19 crisis presents policy makers with an opportunity to confront long-standing challenges. “The current crisis brought to the fore the need to address long standing challenges to inclusive growth – unlocking investment, restoring competitiveness, maintaining inclusiveness, and doing more with fewer public resources,” noted Idah Pswarayi-Riddihough, World Bank Country Director for Mauritius, Mozambique, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles. “This is the time to accelerate the recovery and re-emerge from the storm stronger than before with the adoption of a new series of reforms.”

The report highlights four main pillars for a strong recovery:
•A new industrial policy approach that focuses state support on innovation and technology transfer, while addressing cross-cutting issues in skills development, competition, natural resource management, and public private partnerships to promote productive private sector investment.
•Reversing the ongoing decline in competitiveness by leveraging foreign direct investment and new preferential trade opportunities to upgrade exports, while focusing Covid-19 support measures on managing the fallout from the pandemic in the short term.
•Maintaining Mauritius’ inclusive development path will require renewed and more comprehensive efforts to promote labor market participation, especially for low educated women and youth, and more attention to early childhood and second chance education. Moving resources from the overly generous basic pension system to more targeted and effective anti-poverty programs would help cope with the increased social needs and reduced fiscal space.
•Further strengthening of the public sector, in terms of policy coherence in complex, multi-sector reforms, and implementation capacity. Close collaboration with the private sector is also key.

“This report lays out a short- and medium-term agenda to reignite inclusive and sustainable growth in Mauritius,” added Erik von Uexkull, World Bank Representative for Mauritius. “While the global situation is slowly improving with the increased availability of vaccines, this is not a storm that countries can simply ride out and return to business as usual. For Mauritius, the best way forward will be to focus on its proven ability to adapt and preserve its social contract by laying the foundations for future inclusive growth. This can start now, under the new budget.”

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 05/26/2021

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A Strong, Relevant and Credible WTO Is Needed to Build Back Better from COVID, Say Asia-Pacific Business Leaders

Asia-Pacific business leaders, meeting virtually this week in the APEC Business

Advisory Council (ABAC), have released a Statement in support of the WTO. “The WTO is the foundation of decades of prosperity for our region and the world,” said Rachel Taulelei, Chair of ABAC. “We need it now more than ever – but we also need to strengthen and update the WTO rulebook and operations to keep it relevant.” Ms Taulelei said that ABAC was urging APEC economies to lead this work – just as APEC had played a pivotal role in concluding the WTO Uruguay Round 25 years ago. “Our top priority must be to ensure that WTO rules can help us collectively to overcome the health challenges of COVID-19 and restart the engines for growth,” she explained. “Trade can and should be part of the solution to the current crisis.”

“We also need to get the WTO system fully operational again – that means we need to appoint a full slate of WTO Appellate Body members and agree necessary reforms to the dispute settlement system,” she added. “And enhanced transparency, both in respect of COVID responses and in meeting existing obligations, will be essential to build trust.” Ms Taulelei added that ABAC was urging APEC economies to champion reforms in other areas too. “For resilient growth, we will need continuing trade liberalisation to keep supply chains functioning, and global rules in a range of other areas – including for digital trade, for measures that help turbocharge the transition to a low-carbon economy, and for wider and more successful participation in trade,” she added. “There is also unfinished business in agriculture, fish subsidies and services that needs to be resolved,” Ms Taulelei noted. The Chair said that ABAC strongly supported the efforts of the new Director-General to find common ground ahead of the Twelfth Ministerial Conference. “Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala has begun her term with energy and determination. The Asia-Pacific business community welcomes her drive, and stands ready to contribute to WTO trade policymaking – this year and into the future,” Ms Taulelei concluded.

ABAC STATEMENT ON THE WTO 11 MAY 2021

The APEC Business Advisory Council strongly supports the multilateral rules-based trading system, with the World Trade Organisation at its heart. For decades, the WTO system has helped to advance international cooperation for the common good. It now has a key role to play in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic – both in overcoming health challenges and in bolstering economic recovery. ABAC warmly welcomes the appointment of Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the Director-General of the WTO. There are also encouraging signs of renewed engagement across the WTO membership. Now is the time to act. Concerted, constructive and collaborative engagement from all WTO members is needed to face down global challenges. APEC can, and should, lead in this effort. ABAC calls on APEC economies to work together to shape a strong, credible and relevant WTO, one that responds effectively to the pandemic, fosters economic rebuilding and reflects evolving business needs and models.

To that end, APEC’s priorities should be:

•Coordinating closely on a strong and effective response to the pandemic;

•Getting the WTO system fully operational again;
•Achieving concrete outcomes on necessary reforms to WTO rules and processes.

1.'Pandemic trade policy': Coordinating a strong and effective response to COVID-19
Trade should not be seen as a problem in tackling the pandemic – but rather, as central to the solution. Free and open trade in vaccines and in an agreed list of essential medical supplies and services will be crucial to overcoming COVID-19 for economies individually and collectively. We should avert the impulse towards economic nationalism, and instead support the functioning of global value chains and open markets. We must also recognise the needs of the most vulnerable. ABAC urges APEC economies to support existing initiatives in the WTO such as the Trade and Health Initiative, and to lead a new initiative in the WTO to achieve:
◦an immediate standstill on export restrictions on vaccines and on an agreed list of essential medical supplies and essential services, with a view to removing all such restrictions as soon as possible1;
◦the permanent elimination of import tariffs and non-tariff barriers on those same products;
◦addressing barriers to movement of essential personnel in times of crisis; and
◦new reporting and monitoring mechanisms for trade in vaccines and medical supplies.

2. Getting the WTO system fully operational again
Ensuring that the WTO system continues to be relevant, effective and enforceable will be critical to economic rebuilding. ABAC calls on APEC economies to work urgently to:
◦appoint a full slate of WTO Appellate Body members; and agree necessary reforms;
◦build trust through enhanced efficiency and transparency on all COVID-response measures
by establishing a monitoring and notification mechanism.

3. Achieving concrete outcomes on necessary reforms to WTO rules and processes
APEC economies should champion reforms to ensure that WTO rules better reflect modern business and societal concerns, and contribute more fully to supporting productivity, innovation, growth, resilience, inclusion and sustainability. Looking ahead to outcomes from MC12, ABAC calls on APEC economies to:
◦commit to enhanced transparency including through full and timely adherence to existing obligations and improvements to those mechanisms as needed, including for COVID-response measures as noted above;
◦support ambitious outcomes on the trade-related aspects of e-commerce, and seek agreement to a permanent moratorium on Customs duties on electronic transmissions;
◦support improvements to rules for the domestic regulation of services, and the eventual revival of negotiations on trade in services;
◦champion the urgent elimination of fish subsidies that contribute to illegal,

unregulated and unreported fishing; the elimination of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies;

◦the development of a sectoral initiative to liberalise trade in an agreed list of environmental goods and services, expanding on the existing APEC Environmental Goods List, recognising that this could enhance progress to a low-carbon economy and lay the groundwork for negotiations on rules for trade measures to address climate change that are WTO-consistent, necessary, proportionate, non-discriminatory, transparent, predictable and least-trade restrictive; to that end, ABAC encourages participation in the new joint initiative on Trade and Environmental Sustainability;
◦pursue substantial and meaningful reductions in trade-distorting agriculture support;
◦support negotiations on investment facilitation for development and other initiatives that encourage more inclusive participation in trade, including by MSMEs;
◦help close the gender gap by supporting initiatives for women's greater participation in trade, including championing a roadmap for a Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative which would entail a standstill on current relevant laws and regulations and further binding commitments to prohibit the discrimination between men and women with respect to rights of ownership and entrepreneurship for women-owned businesses;
◦take a fresh look at the rules on subsidies (both industrial and agricultural), consistent with fundamental WTO principles for fair and non-discriminatory trade, including a meaningful cut in trade-distorting domestic support for agriculture;
◦and recognise that 'plurilateral' negotiations, including on the topics above, can contribute to good outcomes for the system overall, provided that they are consistent with WTO principles and are designed to serve as building blocks to future multilateral outcomes.

Finally, to support both transparency and the responsiveness of the system, APEC should champion a greater engagement by the international business community, including ABAC, in WTO processes by establishing a formal structure for private-sector representation and business inputs to inform WTO policymaking.

From https://www.apec.org/ 05/12/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Premier Li Stresses Importance of Structure, Layout of State-owned Economy

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Saturday stressed the importance of the structure and layout of state-owned economy following the merger of Sinochem Group and ChemChina Group, two state-owned chemical giants. Li made the remarks in a written instruction on the establishment of a new holding company occurring on the same day as a result of the joint reorganization. He added that the move would boost agricultural modernization and competitiveness in the chemical industry. The new company should shore up international cooperation and maximize its role as an industry leader, the premier said, calling for major technological breakthroughs in germplasm and chemical engineering. Li also urged the new company to explore innovative models of management and operation and make contributions to stabilizing the industrial and supply chains. Chinese State Councilor Wang Yong attended the establishment ceremony, underscoring research and utilization of green, low-carbon technologies to help achieve carbon neutrality target.

China's State Council approved the joint restructuring of the two chemical giants in late March. The new company covers fields including life sciences, material sciences, the basic chemical industry, rubber tires, and urban operations. Headquartered in Beijing, Sinochem Group was founded in 1950 and is a leading integrated operator in the oil and chemical industry. It provides agricultural inputs (seeds, agrochemicals, and fertilizers) and modern agricultural services. The company also exerts a strong influence on city operations and the non-banking financial services sector. ChemChina Group is the largest chemical enterprise in China. Based in Beijing, it has production and research and development bases in 150 countries and regions worldwide. It also boasts a full-fledged marketing network.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/08/2021

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Xi Stresses Improving Assessment Mechanisms for Science, Technology Advances

President Xi Jinping on Friday stressed efforts to improve assessment mechanisms for advances in science and technology and to deepen pricing reforms in medical services. Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, made the remarks while presiding over the 19th meeting of the central committee for deepening overall reform. He also urged efforts to relieve the burdens on students in compulsory education. The meeting reviewed and adopted a slew of guidelines on the above-mentioned issues, along with other suggestions such as on deepening reforms of the compensation system for ecological protection and on strengthening the protection and inheritance of historical culture in urban and rural development. At the meeting, Xi called for better use of the assessment mechanisms to stimulate enthusiasm among science and technology personnel and early achievement of technological self-sufficiency. He demanded efforts to give full play to the main role of schools in teaching and education, while stressing the need to regulate after-school training institutions both online and offline.

On health, Xi said basic healthcare should focus on serving the interests of the public, while measures such as deepened pricing reform for medical services should be taken to improve the quality of healthcare services. On the goal of building an ecological civilization, Xi urged further efforts to link with the carbon-peaking and carbon-neutrality tasks and advance fostering the compensation system for ecological protection. He also called for fostering an urban-rural historical cultural protection and inheritance system with scientific classification, strong protection and effective management. The meeting was also attended by Li Keqiang, Wang Huning and Han Zheng, all members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee. The meeting detailed tasks on improving assessment standards for science and technology achievements and fostering a diversified evaluation system with the joint participation of governments, social organizations, enterprises, as well as investment and financing institutions.

It called for accelerating the application of the achievements and increasing financial support for the application and industrialization of the outcomes. The meeting recognized the heavy burdens placed on primary and secondary school students as the most prominent problems in compulsory education, and stressed the regulation of after-school training institutions. On deepened pricing reform for medical services, the meeting underlined the government's regulation of basic prices for regular services, while sophisticated medical service pricing must reflect the value of professional work. To push the green transformation of economic and social development, more efforts should be made to improve the classified compensation system and strengthen the coordination of compensation policies. Regarding problems such as damage to historical and cultural heritage in urban-rural construction, the meeting demanded strengthening top-level plans for the coordinated protection of them.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/21/2021

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China to Deepen Reform of Price Mechanism

The National Development and Reform Commission has issued a guideline on strengthening the reform of its price mechanism to bring it in line with China's high-quality development during the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) period. By 2025, prices in competitive areas of business will be mainly determined by the market. The price mechanism for energy and natural resources will be further improved, and the price-control mechanism for commodities important for people's livelihoods will be improved, according to the guideline. It urges efforts to fine-tune the monitoring, forecast and early-warning system for key commodities, strengthen price control for goods important for people's livelihoods and address unusual fluctuations in commodity prices. Measures will be taken to promote energy-price reforms, such as optimizing the price mechanism for wind power and photovoltaic power generation, as well as improving differentiated and tiered electricity prices for industries with high energy consumption and emissions. In terms of water-price reforms, the guideline stresses deeper price reforms in water used for agriculture and in urban areas, as well as improvements to the charging mechanism for sewage treatment. The guideline also calls for efforts to accelerate price reforms for public services, such as education, elderly care, tourism, heating and garbage disposal.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/25/2021

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China Streamlines Tax Procedures to Improve Business Climate

China's taxation authorities on Monday announced a policy to simplify the declaration of multiple property and behavior taxes to improve the business climate. From Tuesday, when declaring 10 kinds of property and behavior taxes, taxpayers will no longer have to use separate tax declaration forms, but can declare multiple taxes on one form, said the State Taxation Administration. The 10 kinds of property and behavior taxes include urban and township land-use tax, real-estate tax, vehicle and vessel tax, stamp tax, farmland-occupation tax, resource tax, land-appreciation tax, deed tax, environmental-protection tax and tobacco tax. The reform is expected to improve efficiency in tax administration, and the tax authorities will continue to introduce new reforms on tax services to facilitate high-quality economic and social development, said Han Guorong, an official with the administration.

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JAPAN: To Establish Agency to Speed Up Digitalization

The Diet on Wednesday enacted a set of laws to establish a new government agency in September as the country aims to speed up digitalization. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's government hopes to accelerate digitalization in the central and local governments to improve the quality of services after the novel coronavirus pandemic exposed challenges caused by a delay in the initiatives. Under the digitalization legislation that was enacted in the upper house plenary session, Japan will revamp computer systems at the central and local governments and introduce common nationwide rules to protect personal information. It will also be tasked with taking privacy protection measures as the legislation will boost the exchange of personal information, in a move that could cause data leakage and other risks. The Suga government has, since its launch last September, placed a high priority on digital reforms, as Japan has long been struggling to promote administrative reforms by utilizing information technology, despite having aimed at improvements since around 2000. Under the digital agency law, which also seeks to promote digitalization in the private sector, the prime minister will appoint a cabinet minister overseeing the body and a top administrative official, likely to be chosen from the private sector.

The agency plans to have roughly 500 officials, of whom around 120, including IT engineers, are expected to be recruited from the business industry. Under the legislation, the government will do away with hanko seals on official documents and allow digital data to be used instead of paper documents. Both hanko seals and paper documents have long been regarded as important parts of the country's working or administrative culture, but they are now viewed as a major factor delaying digitalization. Local governments will be obliged to introduce computer systems that meet central government standards to facilitate communication between them and enhance the efficacy of public services provision. The government was criticized for a delay in delivering a one-off cash-handout worth 100,000 yen per individual last year as a way to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on households. The new entity will promote the My Number personal identification system, currently under the jurisdiction of the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, so that it can be utilized in such occasions.

From https://japantoday.com 05/12/2021

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Japan to Disperse Data Centers to Regional Areas

The government will provide financial support for companies and municipalities to establish data centers in about five regional cities in a bid to develop the infrastructure for a digital society, as well as to decentralize the computer server and data storage facilities that are currently concentrated in large cities, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned. The Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry will formulate the plan this month, and the government will include it in its growth strategy to be compiled as early as June. Data communication volume doubled in Japan in the three years to 2020 due to the expansion of digital services. Data centers are expected to become even more important from now on because the need to instantly process large amounts of information has been increasing due to the spread of telemedicine and other innovations. According to research firm International Data Corporation Japan, the size of the market related to data centers in Japan is expected to exceed ¥2 trillion in 2024.

Currently, more than 80% of Japan’s data centers are concentrated in the vicinities of Tokyo and Osaka, where there is a high volume of telecommunications use. The government intends to improve the safety of data storage and the continuity of communications and business operations in the event of a disaster by dispersing a number of data centers to regional areas. Specifically, the government will select about five core large-scale bases in major cities other than Tokyo and Osaka. It will also consider adding about 10 small and medium-sized bases. It is planning to use vacant spaces in industrial parks and former sites of research institutes in areas where the ground is solid and there is little concern about flood damage. Data centers are large-scale facilities housing many servers and other equipment. In addition to securing land for such facilities, it is essential to secure an adequate communication network and power supply, meaning the investment for each facility can reach tens of billions of yen.

The government is considering providing operators of data centers with subsidies and other benefits for telecommunications and electricity use. The city of Inzai, Chiba Prefecture, is known for its concentration of data centers, and will serve as a model case. Economic security considerations are one reason why the government is embarking on the development of data centers within Japan. If a data center is located outside Japan, there is a higher risk of data leakage for reasons such as demands made by the government of the other country. There is also the possibility of not being able to adequately respond to cyber-attacks. In Asia, the Chinese government is taking the lead in strengthening its own data centers. China's total floor space for that purpose is 1.7 million square meters, four times that of Japan. Countering such moves is also behind the Japanese government's plan.

From https://the-japan-news.com 05/26/2021

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LDP to Push Digital Transformation for Legislative Activities in Japan

Looking to allow Diet members to freely post deliberations and other legislative activities on social media, the Liberal Democratic Party will embark on the promotion of digital transformation, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned. The subcommittee of the LDP's Research Commission on Intellectual Property Strategy has compiled a draft proposal for the use of digital contents by Diet members and plans to formally summarize its recommendations soon to submit them to the government. Currently, lawmakers are required to obtain permission from the Diet to distribute videos of Diet deliberations through social media. In order to "ensure the freedom of political expression and improve the transparency of the governance system," the subcommittee included in the report the need to revise the law so that videos of this kind can be freely posted on social media.

Lawmakers are assisted in their legislative activities by National Diet Library staff members, who have not been allowed to send copied materials online via email or other means, so the lawmakers had to visit the library or receive the materials at their offices. While the revised Copyright Law, which was passed Wednesday, allows Diet members to receive such materials by email, the draft proposal wants to further improve the system because the types of materials that can be sent via online methods are limited. The promotion of digital transformation will not only improve the efficiency of legislative activities, but will also lead to the enhancement of the work of the library's staff and the reform of their work styles, an LDP source said. The draft proposal also calls for international cooperation among investigative agencies to strengthen the crackdown on pirate sites that post manga and other works on the internet without permission, as well as the creation of a system that assists on legal procedures of related trials held in foreign countries.Speech

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SOUTH KOREA: 'Conflict of Interest Prevention Bill' Poised to Improve Public Sector Work Ethics, Transparency

The recent parliamentary passage of the so-called conflict of interest prevention law, which took eight years since its first proposal, is expected to bring about a vast change of culture in the public sector in terms of improved transparency and work ethics. The National Assembly on Thursday passed the bill that prohibits public officials, including lawmakers, from seeking personal gain using information related to their job responsibilities. Similar anti-graft bills were proposed over the past eight years in vain. But a recent massive land speculation scandal involving employees at the state-run housing developer, LH, provided a decisive impetus for the latest bill's parliamentary passage. The new law will directly affect 1.9 million workers in the public sector, including those in central and local governments and state-run public corporations. A violation of the proposed law resulting in gains in property could lead to criminal punishment, including a maximum sentence of seven years or a maximum fine of 70 million won (US$63,000), and other disciplinary actions.

Some watchers estimate that those subject to the bill could potentially reach some 8 million when including family members of public sector workers. The law calls for stronger punishment for employees with higher pay grades, including vice minister or higher level officials, legislators, local council members, politically appointed officials and executives in public corporations. It also bans family members from being recruited at public agencies, companies and subsidiaries where relatives are involved in recruitment-related work. Those who have family connections at public companies or subsidiaries are also prohibited from signing commission contracts with those agencies. In particular, public sector employees involved in real estate or land purchase operations are now required to declare new personal property transactions within 14 days. A companion bill that specifically toughens punishment for legislators who use insider knowledge for personal gain was also passed.

From May 2022, newly elected lawmakers must fully declare their personal and family-related wealth along with their previous activities while working in the private sector within 30 days. They must also submit a request to avoid being admitted to certain committees in cases of potential conflict of interest. The laws will go into effect one year after the Cabinet promulgates them. The state-run Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission said it plans to launch a special task force to produce an enforcement ordinance within the year. The commission also plans to organize briefing sessions and campaign programs to educate public sector employees on the new bills. Jeon Hyun-heui, chairperson of the commission, said that public officials have begun managing their work ethics as they could face strong criminal punishment when breaking the law. "The new bills will become a historic cornerstone in the country moving toward a nation of integrity," she added.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 05/02/2021

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S. Korea Eyes Hefty Investment for Bio Big Data System

South Korea said Wednesday it plans to spend some 1 trillion won (US$891 million) building a big data system on biohealth by 2028 in a bid to sharpen its competitive edge in the health care sector. Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said the country plans to establish the so-called Bio Data Dam by 2028, a big data scheme that will collect biohealth information of 1 million people, including some 400,000 patients. To this end, the government plans to inject about 1 trillion won on setting up the system over the next six years from 2023, Hong said at a government meeting on innovative growth. The minister also said the government plans to soon announce a set of measures that will help the country become a global vaccine hub. South Korea's vision to become a global vaccine hub got a boost as the country's leading biopharmaceutical firm Samsung BioLogics Co. signed a deal last week to bottle Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine at its local factory. Moderna will become the fourth COVID-19 vaccine to be produced in South Korea, following AstraZeneca, Novavax and Sputnik V vaccines.

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S. Korea Aims to Develop Exascale Supercomputing System by 2030

South Korea will beef up its high-performance computing infrastructure to establish an exascale supercomputing system by 2030, the country's science ministry said Friday. An exascale supercomputer can perform a quintillion calculations per second. Countries like China and Japan have already moved forward on releasing such a computer in the next few years. Under the national computing innovation strategy, South Korea targets to have the world's fifth-largest amount of computing power, secure 24 industry leading computing technologies and create 10 new service areas by 2030, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT. The ministry said it first plans to replace the fifth-generation Nurion national supercomputer, now the world's 21st-fastest, with the sixth-generation mainframe by 2023 and with the seventh-generation system by 2028. The country is looking to utilize national supercomputing resources in sectors including nanotechnology, autonomous driving and aerospace. The ministry said it will support research and development (R&D) activities in four areas including processors and platform solutions to bolster the country's technology prowess in the supercomputing sector.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 05/28/2021

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South-East Asia

PHILIPPINES: Duterte Names New National Police Chief

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has appointed Police Lieutenant General Guillermo Eleazar as the new chief of the Philippine National Police (PNP), presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said on Wednesday. Eleazar, currently the PNP deputy chief of administration, will replace PNP chief General Debold Sinas who will retire on May 8. "Eleazar's track record of professionalism, dedication, and integrity speaks for itself. We are therefore confident that he will continue the reform initiatives of his predecessors and lead the police organization to greater heights," Roque said in a statement. Eleazar, a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy, held several positions in the PNP, including deputy chief of administration and regional director of the National Capital Region Police Office.

From http://www.xinhuanet.com 05/05/2021

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SINGAPORE: PM Calls on People to Work with Government to Avoid 2nd Circuit Breaker

Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Saturday that the government will have to be agile and decisive with its response to tighten measures against COVID-19 promptly where it is necessary, to clamp down on the spread of new clusters, and to avoid going into a second Circuit Breaker. He called on Singaporeans to work with the government and not let down the guard, when he delivered his 2021 May Day Rally speech. "It is not time to relax yet. This is a marathon. Let us keep jogging and keep ourselves safe," he said. Lee reminded the Singaporeans not to make the mistakes some other countries have done, which were celebrating too early, relaxing too fast, letting the guard down, which caused another wave to come. "If we have to do another lockdown like last year's Circuit Breaker, it would be a major setback for our people and for our economic recovery," Lee added. Singapore was in the COVID-19 Circuit Breaker period from April 7 to June 1 last year, so as to stem the spread of the coronavirus. The Circuit Breaker measures include home-based schooling and shutting most workplaces temporarily. According to the Prime Minister, Singapore saw several new community clusters, some are quite big and worrying, emerged in the last few days, after a long period when it had few community cases. A press release from the Ministry of Health on Saturday showed that the number of new cases in the community of Singapore has increased from 11 cases in the week before to 37 cases in the past week.

From http://www.xinhuanet.com 05/01/2021

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VIETNAM: Urban Governance to Be Piloted in HÀ Nội

A plan to pilot the urban governance administrative model in Hà Nội has been issued by the city's People's Committee. It aims to clarify and give instructions on implementing a Government's decree on piloting the model in the capital from July 1. Under the decree, there will no longer be any ward-level People's Councils in Hà Nội. It means that instead of having both a People's Committee and a People's Council, each ward will be governed only by a People's Committee. The organisational structure of the committee will also be changed. Instead of having only a chair, vice chairs and members, the new ward-level People's Committee will also have a police chief, a military commander, and other officers performing different functions. The chair will hold decision-making power and be responsible for everything that happens in their committee. They can also authorise justice and civil status officers to make copies and notarise copies of the people's original documents instead of having to do it themselves.

Officers working for these new ward-level People's Committees will have the same rights and obligations as those working in their respective district-level People's Committees. Each ward-level committee should have an average number of 15 officers, according to the decree, but it's not necessarily the same for every committee. These changes will make major improvements to the Hà Nội's administrative system, said Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Trần Tuấn Anh. "With the urban governance model we will lay a foundation for the upcoming civil service reform," he told the Government portal baochinhphu.vn. "One of the key aspects of this model in Hà Nội is that ward-level People's Committees work as local state administrative agencies and the chairs are leaders, which will ensure a democratic focus and help modernise the administrative sector." Urban governance will also be piloted in HCM City and Đà Nẵng City from July 1. Instead of closing down ward-level People's Councils like Hà Nội, these two cities will remove district-level People's Councils from their administrative systems. Wherever it is implemented, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs Trần Tuấn Anh said the pilot process would make good use of the cities' civil officer resources. "It will also help the cities to be more proactive, responsible and creative in serving the people, making them happy and speeding up the socio-economic developments," he said.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 05/04/2021

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Health Sector Launches a Website on Stroke Prevention and Control

The health ministry's Medical Services Administration (MSA) in collaboration with Bayer Vietnam, launched a website on stroke prevention and control on Thursday. The website is an electronic information channel on stroke prevention and control for patients and the community under the framework of a cooperation programme on "Strengthening awareness of the community on stroke prevention and control for 2021 - 2023" between the MSA and Bayer Vietnam. "Strokes or cerebral vascular accidents are the most common cause of death in Việt Nam. Each year Việt Nam has about 200,000 stroke cases, of which about 50 per cent are fatal. Although many people fortunately survived after a stroke, they still suffer severe sequelae, even inability to work, creating burdens on families and society. Therefore, it is very important to raise awareness for patients and the community so that everyone can actively participate in stroke prevention and treatment," said MSA director Lương Ngọc Khuê at the launching ceremony. The website is directly linked to the MSA's website, providing people with accurate and useful information and knowledge, especially the latest scientific information and the latest medical advances on stroke prevention and control. It also provides important information from recognising the early signs and symptoms of a stroke, how to manage and prevent a stroke through building a healthy lifestyle and adhering to treatment or a forum to share experience on stroke prevention and control or a Q&A section to help patients get online consultation from professional experts. In addition to the special website, MSA also launched a Facebook fan page and a YouTube channel to further disseminate useful information about stroke prevention and control to patients and the community.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 05/06/2021

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HCM City Promises to Remove Administrative Barriers to Long-Delayed Projects

HCM City authorities on Tuesday promised enterprises that they would continue to support enterprises amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and would speed up major projects that have been delayed for years. HCM City People's Committee Chairman Nguyễn Thành Phong said: "More efforts should be made to improve the business climate and competitiveness, tackle difficulties faced by businesses, and push forward with administrative reform." Speaking at a meeting to review the economy of the first four months of the year, he told the Department of Home Affairs to set up a working group to help remove barriers for enterprises, especially those related to administrative procedures. “If the problems are caused by a central agency, the city will work with the central Government to remove them. Every week, I receive hundreds of complaints from businesses about prolonged procedures, causing project delays,” he said. “The delays cause serious damage to businesses as they have to pay bank interest every day.” “The head of any agency that causes the delay in administrative procedures must be fully responsible,” Phong said.

He said the fight against the outbreak remains the top priority, adding that the city would focus on achieving its “dual goal” of containing the Covid-19 pandemic and reviving the economy the rest of the year. The Department of Health has been asked to prepare a prevention plan for the fourth wave of the outbreak. The city also plans to build field hospitals and increase testing capacity of up to 15,000 samples a day. The city is strengthening pandemic control at airports, railways, roads and waterways. It has re-established checkpoints equipped with devices and border guard command forces to ensure COVID-19 control at city gateways. It will also continue to implement solutions to support the private economy, and encourage the formation of highly competitive corporations and enterprises in the region and the world. Phong asked all agencies to continue to promote e-commerce and the digital and sharing economy, especially amid the difficult conditions caused by the pandemic.

Signs of recovery

Speaking at the online event, Lê Thị Huỳnh Mai, director of the Department of Planning and Investment, said the city’s total retail sales of goods and revenues from consumer services in the first four months was up 7.9 per cent year-on-year. Since the beginning of the year, 5,588 businesses have resumed operation, up 95.18 per cent year-on-year. The index of industrial production (IIP) in the first four months increased by 9.7 per cent over the same period, which is a positive sign of economic growth, according to Mai. Nguyễn Thị Hồng Hà, director of the Department of Finance, noted the clear signs of recovery in the first four months as the total state budget revenue was estimated at more than VNĐ140 trillion (US$6.08 billion), an increase of 15.76 per cent over the same period last year. Lê Duy Minh, director of the city Tax Department, said the city is likely to achieve revenue targets for the year based on the positive results in the first four months. From now to the end of the year, the city will continue to support businesses by extending tax payments worth a total of VNĐ15 trillion ($650.2 million) for 56,000 organisations and individuals, including 34,000 businesses.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 05/13/2021

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Minister of Home Affairs: The Election Was a Complete Success

The elections of deputies to the 15th National Assembly (NA) and People's Councils at all levels for the 2021-2026 tenure was a comprehensive success as it took place democratically and in line with legal regulations, Minister of Home Affairs Phạm Thị Thanh Trà told Vietnam News Agency.

Could you give a brief assessment of the election results that the Ministry of Home Affairs has collected so far?
First of all, it must be said that this was a completely successful election, ensuring democracy, equality, safety and compliance with regulations and law. The election day was truly a big festival for every citizen. By 7pm on the election day, the turnout rate reached 99.16 per cent. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, localities and units made great efforts to mobilise voters to participate in the election. In many localities such as Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, Điện Biên, Hà Giang, Đắk Nông, Bình Định, An Giang, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, Bạc Liêu, Bến Tre, turnout was more than 99 per cent . In mountainous provinces such as Lạng Sơn and Lào Cai, the rate was 99.98 per cent. The National Election Council, the Government, the Prime Minister, relevant ministries and agencies such as the National Election Council Office, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the whole political system, from central to local, made efforts in directing, organising and implementing the election.

All citizens showed positive responses, consensus, unity and solidarity. Voters across the country were very excited when holding their ballot papers in hand. The high turnout rate of voters nationwide, even in COVID-19 pandemic-hit areas, showed people's faith in the regime, the Party and the State in building a socialist rule-of-law state. In regards to safety and order, the election took place without any trouble or large gatherings. The local police and military forces closely coordinated to ensure absolute security and safety on election day. On election day, localities ensured necessary distancing among voters, staggering time slots and implementing the 5K principle. Polling stations were fully equipped with temperature measurement equipment, backup masks, and hand sanitiser. In some places, there were cases where voters showed symptoms of cough and fever, so members of the Election Team instructed them to go separately and cast their ballots in backup boxes. For the area where voters are isolated at home, the Election Team implemented measures to prevent and control the pandemic in accordance with regulations so that voters can exercise their voting rights safely and in accordance with the law.

In some pandemic-hit areas, the vote rates were still quite high. Why do you think this was?
People’s belief for the country, for the Party and the State is the most important. In such a difficult situation, with many voters being quarantined or lying on hospital beds for treatment, they are still willing to participate in the election with their hearts, will and national spirit.

On Election Day, the Ministry of Home Affairs organised a delegation to inspect the election work in Bắc Ninh, one of the localities with the most complicated context of COVID-19. Can you give some information about the election work here?

On the election day, a delegation of the Ministry of Home Affairs led by Deputy Minister Trần Anh Tuấn went to check four polling stations in Tiên Du District and Từ Sơn Town. In this locality, voting was done in divided time zones, with voters grouped by residential cluster. Voters before entering the polling station voters had their temperatures checked and hands sanitised. All polling stations had isolation rooms. If a voter was found to be infected, they were isolated immediately. For F2 cases isolated at home, the Election Team brought an extra ballot box to their homes for voters to cast their ballots. A situation arose in Bắc Ninh when 38 voters were taken into isolation areas on May 22, the day before the election. At these locations, early voting had already been conducted. To ensure the rights of voters, on the morning of May 23, election teams had to bring extra ballot boxes to the isolation areas. This means local electoral organisations paid great attention to create the most favourable conditions for people to exercise their rights and obligations, and to maximise democracy. Many areas had to conduct early voting due to their geographic conditions or due to the pandemic. But in general, all localities and election teams managed to strictly comply with the provisions of the law. The ultimate goal was to create the most favourable conditions for voters to exercise their citizenship rights and maximise democracy. Therefore, the vote rates in these localities in the whole country were very high: Bắc Giang Province (98.20 per cent), Bắc Ninh Province (97.55 per cent), Điện Biên Province (99.61 per cent), Khánh Hòa (99.29 per cent).

From https://vietnamnews.vn 05/25/2021

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Capital Market Development Helps Boost Transparency in SOEs Equitisation

Capital market development helps State-owned enterprises (SOEs) enhance the transparency of corporate governance, thereby promoting transaction volume on the market and increasing liquidity for state shareholders, an official has said. The statement was made by Đặng Quyết Tiến, director of the Department of Corporate Finance from the Ministry of Finance in a recent interview with Tạp chí tài chính (Finance Magazine). The mechanisms, policies and legal system on the management and use of state capital and assets in SOEs have been amended and supplemented to ensure close management and transparency, maximising the benefits of the State, removing difficulties and obstacles to speed up the equitisation process and limit the loss of capital and state assets. “State-owned enterprises have been gradually restructured more effectively, maintaining their role as an important material force of the economy, contributing to economic regulation, macro stability and ensuring major balances of the economy and promote socio-economic development,” Tiến said.

“The potential for the development of the capital market in Việt Nam is huge, especially the equitisation of State-owned enterprises. During 2016-2020, with drastic measures, 11 per cent of state capital was transferred to the market, with the remaining being 89 per cent,” said Tiến. Besides such results, Tiến pointed out some shortcomings and limitations in the equitisation process including irresponsibility of managers, loose management over operations, low production and business efficiency, capacity being not commensurate with available resources, inefficient projects and slow corporate governance innovation. “Many SOEs have not kept up with the changing requirements of the market and have not really followed the market mechanism. Investment management, financial management, risk management, thrift practice and anti-waste practice are still insufficient. Production costs are still high. Technology and business management tools are slow to innovate," said Tiến. To link the development of the capital market with the SOE restructuring roadmap for 2021-2025, the Ministry of Finance had proposed a number of solutions such as raising the awareness and courage of leaders. Leaders of ministries, ministerial-level agencies, Government agencies, chairpersons of People's Committees of provinces and centrally-run cities, chairpersons of members' councils of economic groups, corporations and enterprises are responsible for the approval of restructuring plan of SOEs, organising and supervising the implementation of the plan.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 05/26/2021

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SBV Approves Plan for Digital Transformation by 2025

Nguyễn Thị Hồng, deputy governor of the State Bank of Việt Nam (SBV), has just approved a plan for digital transformation of the banking industry by 2025, with a vision to 2030. The plan is expected to comprehensively renovate the management activities of the SBV in a modern direction, on the basis of effective application and exploitation of achievements of the fourth industrial revolution, fully meeting the Government's criteria and indicators on digital transformation. According to this plan, 100 per cent of the public services of the Bank will be eligible to be upgraded to level 4 by 2025. One-hundred per cent of level 4 public services are integrated on the national public service portal and 90 per cent of work records at the SBV are processed and stored online. At least 50 per cent of inspection and supervision activities of the SBV are carried out through the digital environment and the information system of the Bank. For credit institutions, foreign bank branches must have at least 50 per cent of banking operations allowing customers to perform completely online. In particular, the plan also sets a target of at least 50 per cent of adults using electronic payment services and at least 70 per cent of customer transactions made through digital channels.

At the same time, the SBV expects at least 60 per cent of credit institutions to have revenue from digital channels of over 30 per cent. At least 50 per cent of decisions on disbursement and lending of commercial banks, financial companies for small loans and consumer loans of individual customers are made in the direction of digitisation and automation. And at least 70 per cent of work records at credit institutions are processed and stored digitally. By 2030, the SBV set a goal that at least 70 per cent of its inspection and supervision activities are carried out through the digital environment and the information system of the Bank. At least 70 per cent of banking operations allow customers to perform completely digitally. To implement this strategy, the SBV has proposed a plan to promote communication activities, modernise the payment infrastructure, and review and propose amendments and supplements to documents to create favourable conditions for banking digital transformation. On the other hand, the SBV also proposed to have preferential policies, attract high-quality human resources with knowledge and degree in information technology and skills in digital transformation, as well as regularly deploying training programmes to foster knowledge and skills on digital transformation for human resources in the banking industry. At the same time, the SBV also recommended amendments and supplements for undergraduate and postgraduate education programmes in banking - finance on professional contents associated with digital transformation. The decision took effect on May 11.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 05/26/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: Himanta Biswa Sarma Sworn in as CM of Assam, Aims to Bring Assam Among Top 5 States

As the new government came into power in Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma took the charge of the Chief Minister of Assam following the oath taking ceremony on Monday, May 11. The newly sworn-in CM announced that one of his core objectives is to make Assam one of the top five in India in the next five years. Addressing the press, the CM said that the prime focus of the government will be to control the COVID-19 pandemic, work on fulfilling all poll promises and make the state free from the annual flood havoc. As per a press release, Sarma said, “The COVID-19 situation in Assam is alarming. Our daily cases have crossed the 5000 mark. In our cabinet meeting tomorrow, we will discuss it from all perspectives, and take measures accordingly.”

From https://egov.eletsonline.com/ 05/16/2021

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TIFAC Suggests District-wise, State-wise and Central COVID-19

Command Centres

The Technology Information Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC), an autonomous institute under the Department of Science and Technology (DST) suggested that a COVID-19 Command Centre should be established in each district, equipped with necessary infrastructure and manpower. The COVID Command Centre will ensure both way information flow between the Centre and villages. This can help optimum use of available resources and also usage of data for other scientific purposes. COVID-19 cases have surged rapidly, particularly during the second wave and penetrating in the rural areas as well. As the pandemic spreads in the villages of India in varying intensity, accurate information about infection rate, recovery rate, death rate, supply of medicines, availability of medical infrastructures like hospital beds and oxygen need to be available to the administration with a click of a mouse. This is to facilitate efficient management of resources towards the containment of COVID-19 spread across the country. According to TIFAC, all the districts COVID-19 Command Centres should be connected with the State COVID-19 Command Centre, which will be the repository of information of the entire state. Similarly, all State COVID-19 Command Centres will be connected digitally with the Central COVID-19 Command Centre so that information of all states and villages of India will be available centrally as well. All the data and information that gets collected should be transferred and stored digitally so that time-series data is available at Central COVID-19 Command Centre for the whole of India and at States COVID-19 Command Centre for the entire states.

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Income Tax Department to Launch New E-filing Portal, E-filing to Be Suspended from June 1 to 6

The Income Tax Department, Government of India, is going to launch its new e-filing portal www.incometax.gov.in on June 7, 2021. The new e-filing portal is developed keeping taxpayers in mind. Hence, the portal aims to provide convenience and a modern, seamless experience to taxpayers. New taxpayer-friendly portal integrated with immediate processing of Income Tax Returns (ITRs) to issue quick refunds to taxpayers. Also, all interactions and uploads or pending actions will be displayed on a single dashboard for follow-up action by taxpayers. The portal offers free of cost ITR preparation software online and offline with interactive questions to aid taxpayers to file ITR even without any tax-related knowledge, with pre-filling, for minimising data entry effort. Moreover, a new call centre for taxpayers' assistance has been established. This will support in providing immediate answers to taxpayers' queries with FAQs, Tutorials, Videos and chatbot/live agents. The department has also developed a mobile app that will carry all the key portal functions that are available on the desktop version. The app that will be enabled subsequently will provide anytime access on a mobile network. Besides, a new online tax payment system on the new portal will be enabled subsequently with multiple new payment options using net banking, UPI, Credit Card and RTGS/NEFT from any account of the taxpayer in any bank, for easy transactions. However, in preparation for this launch and for data migration activities, the existing portal of the Department www.incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in would remain unavailable to taxpayers as well as other external stakeholders for a brief period of six days i.e. from June 1, 2021, to June 6, 2021. Also, during this period the Department will not fix any compliance dates. Further, directions have been issued to fix hearing of cases or compliances only from June 10, 2021, onwards, to give taxpayers time to respond to the new system. In case any hearing or compliance which requires submissions online has been scheduled during this period, the same will be preponed or adjourned and the work items would be rescheduled afterwards. Therefore, the Department has encouraged all the taxpayers to complete all their urgent tasks involving any submission, upload or downloads before June 1, 2021, to avoid any difficulty during the blackout period.

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MCMG Leveraging SAS Systems, Improving Revenue Management

It is not even a year since digital working has set in as the new normal and no more a mere choice. In such a scenario optimising revenue also needs technology-based solutions. Realising the fact, Elets Technomedia Pvt. Ltd. in association with SAS India organised a series of webinars – 'Revenue Management & Intelligence Summit 2021' on May 5, 2021. The second webinar witnessed senior policymakers from west India sharing their vantage points on 'Optimising Revenue Management through Advanced Analytics'. Dr Sangeeta Hasnale, Assistant Commissioner, Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), said, "We introduced the SAS System in our offices to know the issues we face in revenue management from the grassroots level and effectively manage the flow of the work" Expressing the challenges she faced, Dr Hasnale pointed out that due to the onset of the COVID pandemic in February 2020, MCGM had only three months to collect the revenue. "Leveraging SAS systems, MCGM enabled itself to collect the maximum revenue in such a short span of time." MCGM is the only corporation that has implemented the Capital Value system. While throwing light on how SAS analytics reformed the revenue management system in MCGM upscaling its efficiency, she mentioned, "SAS analytics showed that out of 4,50,000 people, 3,75,000 people didn't pay the taxes as per the norms laid down by the Supreme Court of India." In order to surface defaulter information, SAS enabled the categorisation that aided the department to know about those who have not paid taxes for over a year and the people who had an outstanding of Rs 1 crore or above. Besides, SAS generated networks have helped us in analysing whether a single commercial entry is having multiple properties or defaulters, she added. Further, Dr Hasnale said, "With SAS system onboard, every officer was able to analyse their units and their major defaulters. Every inspector was able to set their own target. The system not only improved the efficiency of our revenue management systems it also made the overall process transparent. This transparency aided in gaining back the trust of the people in the corporation." In her closing remarks, she said, due to technology solutions we were able to pick out the defaulters and enhance our revenue collection. Therefore, SAS is not only helping in increasing the revenue but also making Mumbai a law-abiding city.

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Power Ministry to Set Up National Mission on Using Biomass in Thermal Power Plants

In a bid to address the issue of air pollution due to stubble burning and bring down the carbon footprints of thermal power generation, the Ministry of Power has decided to set up a National Mission on the use of Biomass in coal-based thermal power plants. The move aims to support the energy transition from traditional to clean fuels in the country and our targets to move towards cleaner energy sources. Hence, the proposed mission is also envisaged to contribute to the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP). According to the Ministry, the "National Mission on use of Biomass in thermal power plants" will have certain objectives including –To increase the level of co-firing from the present 5 per cent to higher levels to have a larger share of the carbon-neutral power generation from the thermal power plants. To take up research and development activities in boiler design to handle the higher amount of silica, alkalis in the biomass pellets. To augment supply chains of biomass pellets and agro-residue and facilitate its transport to the power plants. To consider regulatory issues in biomass co-firing. The modalities of operation and structure of the Nation Mission are under finalisation. It is being envisaged that the Mission would have a Steering Committee headed by Secretary, Ministry of Power, comprising of all stakeholders including representatives from the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG), Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE), etc.

The Executive Committee would be headed by Member (Thermal), Central Electricity Authority (CEA). The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) will play a larger role in providing logistic and infrastructure support in the proposed Mission. The Mission would have full-time officers from CEA, NTPC, DVC and NLC or other participating organisations. The duration of the Mission would be a minimum of five years. Further, the following Sub-Groups are proposed to be formed under the Mission. These include – Sub-Group 1: The group would be responsible to carry out research on properties/characteristics of biomass. Sub-Group 2: This group is proposed to be taking care of technical specification and safety aspects including research in boiler design, etc. to make it suitable to handle the pilot project for a higher amount of co-firing of biomass with coal in pulverised coal (PC) fired boilers. Sub-Group 3: This will be formed to resolve the issues in the supply chain during the mission period and sensitisation programme. Sub-Group 4: The group would be responsible to select designated labs and certification bodies for the testing of agro-based biomass pellets and Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) pellets. Sub-Group 5: The group would be formed on the regulatory framework and economics of biomass co-firing in coal-based thermal power plants.

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Gomatham Sriniwas G Ayyangar Becomes Chief Resident Commissioner, Tripura Bhawan, Delhi

The Government of Tripura, on May 24, appointed Gomatham Sriniwas G Ayyangar (IAS 1987-Batch) as Chief Resident Commissioner (CRC), Tripura Bhawan, New Delhi. He was permanently called back from the Central deputation to avail promotion in the home cadre prior to his retirement in June 2021. Prior to the repatriation orders of the State government, Ayyangar was posted as Senior Deputy Director General (DDG) (Administration), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) under the Department of Health Research. His post at the ICMR was equivalent to a Joint Secretary level post.

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Kerala Govt Appoints KM Abraham as Chief Principal Secretary to CM

After coming in power for the second consecutive time in Kerala, the State government led by Pinarayi Vijayan released orders to appoint former senior state IAS officer KM Abraham as the Chief Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister. As per the sources, the Kerala government crafted a special post for the 1982-Batch IAS (Retd.) officer KM Abraham following the imprisonment of M Sivasankar, a senior IAS officer, who was serving as the Principal Secretary to the CM during his previous tenure. M Sivasankar was caught in the gold smuggling case for whic he has been imprisoned. Abraham, who retired as the Chief Secretary of Kerala during CM Vijayan’s previous tenure is considered to be close to the CM. In 2020, after his retirement, Abraham was assigned the charge of CEO, Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB) to mobilise funds for infrastructure development in the State.

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Arun Kumar Mehta to Be New Chief Secretary, Jammu & Kashmir

The Government of India, on May 27, gave approval for the appointment of Arun Kumar Mehta (IAS 1988-Batch) as the new Chief Secretary of the Jammu and Kashmir. At present, Mehta is serving as Finance Commissioner, Jammu and Kashmir. He will assume the charge of CS on the date the incumbent CS shifts to his next appointment. The decision from the Centre came following the appointment of the incumbent CS of J&K BVR Subrahmanyam (IAS 1987-Batch) as Officer on Special Duty (OSD) and Secretary, Commerce Department to the Government of India.

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Centre Appoints BVR Subrahmanyam as OSD & Secretary, Commerce Department

The Government of India, on May 28, announced the appointment of BVR Subrahmanyam as the new Officer on Special Duty (OSD) and Secretary, Commerce, Government of India. Subrahmanyam, 1987-Batch IAS officer, is the incumbent Chief Secretary of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) approved the appointment of Subrahmanyam as Commerce Secretary on superannuation of Anup Wadhawan (IAS 1985-Batch), the present Commerce Secretary, on June 30, 2021. His appointment has been approved at a time when India is negotiating key trade agreements with the European Union and the United Kingdom. Also, the country is pitching for unhindered access to vaccines and medical products through a waiver in the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Subrahmanyam's expertise in trade can pose a great benefit for India for these trade agreements.

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Dr Sandhya Bhullar Becomes Secretary, National Medical Commission

Following the orders from the Centre, Dr Sandhya Bhullar (IAS 2003-Batch) has been assigned the charge of Secretary, National Medical Commission (NMC) on Thursday, May 28. The decision to post Dr Sandhya came following the resignation of erstwhile NMC Secretary Dr R K Vats (Retd. IAS 1986-Batch). Prior to this appointment, Dr Sandhya Bhullar was recently posted as Joint Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs for an overall period of five years up to March 31, 2024.

From https://egov.eletsonline.com/ 05/29/2021

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: SME Dev't Agency Launches Online 'Queue of SMEs' System

Entrepreneurs in Azerbaijan who want to use the services provided by public and private institutions in Houses of Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs) can get an online queue without visiting the respective centers, Trend reports citing the country's SME Development Agency. As reported, the 'Queue of SMEs' system, created by the agency, allows to more efficiently provide services to entrepreneurs who apply to SME Houses. The application allows entrepreneurs to track the situation in connection with queues in the Houses of SMEs, thus avoiding wasting time. Entrepreneurs can download the 'Queue of SMEs' application to their Android mobile devices via GooglePlay. "Currently there are two SME Houses - in Khachmaz and Yevlakh. They provide services to entrepreneurs in a single space. More than 200 services are provided to those who have applied from about 20 state and private organizations," the agency noted.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/21/2021

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TURKMENISTAN: Continues to Integrate into International Patent System

Turkmenistan continues to integrate into the international patent system in the field of industrial property, Trend reports with reference to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. This was stated on May 24, 2021 during a videoconference between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov and President of the Eurasian Patent Agency of the Eurasian Patent Organization (EAPO) Saule Tlevlessova. Turkmenistan has announced key actions of the country at the national level, including the active implementation of the 'Programme of Development of the Intellectual Property System of Turkmenistan for 2021-2025'. Thus, in order to implement this program, an Interdepartmental commission on Ensuring the Protection of Intellectual Property Objects has been established in the country. During the meeting, the parties also considered the possibility of expanding practical cooperation with the EAPO. Earlier, the country signed a decree on the establishment of an interdepartmental commission for the protection of Intellectual Property, as well as on the approval of its composition and regulations.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/25/2021

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UZBEKISTAN: The Tasks for Improving the System of Housing and Communal Services Identified

On 28 May, a video conference was held under the chairmanship of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on the construction and improvement of maintenance of multi-apartment housing. In our country, large-scale work is being carried out to update the appearance of cities and villages, to create decent living conditions for the population. Over the past three years, housing for 155 thousand apartments with a total area of 41 million square meters has been commissioned. The number of apartment buildings has doubled. With the advent of new houses, modern massifs, the relevance of their maintenance increases. According to surveys of the population, 35 percent of residents of apartment buildings are not satisfied with the services provided, and 65 percent noted that they do not feel the work of partnerships. This is due to the fact that many partnerships are in dire financial straits. There is a low level of service and, consequently, trust in them. Despite the provided benefits, they cannot cope with the timely repayment of loans. At the same time, there are numerous cases of ineffective use of funds in the field of housing and communal services, embezzlement of budget funds. In particular, over the past 2 years, about 100 officials of the sphere have been prosecuted for corruption crimes.

The meeting discussed priority tasks to improve the maintenance of apartment buildings and renew the housing stock. It was noted that the maintenance of some areas in the regional centers, as well as in the cities of Nukus, Chirchik and Angren, will be transferred to qualified service managers as an experiment. Rating assessment of these companies will be introduced. Companies with better service will receive more properties in the future. In all management service companies, round-the-clock application centers will be organized. Another important problem is that in many cases, the liability of partnerships arises from an imbalance in the cost of services. From now on, the minimum set and standards of housing maintenance services will be approved by local kengashs in agreement with the population. At the same time, the territorial administration of ZhKO will have to substantiate the tariff parameters point by point by making a presentation of the planned works and services. Low-income families on the social assistance register will receive compulsory housing maintenance subsidies. The Ministry for Development of Information Technologies and Communications was instructed to launch a unified electronic billing platform for housing and communal services payments from 1 October 2021. It is indicated that 3 thousand newly built apartment buildings are not provided with maintenance services, the need to create management companies for their maintenance is noted.

- If there are no good living conditions, there will be no peace of mind in the family, no productivity at work. I am most worried about low-quality projects. If we eliminate corruption factors in construction and strengthen control over people's money in terms of their intended use, the result will be different, "the head of state said. This year, it is planned to renovate 212 and complete the repair of 456 two-storey houses that are in disrepair. In addition, 2.4 thousand apartment buildings are to be repaired this year, and 4.1 thousand houses in the next two years. For this, a special fund will be created under the Ministry of Housing and Communal Services to finance the repair of houses. Its funds will be formed from the republican and local budgets in equal shares. This year, 220 billion soums will be allocated for these purposes, another 100 billion soums will be attracted from the funds of the population. Thus, 30 percent of the cost of repairing apartment buildings will be carried out by the owners, the remaining 70 percent - at the expense of the fund. The khokims of the regions were instructed to effectively organize renovation and repair work with the targeted use of these funds. Special attention at the meeting was paid to the modernization of the heating system.

15 thousand apartment buildings are connected to district heating networks in cities. But 2 thousand kilometers of pipelines are in disrepair, and losses in the networks are on average 40 percent. In this regard, the task was set to connect more than 2 thousand apartment buildings to the centralized heat supply by the end of the year, having completed the construction and reconstruction of 56 boiler houses, repairing 205 kilometers of networks. - The purpose of the construction of new multi-storey buildings in the form of a whole array is to save energy resources and reduce infrastructure costs. However, neither the ministry nor the regions has developed a unified approach to this issue, - said Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The importance of transferring housing to a modern heat supply model, attracting the private sector to this was noted. This year, 183 new residential areas are being built. 185 kilometers of drinking water supply networks, 290 kilometers of sewerage, 130 kilometers of electricity networks and 110 kilometers of gas supply networks will be laid to them. This requires 415 billion soums and specific funding sources have already been identified.

Responsible persons were instructed to provide the arrays with infrastructure. It was also noted that at least 3 thousand apartment buildings in densely populated areas with a high demand for housing will be built at the expense of the Asian Development Bank loan in the amount of $ 50 million. Instructed to simplify the procedure and reduce the timing of granting subsidies for the payment of the initial payment for housing. Work on landscaping and development of social infrastructure was also touched upon. This year, 18 trillion soums have been allocated to improve conditions in 7,794 villages and makhallas. In addition, another $ 300 million was allocated to provide the population with clean drinking water, and to build and repair internal roads. The President criticized the progress of this work and instructed the responsible persons to eliminate the backlog of projects and ensure their high-quality implementation.

From http://www.uzdaily.com 05/30/2021

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Groups Seek Political Integrity Reforms

Tighter caps on political donations and election spending and an enforceable code of conduct for politicians are on the agenda of a new campaign to improve Australian democracy. Twenty human rights, environment and health organisations including the Human Rights Law Centre, Australian Conservation Foundation and Australian Democracy Network have joined forces for the #OurDemocracy campaign. With a federal election looming between August and May 2022, the groups say law reform is needed to improve the integrity of politicians and reduce the distorting influence big industries have in Australian politics. The changes include a code of conduct for politicians, making lobbying and political donations more transparent, banning big donations and stopping outgoing ministers from taking up jobs in the industries they regulated.

Human Rights Law Centre senior lawyer Alice Drury said the political rules needed a reset. "Our democracy works best when the government puts the best interests of people, our communities and our planet at the heart of every decision," she said. "But right now that isn't happening and harmful industries like gambling and fossil fuels are skewing our democratic processes to win political outcomes that put their profits ahead of our wellbeing." Australian Conservation Foundation's Matt Rose said many people felt let down or excluded from democracy due to the domination of vested interests. "Our organisations have come together to make our democracy fairer and more transparent by speaking together and helping people reclaim their role in our democracy." The government is currently consulting on a Commonwealth Integrity Commission but has yet to seek parliament's approval. However, donation reform has stalled as the major parties disagree on the level of disclosure caps and who should be banned from donating.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/19/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Government Sets Pay and Workforce Expectations for the Public Sector

The Government’s Workforce Policy Statement issued today sets out its expectations for pay and employment relations in the Public Sector, the Minister of Finance and Minister for the Public Service say. “New Zealand has had an exceptionally successful health and economic response to COVID-19. This has been supported by the Government taking on debt for investments like the wage subsidy that protected jobs, supported businesses and ensured the economy was ready for the recovery,” Finance Minister Grant Roberson said. “As the recovery gets underway, we are keeping a close watch on the debt taken on during COVID-19 to support the economy. Just as businesses are making decisions as they plan for the recovery, our responsible economic approach means the Government is faced with choices about where new spending is targeted.”

Last year the Public Service Commissioner issued guidance to Public Service agencies asking them to have nil or minimal pay increases for public servants until June 2021. “Today the Public Service Commissioner is updating that guidance to make clear that pay restraint will need to continue to be exercised across the Public Service for the next three years,” Minister for the Public Service Chris Hipkins said. “The updated guidance will continue to mean no pay increases for those earning over $100,000 and senior leaders within the public service. Any increases will be targeted to lower-paid public servants, largely those earning below $60,000, who account for about 25% of the public sector. “We want to see those on lower wages be the focus of any increases in pay.

“This is about prioritising spending. The policy will also help protect jobs by taking financial pressure off the public wage bill. “It will not impact the work we are doing within the Public Service to close gender and ethnic pay gaps. “The public service is doing a good job implementing the Government’s COVID-19 response, and we ask they lead the way in supporting the Government as we ensure our spending is targeted to where it is needed most,” Chris Hipkins said. “The guidance is consistent with the decision last year by the Remuneration Authority that Minsters and MPs would not be getting pay rises for three years because of the COVID-19 economic environment,” Chris Hipkins said. “The Public Service Commissioner, who sets the pay of Public Service Chief Executives, will also not be increasing their pay.

“Our Public Service is world class and the Government is committed to ensuring it is well-positioned as a modern employer. “We want the public service to use modern, progressive employment practices, and be a great place to work. We also want a productive unified workforce which is grounded in the spirit of service,” Chris Hipkins said. “To achieve these goals, we have set four key workforce priorities for the Public Service: Employ people fairly, equitably and in a way that allows them to live good lives and participate in the economy. Work collaboratively with unions and other groups to achieve shared goals. Create an inclusive environment for all workers with the aim of achieving a diverse workforce. Achieve the goals within the fiscal context of the Government.”

From https://livenews.co.nz 05/05/2021

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3、Management, Capacity Building and Innovation

Asia-Pacific

OECD Ministers Launch New Initiative for Safe International Travel

OECD Ministers have endorsed a new initiative to promote safe international travel during the COVID-19 pandemic at the OECD's annual Ministerial meeting in Paris. The Initiative involves a safe travel blueprint and a temporary international cross-sectoral forum for knowledge sharing. The forum will allow governments and stakeholders to share information in real time on plans and approaches facilitating travel. The blueprint promotes greater certainty, safety and security in travel as reopening takes place. It builds on existing initiatives and aims to increase interoperability amongst travel regimes. It will be used by countries on a voluntary basis. International air passenger transport dropped around 75% in 2020 and international tourism fell by around 80%. For the average OECD country, pre-pandemic, international tourism contributed 4.4% of GDP, 6.9% of employment, and 21.5% of service exports, but with much higher shares for some countries, including Greece, Iceland, Mexico, Portugal and Spain. The halt in international travel and tourism is having a dramatic knock-on impact on the entire, interlinked global economy.

"The OECD is in a unique position to help countries coordinate international action in the context of reopening global travel," said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría at the Ministerial meeting in Paris. “This initiative will help reduce uncertainty and complexity and enable countries to prepare more effectively for a return to safe international travel and tourism.” Without an international framework for travel policies, a patchwork of national and regional rules, inconsistent with each other, will continue to be confusing and costly for travellers and transport and tourism companies, discouraging travel due to the uncertainty and complexity. It could also increase the incidence of use of fraudulent certificates and so undermine the ability of authorities to mitigate public health risks. The OECD Blueprint, initiated by Spain, supports and complements existing international initiatives, such as the European Union's proposed ‘Digital COVID-19 Certificate’, by taking a principles-based approach to ensuring that they are compatible with each other, and adopted in a consistent way across a range of countries.

The Blueprint is a flexible and voluntary set of guidelines not a legal text. It consists of a traffic-light system to classify risks; guidance on how vaccination should be certified for travel to those countries that decide to take vaccination status into account; protocols for testing travellers in different circumstances; and principles to be followed in generating electronic certificates for travel that ensure privacy protection and security and promote interoperability among systems. Countries that use the OECD Blueprint may do so unilaterally or in bilateral or multilateral agreements, or through mechanisms provided in other bodies, such as, in particular the ICAO Public Health Corridor arrangement.

From https://www.oecd.org/ 05/31/2021

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Mobilizing Resources for a Sustainable Recovery: Things to Know

After spending heavily to support their economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, countries in Asia and the Pacific need to look to tax and financial management reforms to mobilize resources for a sustainable, equitable recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Asia and Pacific countries to spend trillions on their economies and set back recent poverty reduction gains by years. Tax yields in Developing Asia average about 17.6% of GDP, well below the OECD average, with many countries suffering from high levels of tax evasion and weak administration. Mobilizing domestic resources through tax reforms and stronger financial management will help stressed economies raise revenues for sustainable growth. Options for broadening the tax base include removing tax exemptions, imposing wealth and intergenerational taxes, hiking property taxes and adopting carbon and digital service taxes. Adopting a multilateral consensus-based system for taxing the digitalized economy will provide resources, while avoiding double taxation. Closing corporate tax loopholes, cracking down on evasion, easing registration procedures and using data and advanced analytics can improve compliance. Making tax systems more progressive will increase fairness and boost community confidence in them. ADB is helping developing member countries strengthen their tax systems and draw up medium-term revenue plans with the creation of a regional digital tax hub in 2020.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/03/2021

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ADB to Enhance Adaptation and Resilience in Response to Climate Change Threat

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will increase its focus on adaptation and resilience to climate change in response to the growing threat facing Asia and the Pacific. This enhanced focus was announced today by ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa during a special event, Raising the Bar on Climate Ambition: Road to COP

26, during ADB’s 54th Annual Meeting. “The Asia and the Pacific region is experiencing a sharp increase in climate shocks and stresses. Floods, droughts, cyclones, and heat stresses are already impacting livelihoods, food and water security, and the health of millions of people, especially vulnerable populations including women and children and the poorest of the poor,” Mr. Asakawa said. “More than 60% of the people in the region work in sectors highly susceptible to changing weather patterns. We must invest more in climate adaptation. We are now dangerously close to the point where action could come too little, too late.”

The event included Climate Policy Initiative Global Managing Director Barbara Buchner; BCPG Public Company Limited Senior Executive Vice President Phatpuree Chinkulkitnivat; Indonesia Minister of Finance Sri Mulyani Indrawati; US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry; Green Finance Committee of China Society for Finance and Banking Chairman Jun Ma; Fiji Attorney-General and Minister for Economy Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum; and COP 26 President Designate Alok Sharma. The panel discussed ways a green, resilient, and inclusive recovery can drive economic growth while shifting toward net-zero emission societies, insights from countries that have embraced long-term national climate plans, and the critical role of finance in the global climate agenda. The discussion built on the outcomes of the United States-led Leaders Summit on Climate last month—in which world leaders committed to stronger action on greenhouse gas emissions—and was part of ADB’s ongoing preparations for COP 26, which will take place this November to support the development of concrete plans for countries to reach their Paris Agreement targets.

ADB will take a holistic approach to enhancing adaptation and resilience. In addition to making physical infrastructure climate-proof, ADB will invest in more projects with climate adaptation as their primary purpose, while promoting strong integration of the ecological, social, institutional, and financial aspects of resilience across its operations. ADB’s move to increase adaptation and resilience investments will include nature-based solutions such as mangroves for coastal resilience, flood risk management-related infrastructure, and climate-smart livelihood practices such as agroforestry.

ADB is working with partners such as the United Kingdom, the Nordic Development Fund, and other financial institutions and global climate funds to roll out an ambitious community resilience partnership program that will support both governments and communities in Asia and the Pacific in their efforts to scale up pro-poor resilience investments at the local level. These actions will complement ADB’s ambitious climate finance target of ensuring 75% of the total number of ADB’s operations support climate action and ADB’s own climate finance resources reach $80 billion by 2030, to help developing member countries achieve, and even increase, their Paris Agreement commitments while charting a fair and equitable path to net-zero and climate-resilient development.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/04/2021

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APEC Should Step Up Cooperation to Secure Vaccine Supply Lines: Report

More than a year into the pandemic, APEC member economies are urged to fast-track trade policy measures and step up cooperation to tackle the ongoing crisis, according to a new policy brief by the APEC Policy Support Unit. Trade policy could facilitate the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, which is key to the fight against the pandemic, the policy brief highlights. It also states that APEC member economies should seize the opportunity to pursue initiatives to reduce or eliminate tariffs on vaccines and related goods and refrain from implementing export restrictions and prohibitions affecting those goods. Read: Promoting Trade in Vaccines and Related Supplies and Equipment

While the average tariff on vaccines is very low within APEC (only 0.8 percent), tariffs are much higher for several goods that are very important in the vaccine supply chain. Essential products such as alcohol solutions, freezing equipment, packaging and storage materials, as well as vials and rubber stoppers face higher average tariff rates above 5 percent. In addition, some import tariffs are very onerous, reaching as much as 30 percent and above for specific products in certain APEC economies. The policy brief recommends that member economies facilitate trade in vaccines and related supplies and equipment by securing open supply lines and preventing unexpected events from affecting the delivery of any goods in the vaccine supply chain.

“APEC economies are collectively responsible for the majority of the world’s COVID-19 vaccine production,” explains Carlos Kuriyama, Senior Analyst of the APEC Policy Support Unit and the author of the policy brief. “But since vaccine production relies on a specialized network with multiple inputs originating from across the APEC region and the rest of the world, this further underscores the importance of ensuring that global supply chains are functional and resilient,” Kuriyama adds. The report shows that since the emergence of the pandemic, several APEC economies have implemented measures to facilitate trade of medical products, including reducing or eliminating import tariffs on a temporary basis as well as exempting those imported products from value-added taxes and income taxes.

While those measures could help facilitate access to vaccines on a temporary basis, the policy brief proposes a better outcome could be obtained by making those measures long-lasting. In parallel, the policy brief recommends strengthening cooperation at all levels, for example, through the implementation of policies concerning intellectual property to promote technology transfer and facilitate vaccine production, as well as measures to mutually recognize good manufacturing practices, to ensure that the quality assurance for vaccines produced in one economy is valid for other economies as well.

“APEC economies need to take not just individual, but also collective actions during this emergency to fight this pandemic,” says Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, Executive Director of the APEC Secretariat. “The current situation is unprecedented and there is a sense of urgency to look beyond business-as-usual considerations to propose effective measures to stop this pandemic.” APEC Trade Ministers will convene virtually in early June under New Zealand’s leadership to set the region’s response to COVID-19, including policies and measures regarding vaccine supply chains.

“Free and open trade will help quickly ramp up COVID-19 vaccine production and at the same time tackle supply chain challenges,” says Kuriyama. “If vaccines or important related goods are unaffordable or unavailable due to tariffs, export restrictions or delays in transit, additional vaccine production may be for naught.” “The urgency of the pandemic requires bold and concerted action across the vaccine supply chain to facilitate vaccinations, and the end to the pandemic,” he continued. To read the full policy brief, Promoting Trade in Vaccines and Related Supplies and Equipment, from the APEC Policy Support Unit, visit this link.

From https://www.apec.org/ 05/19/2021

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APEC Could Play a Role in Bolstering Supply Chain Resiliency

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions to supply chains in the APEC region and has highlighted the need for governments to consider strategies for greater resilience, according to the latest APEC Regional Trends Analysis report launched on Thursday. “Most of the concerns raised about supply chain resilience have been echoed by the business community, but more can be done to manage resilience at the policy level,” says Dr Akhmad Bayhaqi, a senior analyst with the APEC Policy Support Unit. The APEC region has been producing close to 60 percent of global manufacturing value added (MVA) over the past two decades, spread mainly across four main hubs. When COVID-19 lockdowns affected these hubs, it led to severe supply chain disruptions. In the first four months of 2020 alone, the APEC region saw a 6.3 percent decrease in exports and a 5.5 percent decrease in imports compared to 2019.

“Businesses’ attempts to reduce supply chain costs by focusing on lean manufacturing, offshoring and supplier consolidation seem to have increased overall global supply chain risk and reduced flexibility,” explains Satvinderjit Kaur Singh, a researcher with the APEC Policy Support Unit. “This has led to calls for greater resilience in the aftermath of COVID-19.” However, improving resilience is not an easy or cost-free exercise, the report highlighted. Global supply chains were formed based on the business linkages that would provide the most cost-efficient outcome, so that businesses can position themselves competitively in the global markets. The recent disruptions have brought forward the difficult conundrum for businesses in choosing between efficiency and greater resiliency.

"While the concepts of relocation and reshoring were widely considered in the earlier part of the pandemic, it comes with higher production costs and hurts the long-term global outlook," explains Singh. "There is a need for investments in order to build more resilient supply chains," Dr Bayhaqi adds. "Improving just-in-time manufacturing, combined with the right technology and other strategies such as creating cushions in the form of inventory, capacity or lead times and designing contingency plans for possible supply chain shocks can boost resiliency."

IN SEARCH OF RESILIENCE

The pandemic has made businesses and governments more aware of the importance of resilience. But what does it really mean?

Key characteristics of a resilient supply chain:

- Robustness: strong enough to withstand shocks and changes
- Agility: able to quickly recover from shocks
- Flexibility: able to leverage options and alternatives during normal times and during recovery
- Redundancy: able to build adequate surplus capacity

The report calls for governments to avoid policy interventions that may disrupt the efficient configuration of global value chains. Rather than looking at trade as the root cause of supply chain's vulnerability, the report suggests policymakers look at global trade as part of the solution to achieving resiliency. "Governments can focus on promoting digitalization and supply chain visibility; and by enhancing regional cooperation on trade, connectivity and economic openness," says Dr Bayhaqi. "Customs operations and cooperation can be improved by applying automation and digitization through platforms such as the Single Window System." Governments should leverage knowledge transfers and productivity spillovers gained from global value chains for local firms and support them in maintaining the skills and know-how that they have acquired from their supply chains networks.

Structural reforms could also play a crucial role in developing a stable and predictable regulatory environment that allows global value chains to operate and recalibrate their network structures during recovery from a pandemic. "There is no easy fix for supply chain disruptions," says Dr Rebecca Sta Maria, APEC Secretariat's Executive Director. "The focus for economies today is to build long-lasting resilience by looking at their supply chains more holistically, harmonizing regulation, digitizing processes and creating some level of redundancy to allow flexibility.” “The important thing moving forward is to ensure that stronger trust in trading partners and deeper regional integration, by involving micro, small and medium enterprises, form an integral part of APEC’s strategy toward a resilient and inclusive economic recovery,” Dr Sta Maria concludes.

From https://www.apec.org/ 05/28/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Leadership Urges Cool Heads over Economy to Push Balanced Recovery

Moving on from a strong economic rebound, China's top leadership has called for cool heads over the impressive growth to put more focus on deepening structural reform for balanced recovery in the long term. Though China's economy has got off to a good start this year, the central leadership stressed Friday that the country's first-quarter data should be viewed dialectically. "The current economic recovery is still unbalanced and the foundation not solid," noted the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee. China's economy grew 18.3 percent year on year in the first quarter of 2021, as strong domestic and foreign demands powered recovery from a low base in early 2020 when COVID-19 stalled the world's second-largest economy.

Soberly aware that the double-digit growth was fueled by base effect, policymakers underscored more efforts to deepen supply-side structural reform and remove the impediments to domestic and international circulations as China faced "a window of opportunities" at a time when there is less pressure to maintain steady growth. Domestically, while most sectors have emerged from the epidemic impacts faster and stronger than expected, some are still feeling the pinch. Official data showed China's first-quarter manufacturing investment of 2020 and 2021 was down 2 percent on average from the 2019 level. Recovery of consumption, an important pillar of economic growth, also needs further consolidation. Other challenges include pushing industrial upgrading, keeping stability in the property market, defusing financial risks and advancing plans towards carbon neutrality, along with coping with increasing uncertainties in the global market.

Friday's meeting detailed requirements to address such issues, vowing to implement macro policies with precision while maintaining their continuity, stability and sustainability. It urged efforts to maintain stable expectations, keep the economy running within an appropriate range, and ensure it reaches a higher level of equilibrium during the course of the recovery. The country's proactive fiscal policy should be implemented thoroughly, while a prudent monetary policy should be adopted to maintain reasonable and sufficient liquidity, the meeting stressed. China has to strike a balance between short-term tasks and long-term goals, and focus on resolving structural problems to enable a higher level of equilibrium, said Dong Yu, executive deputy dean of the China Institute for Development Planning at Tsinghua University.

As the Chinese government has absolutely no pressure to achieve its growth target of over 6 percent this year, the difficult problems accumulated over the past years will be beginning to be cleaned up one by one this year, according to Zhang Zhiwei, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management. Zhang cited China's recent policy measures, including regulation on mortgage loans, as evidence of government resolution to tackle the economic problems. "It is worth noting that although these policies may bring certain risks in the short-term, in the long-term, they are good for the development of China's economy and capital market," Zhang said.

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

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Xi Stresses Strategic Resolve on Building Eco-civilization

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, has stressed maintaining strategic resolve on developing an ecological civilization and achieving modernization featuring human-nature harmony. Xi made the remarks while presiding over a study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee on Friday, according to a statement issued on Saturday. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) period is a vital phase for China's ecological conservation drive that aims for overall green transformation of economic and social development through coordinated progress in pollution reduction and carbon emission cut, Xi noted. He called for maintaining strategic resolve and planning economic and social development with a lofty goal of achieving harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. At the study session, Wang Jinnan, head of the Chinese Academy of Environmental Planning under the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, explained related issues and proposed work suggestions for discussion. Xi said one of the key characteristics of China's socialist modernization is human-nature harmony. He urged efforts to accelerate the adjustments of industrial, energy, transportation, and land use structures.

Territorial space planning and use control should be strengthened, and resource utilization efficiency comprehensively improved. Peaking carbon emissions and achieving carbon neutrality are a solemn commitment to the world and also a profound economic and social transformation that is by no means easy, Xi noted. He called on Party officials and governments at all levels to set clear timetables and roadmaps to push economic and social development based on efficient use of resources and green, low-carbon growth. "High-energy consumption and high-emission projects that do not meet requirements must be resolutely taken down," Xi stressed. He underscored efforts to continue the fight against air, water and soil pollution and improve the quality and stability of the ecosystem. China will establish a sound mechanism for realizing the value of ecological products so that the protection and restoration of the ecological environment can be awarded a reasonable return, and the cost of damaging the environment paid correspondingly, Xi said. Major biodiversity conservation projects will be launched, and control of alien species strengthened, he noted.

China will actively participate in global environmental governance, improve South-South cooperation, and cooperate with neighboring countries, Xi said. It will provide developing countries with financial and technical support within its capacity, and assistance in improving environmental governance capabilities, in order to jointly build a green Belt and Road, he noted. Xi stressed that China must improve the modernization of the ecological environment governance system and governance capabilities and strengthen legal and policy guarantees for green development. He urged efforts to improve the management of binding indicators for environmental protection, energy conservation, and emission reduction, and establish a sound and stable mechanism of the fiscal input. China should fully implement the pollution discharge permit system, promote the market-oriented trading of pollution discharge rights, energy use rights, water use rights, and carbon emission rights. It should also establish a sound risk management and control mechanism, Xi said.

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China to Stabilize Grain Production, Ensure Food Security

China will further promote stable grain production and step up its ability to ensure food security, a State Council executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Thursday. Thanks to a succession of bumper harvests in recent years, the country has enjoyed ample supply of major agricultural products and ensured basic self-sufficiency in cereal grains and absolute grain security. There is solid foundation for another good harvest this year. The winter wheat acreage increased for the first time in nearly four years, and the crop is in a better shape than the previous years. Summer crops are expected to produce yet another bumper harvest. Spring plowing and sowing has progressed smoothly, and the area planted to early-season rice remains stable. The intended acreage of grains for the whole year will further expand, with corn planted area up from the previous year. "Stable grain production and greater ability to ensure food security have provided a solid underpinning for promoting stable economic and social development and responding to the impact of COVID-19.

Annual grain output should remain at no less than 650 billion kilograms this year," Li said. Determined efforts will be made to ensure stable and high yields. The policies including minimum purchase prices for rice and wheat and subsidies for corn and soybean producers will remain and be improved. The pilot programs of full-cost insurance and income insurance for the three major cereal crops will be extended to make grain growing profitable for farmers. Central budgetary investment and proceeds from the transfer of land-use rights at provincial level will be tilted towards major grain-producing counties. Subnational authorities must strictly fulfill their primary responsibility in ensuring food security. They should strengthen farmland management and summer harvest and sowing, scale up technical services, ensure the provision of agricultural supplies and effectively tackle major agricultural pests and disasters.

Flood control and drought preparedness need to be strengthened in a coordinated manner. Grain procurement, reserves and market regulation will be enhanced, to ensure supply and keep prices stable. Grain storage and logistics facilities will be improved, and the scale and mix of grain reserves further refined. "For a country as big as China, appropriate grain reserves are indispensable. The central government should assume responsibility in this regard, and subnational authorities should also play its due part," Li said. Cultivated land will be better protected and its quality enhanced. The plan of a new round of high-standard farmland development will be implemented, and 100 million mu, equivalent to some 6.67 million hectares of high-standard farmland with high resilience to drought and flood and high yield stability will be cultivated this year. More stringent regulation over the use of arable land will be enforced, to curb non-agricultural activities on farmland and strictly regulate non-grain cultivation, and hold the line of no less than 120 million hectares of cultivated land.

The underpinning role of science and technology in agricultural production will be reinforced. In light of the national conditions and people's needs, science-based and result-oriented efforts will be made to shore up the areas of weakness. The quality of rice and wheat, and oil content of soybean will be improved, and quality vegetable varieties cultivated. The per unit yield and market adaptive capacity of important agricultural products will be boosted, and the milk production per cow and quality of beef cattle enhanced. Mechanisms will be improved to fully mobilize market forces and promote collaboration on innovation between research institutes and universities and enterprises and farmers.

A sound commercial breeding system will be established, and enterprises in seed industry will be nurtured and expanded. The research, development and extensive application of practical and efficient farming machinery and equipment will be supported. The quality and efficiency in the agricultural sector will be promoted through technological innovation. "As urbanization picks up speed, it is imperative to increase our grain supply capacity. We must leverage market-oriented mechanisms, broaden supply channels and boost the micro-circulation for grain supply, to ensure sufficient provision of diverse varieties and maintain the stable operation of the grain market," Li said.

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Chinese Premier Calls for Social Atmosphere that Spurs Innovation, Creativity

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Tuesday called for unremitting efforts to foster a social atmosphere that respects science, knowledge and talent and spurs innovation and creativity. Li, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, made the remarks while presiding over a symposium on the special government allowance system. Vice Premier Han Zheng, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, attended the symposium. Several representatives of the allowance receivers spoke at the meeting, offering suggestions on improving the allowance system, supporting young talents and other matters. China's special government allowances are granted as rewards and honorary titles to outstanding talents that are deemed highly professional or skilled in their specialized fields of work such as scientific study, medical treatment, education and technical operation.

Lauding the achievements the special government allowance system has made over the past three decades since its inception, Li called for more efforts in improving talent incentive mechanisms to pool wisdom and strength for China's high-quality development and modernization. More emphasis should be placed on the training of the basics in cultivating talents, Li said, calling for more support for basic research that might bring no fame and research that demands a long-term commitment. Li urged efforts to promote the spirit of science, craftsmanship and professionalism. He also called for more international exchanges and cooperation to boost innovation and creativity. He further emphasized a favorable environment for talents to grow and play their roles, and said various reforms must be deepened to remove restrictions. More outstanding young researchers should be encouraged to play leading roles in major scientific research projects, he said.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/11/2021

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China Takes Multi-pronged Measures to Ensure Commodity Supply and Stable Price

China will work to ensure the supply of commodities and keep their prices stable, to maintain steady economic performance, the State Council's Executive Meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Wednesday. Since the beginning of this year, due to multiple factors especially the transmission of global price rise, some commodities have seen extended price rally, with the prices of some varieties hitting new records. The government must take very seriously the adverse impact caused by the price hike, and take both holistic and focused measures in light of market dynamics to exercise precision regulation, so as to ensure the supply of commodities and curb unreasonable price increases and prevent transmission to consumer price. "We must carefully analyze the reasons behind this round of rapid increase in commodity prices and focus on the crux of the issue, to adopt measures in a targeted and holistic approach," Li said.

A host of steps was decided upon to strengthen two-way adjustment of supply and demand, including raising export tariffs on certain iron and steel products, temporarily exempting tariffs on pig iron and scrap steel, and canceling export tax rebates for some steel products, to increase supply in the domestic market. Dedicated efforts will be made to advance structural adjustments and discourage projects with high energy consumption. The country's rich coal resources will be further tapped. Key coal companies will be encouraged to raise production and supply while ensuring safety, and the capacity of wind, solar, hydro and nuclear power will be increased to ensure energy supply during summer peak time. Opening-up will be pushed forward, to re-calibrate the import, export and buffer reserves of commodities, facilitate custom clearance and better leverage international and domestic markets and resources, to more effectively ensure supply and keep prices stable.

Market regulation will be strengthened. Industry associations should play their due role in enhancing industry self-discipline. The regulation of futures and spot markets will be better coordinated and targeted measures will be taken when appropriate to screen abnormal transactions and malicious speculations. Irregularities such as making and executing monopoly deals, spreading false information, price gouging and hoarding will be dealt with to the full extent of the law and brought to light. "While the market continues to play a decisive role in resources allocation to ensure the supply of commodities and keep their prices stable, the government must better fulfill its responsibility. Any monopoly and hoarding will be cracked down upon under the law to step up market regulation," Li said. Efforts will be made to maintain the stability of monetary policy and keep the RMB exchange rate broadly stable at an adaptive, balanced level, to guide market expectations as appropriate.

Assistance will be provided to help market entities, especially micro and small businesses and self-employed individuals, cope with rising costs and other difficulties in their production and operation. Policies to provide tax relief for micro and small enterprises and individually-owned businesses and refund all due VAT credits to advanced manufacturing enterprises on a monthly basis will be effectively implemented, and procedures for such concessional tax policies streamlined. Direct-benefit monetary policy tools will be well executed. Re-lending and rediscounting will be scaled up to underpin inclusive finance. Policies to incentivize reductions in the guarantee fees of financing for micro and small enterprises will be well exercised, to encourage banks to issue more credit-based loans. "Policies for tax and fee cuts and inclusive finance will be refined, and assistance to market entities in difficulty scaled up. All the temporary support policies must be fully delivered, to safeguard the lawful rights and interests of micro and small firms and self-employed individuals," Li said.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/19/2021

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China Moves to Keep Commodity Prices Stable

Chinese authorities have admonished key enterprises in the bulk commodity sector to rein in market irregularities and keep commodity prices stable, according to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). The NDRC, together with other four relevant government departments, reminded enterprises with market influence in sectors such as iron ore, steel, copper and aluminum at a Sunday meeting to run in accordance with laws and regulations and keep the market prices in order. Industry associations such as the China Iron and Steel Association and the China Nonferrous Metals Industry Association also attended the meeting. The recent price rally in commodities is partly driven by the transmission of global price rises, but excessive speculation in the market has also pushed up the prices, said the meeting. Key enterprises should move to promote the coordinated development of upstream and downstream industries and keep the industrial ecology healthy, it said.

The meeting also urged the enterprises against irregularities such as price manipulation, the making and spreading of false information on price hikes, price gouging and hoarding. For the next stage, authorities will closely monitor the trend in commodity prices, strengthen regulation over the co-movement between the futures market and spot market of bulk commodities and adopt a zero-tolerance attitude on irregularities, according to the meeting. Enterprises and industry associations at the meeting pledged to regulate production activities and operate in keeping with the law to keep the market and prices stable. Facing commodity price hikes, a State Council executive meeting last week outlined measures to better ensure the supply and stable pricing of commodities, including higher export tariffs on some iron and steel products, provisional zero import taxes on pig iron and scrap steel, and doing away with export tax rebates on some steel products.

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Chinese Premier Stresses Efforts to Strengthen Market Vitality for Development

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has underlined efforts to further advance reform and opening-up, strengthen market vitality and actively deal with changing domestic and external situations for pushing forward the country's stable and sound economic 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 his inspection tour to the city of Ningbo in east China's Zhejiang Province from Monday to Tuesday. When inspecting the Ningbo-Zhoushan port, a major transit area for bulk commodities in China, Li called for paying close attention to the cyclical changes in the world economy and commodity price fluctuations in the international market. China should expand opening-up, further promote the facilitation of customs clearance and conduct free and fair trade, he said, adding that the country should give full play to the advantages of the port and use market-oriented methods to improve the import, storage and trading of bulk commodities. Li spoke with managers of several manufacturing enterprises to learn about the impact that upstream price changes in raw materials had had on their businesses.

He said that rising commodity prices would not only bring excessive pressure to large and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises but also affect the small, micro and individual businesses, adding that consumption activities downstream would also be affected. Li called for making good use of policies, such as tax and fee cuts and inclusive financing, to support market entities, and ramping up market regulation to slow down the transmission of rising costs to the downstream sectors. Enterprises should also pay attention to tapping into their potentials and drawing on innovation to relieve cost pressures and improve competitiveness. During his visit to a government service center in the city, Li stressed that the country should relieve the pressure on enterprises, continue improving its business environment, and create a fairer market for competition. He also inspected a talent resource market to learn about the local employment situation. While visiting a local company, he encouraged it to develop more new products enjoyed by consumers.

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China Leads the World in 5G Base Stations: Vice Minister

China has taken a global lead in the development of 5G, with a total of 819,000 5G base stations built so far, accounting for over 70 percent of the world's total, a government official said here Wednesday. Liu Liehong, vice minister of industry and information technology, released the figures at the ongoing China International Big

Data Industry Expo 2021 in Guiyang, capital of southwest China's Guizhou Province. The number of 5G terminal connections in China has exceeded 310 million, accounting for more than 80 percent of the world's total, according to Liu. During the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), China built the world's largest optical-fiber and 4G network, with over 99 percent of the villages across the country connected to both technologies. The three-day big-data industry expo, showcasing cutting-edge scientific and technological innovations and achievements, kicked off on Wednesday. It has attracted 225 enterprises from home and abroad, according to the organizing committee.

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Holistic Approach to Meeting the People's Republic of China's Agriculture Challenges

The People's Republic of China (PRC) feeds the largest population in the world, a task fraught with many challenges. While investments in agriculture together with institutional reforms have secured a stable food supply, food security remains a concern due to productivity and environmental challenges. Water availability is one of the biggest constraints to agricultural development in the PRC. It is aggravated by climate change that leads to more frequent droughts and floods, causing reductions in grain output. About a decade ago, average irrigation water use efficiency in the country was only about 40%, and soil fertility was degraded in many regions due to intensive farming techniques over decades. In addition, there was limited institutional capacity to manage the advanced irrigation infrastructure that exists, and a lack of mechanized plowing and harvesting equipment. It was against this backdrop that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved in 2012 a $200 million loan for the Comprehensive Agricultural Development (CAD) Project to support the PRC's CAD program to promote a holistic approach to enhance food security. Five provinces (Anhui, Heilongjiang, Henan, Jilin, and Yunnan) and one autonomous region (Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region) were selected for the project.

Boosting agricultural productivity

"The project was designed to use an integrated approach to increase agricultural productivity through developing improved irrigation and drainage infrastructure," says ADB Senior Natural Resources and Agriculture Specialist Shingo Kimura. "This was combined with institutional and capacity development to promote effective operation and maintenance of irrigation and drainage infrastructure, and to introduce modern agricultural technologies." At the preparation stage, the project team gathered extensive inputs from provincial and national government officials as well as villages, including women and ethnic minorities. "A well-informed consultation process along with participation and involvement in subproject identification and implementation ensured the effective operation and maintenance of improved infrastructure upon completion," says Mr. Kimura. Over the six-year implementation period, the project improved drainage over more than 100,000 hectares (ha), developed extensive surface water and groundwater irrigation systems, and introduced water-saving technology. By adopting practices such as land leveling, soil testing, appropriately applying fertilizers, returning crop residue to farmland, and reducing salinity, the project improved soil quality in about 43,600 ha of land, while repairing almost 2,000 kilometers of roads, and providing tractors and plant equipment to farms.

Reducing rural poverty

It also increased agricultural productivity and irrigation water use efficiency in the project area, with grain yields increasing by 53%, cash crop yields (excluding vegetables) by 353%, and vegetable yields by 35% in the project area between 2010 and 2018. "The project supported water-saving irrigation and conservation agriculture, which became more relevant under the PRC's new policy orientation promoting sustainable agricultural production," says ADB's Director of Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture in East Asia Tom Panella. "It was well aligned with the PRC's 12th and 13th Five-Year Plans, which highlighted the importance of food security, agricultural productivity, and water resources management." Further, the project contributed to reducing rural poverty through increasing both farm and non-farm income opportunities. It had a positive impact on women particularly by boosting their participation and representation in local water and farmer associations, increasing employment opportunities, and improving technical capacity in modern agricultural production and irrigation. The project created 24,263 jobs during implementation and 2,284 employment opportunities during operation of the facilities, with women taking up half of the new jobs created.

"The project created 24,263 jobs during implementation and 2,284 employment opportunities during operation of the facilities, with women taking up half of the new jobs created." Ethnic minorities, which comprise about 60% of the population in the project area, benefited through training, job opportunities, and improved farmland. They comprised 60% of farmers who received training and almost 70% of those who received employment under the project. "This project has achieved remarkable results despite the complexities of effectively managing 68 counties scattered around 6 provinces," says ADB Country Director in the PRC Yolanda Fernandez Lommen. "The strong coordination between ADB, project implementation offices, and provincial and county governments was a key factor behind the success and smooth implementation of the project."

Project Achievements

	2010	**2018**	**Increase**
Grain Yields	5.74 ton/ha	8.76 ton/ha	53%
Cash Crop Yields	1.90 ton/ha	8.60 ton/ha	353%

Vegetables	25.2 ton/ha	34 ton/ha	35%
Irrigation water use efficiency – surface systems	40%	55%	
Irrigation water use efficiency – groundwater systems	60%	76%	
Average per capita income of farmers	CNY3,614	CNY9,675	168% (in constant 2010 values)
Poverty incidence in project villages	12.3% (2013)	1.5%	

This article was written by Graham Dwyer, Principal Communications Specialist at ADB's Department of Communications.

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China to Tighten Crackdown on Capital Market Violations

China will tighten its crackdown on violations in the country's capital market, an official with the country's securities watchdog said Saturday. These violations include fraudulent issuances, financial fraud, and market manipulation in the name of market value management, said Li Chao, vice chairman of the China Securities Regulatory Commission. The commission will hasten the optimization of securities and law-enforcement systems and mechanisms, together with other relevant parties, Li said. While continuing its supervision efforts and guarding against various kinds of risks, the commission will also resolutely delegate power to the market in fields where market mechanisms can play an effective role, according to Li. More efforts will be devoted to enhancing supervision, transparency, and predictability to spur market vitality, he added.

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Chinese Steelmakers Quicken Pace for Low-emission

Transformation

Chinese steelmakers are intensifying efforts to shift towards ultra-low-emission production as the country pushes for greener economic growth. As of the end of February, around 620 million tonnes of crude steel capacities of 229 companies have completed or are in the process of ultra-low-emission upgrading, according to He Wenbo, executive director of the China Iron and Steel Industry Association (CISA). For the steel industry to fully realize ultra-low emissions, an investment of about 260 billion yuan (about 40.7 billion U.S. dollars) will be required, which would increase operating costs by more than 50 billion yuan each year, He said. By vigorously promoting industrial structure adjustment, energy structure optimization, ultra-low emission and low-carbon transformation, China's steel industry in recent years has seen remarkable progress in green development. According to CISA data, major iron and steel enterprises had reduced their comprehensive energy consumption per tonne of steel by 58 percent from 2015 to 2020. Making the steel and other energy-consuming industries greener is an important part of China's broader efforts to cut pollution and tackle climate change. China previously announced that it would strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. China Baowu Steel Group Corporation Limited (China Baowu), the world's largest steel conglomerate, in January announced its aim to have carbon dioxide emissions peak before 2023, reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 30 percent before 2035, and achieve carbon neutrality before 2050. China's crude steel output came in at 1.07 billion tonnes in 2020, official data showed.

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JAPAN: Gov't Considers New Cash Handout for Needy Households

Japan's government is considering another cash handout program of up to 100,000 yen each for needy households to help ease the financial strain of the prolonged coronavirus pandemic, sources close to the matter said Tuesday. Under the envisaged plan, applicants for the new program of pandemic support would be required to meet conditions such as not possessing deposits and savings in excess of 1 million yen, but those on welfare would be excluded, according to the sources. The government is considering providing monthly payments of 60,000 yen to single-member households, 80,000 yen to two-person households and 100,000 yen to households composed of three or more people for three months from July, earmarking 50 billion yen from the fiscal 2021 initial budget, the sources said. The move comes as the government is considering extending its third state of emergency beyond the current end date of May 31 for about three weeks, with a fourth wave of infections triggered by highly contagious variants of the novel coronavirus showing no signs of abating.

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Japan Considering Extending State of Emergency

Japan's government is expected this week to make the call on whether or not to extend the coronavirus-related state of emergency that is currently in place for Tokyo and several other parts of the country. It has been a month since the country's third coronavirus state of emergency was initially declared for Tokyo and three western prefectures. The measure was later expanded to cover nine prefectures, plus the capital, in total. It is currently due to expire at the end of May for all prefectures except Okinawa. But coronavirus numbers nationwide remain troubling. Japan's health ministry says the number of severe cases hit a record high on Wednesday. It says 1,413 patients are on ventilators or being treated at intensive care units. Most prefectural governments say it is too early to lift the state of emergency. At an online meeting on Wednesday, the governors of Tokyo and three surrounding prefectures asked the central government to extend the state of emergency for the capital and maintain intensive virus-prevention measures for the prefectures.

"There are concerns that we could see a rapid resurgence of infections if the state of emergency and the measures are lifted," said Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko. "Tokyo and the three prefectures will work together to contain infections." The metropolitan government reported 743 new cases of the coronavirus in the capital on Wednesday. That is 23 fewer than a week ago, and marks the 13th straight day of week-on-week declines. Experts advising the Tokyo government say the current measures must be extended, citing the risks posed by variants combined with an increased flow of people. Experts are expressing concern about the variant that has been spreading in India. It had been detected in 29 people in Japan as of May 24, according to the Health Ministry. Six days earlier, the figure was just eight.

The Tokyo Medical and Dental University Hospital screened 37 patients for the India variant from May 6 to 24. One tested positive. That patient says they have never travelled overseas. Associate Professor Takeuchi Hiroaki says it is highly likely that the patient contracted the virus through community spread and that there are others with it in the vicinity. Professor Nishiura Hiroshi, an infectious disease expert at Kyoto University, says Tokyo has avoided a surge in infections, but the rate has not declined under the state of emergency. "If we consider the impact of the variant first detected in India, it will be difficult to control infections with the present measures," he says. Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide said on Monday that the government will listen to expert opinions and review the infection situation before making a decision at the end of this week.

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Japanese Govt Eyes Energy-Saving Public School Buildings

The government is considering a scheme to decarbonize public elementary and junior high school buildings through improvements in heat insulation and generating solar power as part of efforts to achieve its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned. The government also intends to strengthen the functions of school buildings as disaster evacuation centers, according to sources. This initiative is aimed at turning these school buildings into structures called ZEBs (Net Zero Energy Buildings), which are designed to reduce energy consumption to practically net zero by generating electricity through solar power and other means while curbing consumption. The Plan for Global Warming Countermeasures approved by the Cabinet in 2016 has set a goal of making half of all new buildings ZEBs by 2030. Under the initiative, materials with a high heat insulation properties will be used for roofs and exterior walls and multilayered glass windows will be adopted to increase the efficiency of air conditioning and reduce energy consumption. The buildings will be designed to maximize access to natural light, and incorporate LED lighting with motion sensors to save more electricity.

According to a survey conducted by the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry in 2018, more than 30% of public elementary and junior high schools nationwide have installed equipment to generate power such as from solar and wind. On the other hand, there have been only a few school buildings categorized as ZEBs largely due to the high cost of construction, as this type of structure requires a review of construction methods for the entire buildings. In an effort to increase the number of such energy-saving school buildings, the ministry plans to compile an interim report in July under its study group, which consists of researchers in the field of architecture, school officials and heads of municipalities, according to the sources. School buildings categorized as ZEBs also have the advantage of serving as evacuation centers in the event of a disaster.

In the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, a heating system using solar power worked well during a power outage at a municipal junior high school in Yamamoto, Miyagi Prefecture. A municipal elementary school in Kyonan, Chiba Prefecture, secured its power supply with storage batteries that can be recharged with solar power. Efforts to conserve energy at school buildings are likely to be instrumental in environmental education for students in a practical manner. Students likely will think about energy issues and learn about a mechanism of environmental technology through such efforts as displaying the status of energy consumption and power generation in their school buildings. There are currently about 28,500 public elementary and junior high schools across the nation. If energy-saving school buildings spread throughout the country, this initiative is also expected to have the effect of “raising awareness of environmental issues among local residents,” a person close to the government said.

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SOUTH KOREA: Ranks 9th in Global Entrepreneurship Index 2020

South Korea been ranked ninth among 44 countries in the global entrepreneurship index 2020, rising six notches from a year earlier, the government said Thursday. Asia's fourth-largest economy won 5.49 points out of the full 10 in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's National Entrepreneurship Context Index, up from 5.13 in 2019, according to the Ministry of SMEs and Startups. South Korea was ranked first in the internal market dynamics category with 7.9 points but came in 29th in the professional and commercial infrastructure access section with 4.8. South Korea obtained better points than most major global economies, such as the United States, Canada, Britain, European Union countries, China and Japan. Indonesia topped the list with 6.39 points, followed by the Netherlands with 6.34, Taiwan with 6.06, India with 6.03 and the United Arab Emirates with 6.02. The U.S. placed 12th with 5.15 points, down from 10th with 5.31 in 2019. The average for the 44 countries surveyed stood at 4.69 points for 2020, compared with 4.63 a year earlier. The index gauges 12 entrepreneurial environment conditions, including the financial environment related with entrepreneurship and government programs, which make up the context where entrepreneurial activity takes place in a country. The survey was conducted on 71 experts and 2,000 ordinary people from August-October last year.

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S. Korea to Clamp Down on Online Cryptocurrency Phishing Activity

South Korea said Sunday it will strengthen its monitoring system against cryptocurrency-related phishing websites by working with the National Police Agency amid recent surges in prices of virtual money. The ICT ministry said there have recently been increasing reports of phishing attempts via text messages that lead cryptocurrency users to enter their exchange IDs and passwords on fake websites to steal them and access their accounts. The ministry said it found and blocked 32 such phishing websites in the past three months, compared with a total of 41 websites detected in the whole of last year. Examples of such websites include www.bithnub.com, compared with the address of local cryptocurrency exchange Bithumb -- www.bithumb.com. The ministry said it will strengthen its 24-hour monitoring system to swiftly block such phishing websites.

The National Police Agency has also been conducting a crackdown on phishing websites since the start of March this year. As of May 4, the police were investigating 21 cases, in which individuals accessed other cryptocurrency users' accounts and sold their assets. Major cryptocurrency Bitcoin topped 80 million won (US$72,000) per unit in South Korea for the first time in mid-April. The virtual currency has since fallen, trading at around 67 million won on Friday, according to Bithumb. Amid rising prices, South Korean financial authorities are also cracking down on illegal activities involving cryptocurrencies, such as money laundering, until June.

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S. Korea Vows to Lend Hand with Global Vaccine Supply Shortages

South Korea vowed Wednesday to play a bigger role in easing global shortages of COVID-19 vaccines during a meeting with a group of countries supporting a multilateral trading regime. "To promptly overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that the production and supply of vaccines are expanded around the globe," Trade Minister Yoo Myung-hee said during the virtual meeting of the Ottawa Group. The Ottawa Group refers to a group of 14 members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) seeking to revamp the international trade body, including South Korea, Canada, Australia, Chile and Britain. In December, the group also called for the world to allow free movement of key medical products to cope with the pandemic. During the meeting, Yoo said South Korea will play a bigger role in easing supply shortages of vaccines by emerging as a global hub of production. Last week, South Korea said its plan to become a global vaccine hub got a boost as Samsung BioLogics Co. signed a deal to bottle Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine at its local plant.

Under the deal, the pharmaceutical arm of Samsung Group will ship the Moderna vaccine from the third quarter at the earliest. Samsung will be tasked with providing fill-and-finish, labeling and packaging services to Moderna. In South Korea, production of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine has been under way, and pilot production of Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine is set to begin in August. SK Bioscience, a vaccine development subsidiary of South Korea's SK Group, has also signed a deal with the U.S. vaccine producer Novavax for consignment production of the Novavax COVID-19 vaccine. Yoo added South Korea agreed to speed up cooperation with Washington to strengthen joint response capabilities against infectious diseases, clinching the so-called KORUS Global Vaccine Partnership. Based on such efforts, the trade ministry said South Korea will spare no efforts to expand the supply of vaccines. Members of the Ottawa Group also shared ideas on the wavier of patents on COVID-19 vaccines. Yoo added the world needs to join forces for the stable supply of related materials and lend a hand to the COVAX Facility project.

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CAMBODIA: PM Vows to Inoculate 10 Mln Targeted Population Against COVID-19 by Early 2022

Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen vowed on Saturday to provide COVID-19 vaccines to 10 million out of the country's 16 million population by early next year. The Southeast Asian nation launched a COVID-19 vaccination drive on Feb. 10, with China being the main vaccine supplier. To date, more than 2.46 million people have already been vaccinated, Hun Sen said, adding that for the Phnom Penh municipal dwellers, some 60 percent of them have already been inoculated. "We will do our best to achieve the goal of vaccinating our 10 million targeted population by the end of this year or the latest in early next year," he said in an audio message released publicly. The prime minister said some 4.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines will be arriving in Cambodia in June. The country on Saturday registered 588 new COVID-19 cases in the last 24 hours, pushing the national case tally to 28,825, the health ministry said in a statement. Another seven new fatalities were confirmed, taking the overall death toll to 203, the ministry said, adding that another 415 patients recovered, bringing the total number of recoveries to 21,315.

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MYANMAR: Extending COVID-19 Preventive Measures Until End of June

Myanmar's Central Committee on Prevention, Control and Treatment for COVID-19 on Saturday announced extension of the period for preventive measures against the pandemic to June 30. The extension will be applied to all orders, announcements, directives previously issued by the respective union level government organizations and ministries in order to contain the spread of the disease, the announcement said. According to a release from the Health and Sports Ministry, the number of COVID-19 infections rose to 143,526 in the country on Saturday. A total of 40 new COVID-19 cases were reported in the past 24 hours while the total death toll in the country stood at 3,216, the release said. A total of 132,297 recovered patients have been discharged from hospitals so far. A total of 1,034 samples were tested for COVID-19 on Saturday, down from around 10,000 samples tested daily in early February. COVID-19 was first detected in Myanmar on March 23 last year.

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MALAYSIA: Extending Movement Restrictions Nationwide Till June as COVID-19 Cases Surge

Malaysia will extend its movement control order (MCO) currently enforced in several areas to cover the whole country till June to curb the recent spike of COVID-19 cases, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said on Monday. The restrictions will take effect from May 12 to June 7, Muhyiddin said in a statement, adding that the measures are necessary due to the surge in new COVID-19 cases nationwide, especially in the wake of new variants and poor public discipline in following standard operating procedures (SOP). "The government has decided to take measures that are tighter and stricter to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the community and to stop the surge in cases. Malaysia is currently facing a third COVID-19 wave that could trigger a national crisis," he said. "The existence of new variants with higher infectivity rates, the stress on the public health system and the poor adherence to SOPs among segments of the community means the government will have to take more drastic action to stop the country from sliding into an even worse health disaster," he added. According to the prime minister, data had shown that public activities, especially crowding in confined spaces had caused the number of cases to shoot up.

Among the restrictions that will be in place are a total ban on inter-state and inter-district travel except for emergencies, work or vaccination while all forms of social events including celebrations, weddings, and holidays are prohibited. Educational institutes will remained closed, and dine-in at restaurants will not be allowed while only three people will be allowed in vehicles, including the driver. Celebrations for the upcoming Eid al-Fitr will also be curbed. However, all economic sectors will be allowed to operate given SOPs are observed. Since last week, the Malaysian government has announced the implementation of two-week MCO in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and a number of areas across the country where increasing COVID-19 cases were reported. Malaysia's Health Ministry reported 3,807 new COVID-19 infections on Monday, bringing the national total to 444,484. Health Ministry Director-General Noor Hisham Abdullah said in a press statement that five of the new cases are imported and with 3,802 being local transmissions. Another 17 deaths have been reported, bringing the death toll to 1,700. Some 3,454 patients have been released after recovery, bringing the total number of cured and discharged to 405,388 or 91.2 percent of all cases. Of the remaining 37,396 active cases, 434 are being held in intensive care and 224 of those are in need of assisted breathing.

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PHILIPPINES: President Calls for "Greater Solidarity" for Pandemic Responses

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte on Friday called for "greater solidarity for collective, coordinated, and comprehensive responses" in the ongoing fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, saying "inward-looking policies will lead us nowhere." During a virtual conference held by Nikkei, a Japanese economic newspaper, Duterte said that his country supports "all avenues for increased production of COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines." He said that collective international action can only complement national responses, which should be "people-centered and holistic." Noting how the pandemic reinforces "deglobalization trends," Duterte reaffirmed the Philippines' support for "a free and rules-based multilateral trading system." "The key to recovery and shared prosperity remains the free movement of goods, capital, and services, as well as the harnessing of valuable human resources. Despite the pandemic, opportunities for growth remain," Duterte added. The Philippines' Department of Health (DOH) reported on Friday 6,258 new COVID-19 infections, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in the Southeast Asian country to 1,171,403. The death toll climbed to 19,763 after 141 more patients died from the viral disease, the DOH said. The Philippines, with a population of 110 million, has tested over 12 million people since the outbreak in January 2020. Meanwhile, presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said on Friday that the government has created a small working group to "study and formulate protocols for inbound international travel of fully vaccinated individuals." The Department of Tourism and the Department of Foreign Affairs will co-chair the group, Roque added. The Philippines barred the entry of foreign tourists into the country when it imposed a strict coronavirus lockdown in mid-March last year.

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THAILAND: Adding Supportive Measures as New Coronavirus Outbreak Hits Economy

Thailand is planning to spend billions of U.S. dollars in economic relief to help people affected by COVID-19 and support its economic recovery threatened by a new wave of pandemic. The cabinet of ministers has approved a package of supportive measures with an estimated cost of 178.5 billion baht (about 5.7 billion U.S. dollars), including the extension of a co-payment campaign, according to Deputy Prime Minister Supattanapong Punmeechaow. The government will launch the phase-three of the co-payment campaign, likely to benefit 31 million people from July to December, Supattanapong said at an online press conference. The program allows registered individuals to buy goods or services by paying only half the price of their purchases, with the government subsidizing the other half, a maximum of 3,000 baht in total in phase- three. The government also approved grants for the "We Win" and "We Love Each Other" campaigns, with each person registered for the schemes able to receive a total of 2,000 baht before the end of June.

These measures came as Thailand continued to grapple with its worst coronavirus outbreak so far, which has claimed more than 200 lives in the past month and more than doubled the country's COVID-19 caseload to reach 76,811 Thursday. The outbreak forced the government to reintroduce restrictive measures, including closing schools and entertainment venues, limiting business hours and increasing the mandatory quarantine period to two weeks, which had been reduced early last month to 10 days for international visitors from countries with no cases of COVID-19 variant strains. The Bank of Thailand, the country's central bank, on Wednesday held its policy rate unchanged at a record low of 0.5 percent, the eighth straight hold, to support the economic recovery. The economy would "expand at a much lower rate due to the third wave of the outbreak," the central bank said, adding that it would stand ready to use additional appropriate monetary policy tools if necessary.

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Thailand to Ease Restrictions on Restaurant Dine-in Services

Thailand decided on Saturday to allow restaurants in the capital Bangkok to resume dine-in services, but with a limited serving capacity and operating hours. From Monday, restaurants, cafes and other foodshops in Bangkok and its neighboring Nonthaburi, Pathumthani and Samut Prakan provinces, which currently remain under maximum control and restrictions, can receive customers up to 25 percent of their capacity until 9:00 p.m. local time and provide take-away services until 11:00 p.m. local time, according to a royal gazette issued late Saturday. Previously restaurants in regions under maximum control and restrictions could only open for food delivery. Restaurants, cafes and other foodshops in another 17 provinces under maximum control can provide dine-in services until 11:00 p.m. local time, according to the royal gazette. However, the sales of alcoholic beverages at those places will still be banned. Thailand reported 3,095 new COVID-19 infections on Saturday, raising the total caseload to 99,145, official data showed.

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Thailand Extends State of Emergency amid Rising Covid-19 Infections

Thailand announced Friday to extend the state of emergency to the end of July as the country grappled with its worst COVID-19 outbreak so far that has shown no sign of improvement. The Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) on Friday approved the extension of the emergency decree nationwide until July 31 to contain the spread of the virus, according to CCSA spokesman Taweesin

Visanuyothin. The decree, which has been put in place since March last year and extended several times on a monthly basis, allows the government to streamline disease-control measures without multiple approval procedures. Thailand is now fighting against the third wave of outbreak, with its total caseload more than quadrupling and death toll increasing sevenfold in the past seven weeks. The outbreak, which started from entertainment venues in the capital Bangkok in early April, has now spread to crowded communities, prisons and construction work sites. On Friday, the country reported 3,481 new cases, raising the total tally to 123,066, and 32 new fatalities, taking the death toll to 735 so far, according to the CCSA. Of the new cases, 1,644 were confirmed at hospitals, 951 were detected at prisons, 874 at communities and workplaces while 12 under mandatory quarantine from abroad, Taweesin said. He said 15 construction workers in Bangkok have been found to be infected by the COVID-19 variant first detected in India. As of Thursday, the country has administered more than 2.64 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, with more than 920,000 people having received both doses, while more than 1.7 million having received the first doses, according to the spokesman. The government aims to inoculate 70 percent of its nearly 70 million population by the end of the year. A mass vaccination program will roll out on June 7 when foreigners in the country will also be able to register for injection at designated venues.

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VIETNAM: Ministry of Health Instructs Factories Nationwide How to Stay Safe amid Pandemic

Inspections conducted by the Ministry of Health at more than 200 factories and companies showed the limited capacity of some facilities in COVID-19 prevention and control work, said Deputy Minister of Health Đỗ Xuân Tuyên on Thursday. Tuyên, who is deputy head of the National Steering Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Control, chaired a teleconference with authorities and leaders of local health departments in all 63 cities and provinces nationwide. Businesses, manufacturing facilities and industrial parks were instructed on COVID-19 prevention and control. According to the health ministry, only 5 to 10 per cent of businesses and factories updated their outbreak status on the COVID-19 safety map. Some localities have not prepared COVID-19 prevention plans at industrial parks and every factory. Deputy Minister Tuyên asked enterprises which have not recorded COVID-19 cases to actively conduct inspections, set up response teams and ask workers to fill in health declarations. “At least 20 per cent of labourers who have suspected symptoms must have health check-ups. Workers have to keep a safe distance from each other at the workplace and during lunch time,” he said.

Factories which reported positive cases must zone off, isolate, and thoroughly trace infections, minimising the number of infections spreading to the community. Daily buses carrying workers to the factories must have windows opened, reduce the number of people by half and be disinfected every day. Localities which have positive cases in both community and factories need to take preventive measures at residential quarters and workplaces in order to prevent cross infection, he said. The Deputy Minister noted that businesses and industrial parks must think about long-term plans in case the outbreak lasts a long time. Putting F1 cases in quarantine at home should be considered if there are many F1 cases in one living area. Taking testing samples, medical supervision and domestic waste collection at home quarantine sites are conducted the same as centralised quarantine sites, he said. Businesses must conduct testing on workers and resume operation at virus-free factories, he said. Since the fourth wave of COVID-19 in Việt Nam, industrial parks in Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang have become hot spots. By 7pm yesterday, Bắc Giang has reported 1,564 community cases while the number of cases in Bắc Ninh continues to rise with 654 cases since April 27. Most of them are factory workers at local industrial parks. The health ministry is asking localities to build COVID-19 safety protocols at industrial parks as clusters at factories are new in this wave.

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South Asia

INDIA: How Cloud Computing Technology Affects the SEO Industry

Cloud computing is a collection of services and applications that users can access and use via a web browser. With cloud hosting, it is unnecessary to install software on your system. However, it can be accessed through the service provider's system. Cloud hosting is offered as three basic services: Platform As a Service, Software As a Service, Infrastructure As a Service. Cloud hosting is more popular now than ever before. Many are surprised to realize that cloud hosting can impact the search engine optimization rankings of websites and businesses online. This is because cloud hosting services make it easier and quicker to access platforms and software. Cloud hosting can increase the loading speed of a website. This is essential when discussing the experiences customers have when visiting a website. Customer experience is a major part of search engine optimization ranking as determined by search engines, such as Yahoo, Google, and Bing. Let’s look at how cloud hosting and storage can impact SEO rankings. There is abundant evidence that changing to cloud hosting improves the search engine optimization ranking of many websites. The reason for this is that pages load faster. One of the most important metrics that is used when determining the ranking of a website is user experience. The higher the user experience, that is the more satisfied the user is with their interaction with the site, the higher the site ranks. Users have become impatient. If a website takes more than a few seconds to load, they navigate away. If the experience of switching between pages, accessing videos, or viewing a gallery is cumbersome, users will navigate away. This is where cloud hosting and secure cloud storage solutions have become invaluable. Unquestionably, quicker loading times are the primary way that cloud hosting services affect a website's SEO.

Bots and other malicious programs pose a major threat to websites and online services all the world over. Bots can make it possible for a hacker to get around a website security and give an unauthorized individual the ability to control a website. Some bots make it possible for hackers to have a good view of a website, allowing them to steal information, disrupt functionalities, and engage in other things that will impact the search engine optimization status of the website. One of the best ways to address unwanted malware attacks from bots is a robust web hosting service. Cloud hosting services offer strong security against bots. There’s no such thing as 100 percent impenetrable security. However, cloud hosting offers some of the best security possible. One of the biggest benefits connected to cloud hosting is reliability. If your website is constantly down because you are using unreliable hosting, your ranking is going to plummet. However, cloud hosting has proven itself to be a reliable source of hosting. Many cloud hosting providers can promise an uptime of 99.9 percent. Since there is a lot of competition in cloud hosting, hosting providers offer phenomenal customer service. If there is anything wrong with the hosting and you call the provider, you will usually get a quick response. This is an important benefit of cloud hosting, especially when compared to other types of hosting. People use their smartphones for just about everything from listening to the music to using business tools such as accounting apps. More people use their smartphones to access the Internet than accessing the Internet from desktop devices. Successful search engine optimization strategies must be formulated to take mobile users in mind.

Businesses that do not optimize for mobile are going to lose visitors. With over 3.7 billion people around the world using their mobile devices to access the Internet, this is a facet of search engine optimization that cannot be ignored. When you use cloud hosting, analytics and data are made available to search engines that allow the website to be easily tailored to smart phone access. Search engines are interested in knowing the location of hosting compared to the location of where the search is made from. Search engines are going to give higher priority to servers that are hosted locally because these are going to provide faster responses and information that is applicable locally. If someone is in Australia and they are looking for baseball equipment, the searches they are going to get will have an Australian extension. This only makes sense, especially when thinking about local search engine optimization for small businesses that are not looking to reach a global audience. Before cloud hosting, online businesses would need to purchase and maintain several domain names and websites so that they catered to the geolocations they were trying to target. However, cloud hosting allows for the creation of multiple sites at a low cost.

The ease and availability of cloud-based systems to offer local hosting improves a website's chances of ranking well. Another way that cloud hosting improves search engine optimization is that it offers several resources and tools. Since the entire infrastructure is in a centralized place, service providers can offer their clients flexible capacity without it being expensive.

Tools, dashboards, and management consoles can also be offered, which improve the end-user’s ability to manage their website remotely. Some of these tools can help website owners build unique strategies for search engine optimization. Cloud-based systems allow the owners of websites to monitor the activity of their users. This information can be analyzed. Changes can then be made in the search engine optimization strategy with the goal of reaching more customers. The popularity of cloud hosting comes from the benefits it offers. It provides a seamless Internet service that is secure and flexible. The number of malicious attacks decreases when using cloud hosting services. The speed of websites increase when businesses opt for cloud services. Websites that have few risks and are optimized for speed attract customers. This plays a role in a high search engine optimization ranking. This leads to improved SERP ranking, which creates a positive chain reaction that will eventually benefit the business’s bottom line.

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IT Interventions Fueling Odisha’s Growth Engine

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the governments, industries and even the common people have taken the digital route to continue their activities. The pandemic has opened eyes to realise the value of digitisation and technology. Sharing his perspective on how digitisation in Odisha augmented revenue and land services, citizen services, and other government sectors, CJ Venugopal, IAS, Member, Board of Revenue, Odisha, interacted with Kartik Sharma of Elets News Network (ENN) in an exclusive interview. Please give us a brief idea on IT innovations done in the Land and Revenue sector in Odisha? We have taken a number of IT interventions in the land and revenue sector for the benefit of the citizens. Revenue and Disaster Management Department of Odisha had brought a great change in the revenue administration of the state by the introduction of ‘Bhulekh’ web service. Bhulekh is a part of the Land Records Modernisation Initiative implemented by the government and under this programme, the government aimed to achieve complete digitisation of all the land records. Odisha successfully made all the land records digital and accessible to the general public through Bhulekh Odisha website. Similarly, the introduction of the CCMS (Court Case Monitoring System) project was a revolutionary step that brought the general public and the Revenue Administration closer. The general public can now get to know about the status of land through Bhulekh and about the status of Revisional Cases through CCMS project. Through ‘Bhunaksha’ software, the general public can view and search tehsil and village wise maps of the state. The other IT innovations introduced in the revenue sector are online issuance of miscellaneous certificates, online mutations of Tehsil wise RoRs and payment of revenue dues online. Please tell us about the IT interventions in ease of registration of land in Odisha? To make the registration of a property hassle-free, we have reengineered the whole registration process in Odisha and now it can be done with ease, through the Inspector General of Registration Revenue and Disaster Management Department (IGR) website. The department is primarily responsible for computerisation of revenue offices, updating of land records, digitisation of cadastral maps, inter-connectivity among revenue offices, undertaking survey operations using modern technologies, etc.

To offer ease of registration, the department makes available a host of services on its website. These include:
Online land records, showing the ownership of the land
Model sale deed format for property registration in Odia and English languages
Issuance of e-Stamp certificates
Online payment of registration fees
Stamp duty and registration fees calculator
Benchmark valuation of all land
Several online facilities have been provided to the citizens for registration. Various certificates required for different purposes are now made available online easing the requirements of the citizens. Please tell us about the opportunities and challenges of Virtual Court hearings in the lockdown period and what have been the innovations to overcome the challenges? Last year during the lockdown period pertaining to COVID-19 pandemic, there had been certain restrictions on the movement of people imposed by the Government, we felt that was opportune time for introduction of Virtual Courts by the Revisional Courts under Board of Revenue, Odisha.

By holding Revisional Courts through the Virtual Courts system integrated with CCMS project the concept of social distancing was being adhered to in letter and spirit as the people need not visit the Revisional Courts physically to contest their cases. This is now being used as an alternative to in-person interactions between petitioner, defendants, and all parties related to trials and judgment. The general public/their advocates could participate in the Court proceedings by sitting at the comforts of their home or workplace through online linking to the concerned Courts via links provided to them in the Daily/ Weekly Cause lists of the Courts. Virtual court concept is not just for ease of use. The fact of the matter is that most court systems are already dealing with the burden of heavy backlogs of cases and other matters. Anything that can be used to speed things up is a boon for this sector of the government. However, there are certain challenges that also come along with this opportunity. The challenges faced in holding of Virtual Courts during the lockdown period are providing online platform to all the litigants to participate in the hearing of their revisional cases, since many litigants are either not techno-savvy or that they have not provided their email IDs/mobile numbers it was difficult to facilitate the process. Besides, the sustainability of the data in the virtual cloud space for a longer and trouble free environment for usage by more number of participants during a single sitting of virtual court also poses a challenge.

To overcome such challenges steps were being taken in consultation with the National Informatics Centre (NIC) to broaden the virtual data cloud space, the speed of data and other technical issues. The information gap of email IDs/mobile numbers have been addressed by collection of proper data from the users for holding the virtual courts. Also, regular training is being imparted to the departmental personnel in the revisional courts for smooth facilitation. The Virtual Court platform for government work is device agnostic i.e., it can be operated on Desktop, Laptop, IPad, Smartphone, etc. The result is a virtual court system that deals with more hearings per day in a quicker and more efficient manner. Aggrieved citizens can get on with their lives faster and pursue the next course of action or other solutions for their future in a time bound manner. I sincerely hope that virtual courts have the capacity to break through the barriers of months-long waiting periods and speed up the court work at the same adhering to public safety of social distancing. Please share insights on the innovative Court Case Management System which you have developed in Odisha? The introduction and development of the innovative CCMS application in the State of Odisha has transformed the old practice of physical verification of Court case status by the general public. It not only saves time but is also a cost-saving option for people. Revenue Court Case Monitoring System is a generic e-governance system yet unique of its kind. It can be rolled out across the country with minimal customisation or modification. SMS integration and online Stamp and Payment Gateway modules are planned for implementation shortly. The mutation cases along with Appeal cases are handled in Revenue Court Case Monitoring System. The database contains all the Revenue case details. The processing stages and the final disposal status are made available online to the concerned people.

Please tell us more about the document management system? As the revenue documents are of vital importance for Revenue Administration, they need to be preserved for future use. The physical records after they have been finalised are generally preserved in Record Rooms of various offices. However with the advancements in the technologies the documents of various offices can now be stored in Digital formats. Our Document Management System (DMS) is a digitally storage and retrieval system introduced for online storage and retrieval of the records, indexing of data and images, etc. The land record details, case records, maps and other documents are scanned/digitised, indexed and stored in computer systems which can be used at any given point of time. The objectives of the DMS are to preserve the data of tehsil case records in scanned copy format, meta data storage of records for intelligent search facilities, easy retrieval of soft and hard copies of the Tehsil records and maintenance of flow of case records for court cases. As a result, the flow of the document to courts and their movement is being recorded in the system and we can easily provide certified copy to the citizens. Please tell us about the successful integration of databases to ensure better services to the citizens? Presently, the databases of various online programmes are at their introductory stage in the state which are continuously being developed to cater the needs of the people and revenue administration. For better administration, we need to keep pace with the technological advancements, which can be done through successful integration of the databases with various developmental programmes. By giving importance to the end user's needs and priorities for rendering better services to the citizens at large we can take up need based integration for optimal results. This will also enable faster decision making and to make available information/certificates/land records to the concerned citizens.

You have taken e-governance initiatives in every department you work. What has been the inspiration? We are in the most exciting phase of e-governance in the history of our country. Information Technology (IT) is bringing a great transformation in the governance spectrum. Though we still have a long way to go, compared to some developed countries. Our lack of physical infrastructure, awareness and digital literacy are some of the hurdles that we are yet to overcome. But as time progresses, I think we will be able to find ways and means to overcome these challenges. Over the years, I have used my project management techniques and expertise to conceptualise innovative e-governance solutions which had helped departments to identify and clear bottlenecks, promoted transparency, reduced service delivery costs, and delivered public services efficiently. As of now, the priority of the R&DM Department is to be on a digital platform for each and every component. This approach eventually will lead to leveraging the power of IT for streamlining of administrative functions, reduce duplication of work and increase transparency. In addition, the processes of data collection and analysis will be simplified, and become less tedious. E-governance holds advantages to citizens in every walk of their life. But perhaps the single-largest benefit of e-governance is it's potential to make the state and nation an information and knowledge society and contrary to popular perception, its impact will be far-reaching, down to the villages and could bridge traditional and digital divides across the country.

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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 two-shifts. We have created a university-like 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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Narendra Singh Tomar Launches NMMS App to Induce Transparency in Rural Development

Union Minister of Rural Development, Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare, Panchayati Raj and Food Processing Industries, Narendra Singh Tomar launched National Mobile Monitoring Software (NMMS) app and Area Officer Monitoring App on May 21. The apps will induce transparency and accountability to the execution of rural development works conducted by the Ministry. The Minister lauded the efforts saying that these two Apps will be big steps towards bringing in transparency and effective monitoring of schemes. Also, he advised the Ministry to make the apps multilingual, provide sufficient training and equipment, and allow time for its rollout. During the launching of the apps through video conferencing, Sadhvi Niranjan Jyoti, Minister of State, Rural Development, Secretary, Rural Development and officials from the Ministry and all the State Governments were also present. The NMMS App permits taking real-time attendance of workers at MGNREGS worksites along with the geotagged photograph, which will increase citizen oversight of the programme besides potentially enabling processing payments faster. On the other hand, Area Officer Monitoring App facilitates them to record their findings online along with time-stamped and geo-coordinate tagged photograph for all the schemes of the Department of Rural Development- MGNREGS, PMAYG, PMGSY. This would also enable not only better record keeping of inspections by field and supervisory officials but also facilitate analysis of the findings for better programme implementation. On the occasion, the Minister of State highlighted the good works done under MGNREGA by providing employment to rural people during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Secretary, Rural Development, Nagendra Nath Sinha emphasised the strengthening of Social Audit, recruitment of Ombudsman, geotagging of assets and monitoring of works.

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Technology Tools Aided to Optimise Revenue amid Lockdown

With the onset of the COVID pandemic, rapid digitisation took place in India. This saw not only the private firms going on online operations mode and adapting to work from home but the government departments do the same as well. The pandemic directly impacted the revenue generation of the government. Addressing initiatives by the Transport Department of Goa to optimise their revenue collection, Rajan Satardekar, Director of Transport, Government of Goa, deliberated at the Revenue Management & Intelligence Summit 2021 on May 5. He commenced his address with a brief introduction of Goa. He said, "Goa is a small and a beautiful state that can be compared to a district of some big state. There is a population of 14.5 lakh that resides in Goa. The vehicle population is 14.8 lakh and there are 10 lakh registered licenses. As far as revenue collection is concerned, our revenue collection for the year 2019-20 is Rs 299 crore." As tourism is a major industry in Goa and a major source of revenue, it faced the adverse impact of the COVID pandemic in the year 2020. In the initial months of the year, the revenue collection slumped to 10 per cent as compared to the previous year and gradually rose to the 80 per cent mark, Rajan Satardekar said. He said, "A lot of initiatives were taken to tackle the situation.

Transport is in the concurrent list so it is the subject of centre and the state. However, tax is a state subject and we have two major types of taxes. These include motor vehicle tax and passenger tax and both these are operated online." Further, he mentioned that the department has adopted the latest version of the cloud platform of the National Informatics Centre (NIC) – e-vaahan and sarthi." Speaking on a few initiatives that helped Goa to optimise revenue collection and delivery of services, he said, "Payment mechanism is completely online. Over 80 per cent of tax collection comes through digital channels. Traffic enforcement has been handed over handheld devices that are integrated with the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) data on Vahan and Sarthi so now the department can charge fines on repeated offenders." In the previous year, around 7.7 lakh challans were issued, he added. While concluding his session, Rajan Satardekar said that in addition, the department has already implemented a High-Security Registration Plate (HSRP) so that it comes pre-fitted. Also, the local vendors have been asked to ensure the HSRP. Goa has received around 50 EV buses and another 200 are in the procurement phase and are expected to be received in the next two to three months. Furthermore, digital meters have been installed in taxis. This is another significant initiative.

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Leveraging Data Analytics to Optimise Revenue Through Transport

The COVID pandemic shook the entire country including the government, private firms and the lives of citizens. However, to ensure continuity going digital was the only way. With the digital transformation reshaping a new normal, the government departments also took the digital route to optimise their revenue generation and management. Explaining the scenario of Chhattisgarh, Shailabh Sahu, Additional Commissioner, Department of Transport, Chhattisgarh, addressed the Revenue Management & Intelligence Summit 2021. Shailabh Sahu commenced sharing consensus with Rajan Satardekar, Director, Transport Department of Goa said, “I agree that the Transport department is in the concurrent list in the Constitution and both the Centre and the States can formulate rules to manage the department.” Considering taxation, primarily there are three taxes – first, there is a lifetime tax levied on a passenger vehicle at the time of purchase; secondly, there is a quarterly tax for goods trucks; and thirdly, a monthly tax for buses, he added. He said, “If we look at all the taxation individually, there are several challenges that we face. For Lifetime tax, the taxation is on the selling invoice which is paid annually. We’re focussing on two things that we need to plug the leakages and explore more ways to earn revenue.” The lifetime tax is charged on the basis of the selling invoice of a vehicle. Here dealers are making different invoices due to which the tax amount varies as it is a percentage of the price. So, the department is trying to lock the price of a vehicle from the manufacturer to plug these leakages. Further, he detailed quarterly tax. He said, “Most of the times the transporters fail to pay the taxes. At present, we have Rs 200 crore tax pending from the transporters.” The biggest challenge is to identify the defaulters’ addresses as many times the addresses are fake or incorrect or the person moves from one address to another. Hence, the department plans to use third party agencies like India Post to register certificates to cross verify the addresses, he added.

Speaking on monthly taxes paid by passenger vehicles he said, “For monthly taxes that passenger vehicles like buses pay is based on the number of kilometres they travel. Therefore, they need to apply for permits mentioning the kilometres it would travel. However, not the buses would apply for a permit for 100 km and the runs the bus for 300 km. This is because the department was facing challenges in tracking and monitoring bus routers. Hence, we have planned to install GPS to bridge the gap.” He mentioned that as the department was working on plugging the leakages, the department has strengthened its enforcement department. “We are using handheld devices to issue e-challans to have more transparency in the system.” Besides, the department is keeping a check on vehicles with overloaded goods. Also, since the Motor Vehicles Act 2019 came into effect, there are heavy fines that can be levied on such vehicles. To prevent overloading and to catch the offenders, the department has installed Automatic Number Plate Recognition System (ANPR) cameras. These cameras are being installed on sub-routes, the ones which are not commonly used so that the manpower can be deployed on major routes. Further, as a one of a kind solution to the issue of overloaded vehicles, the department is investing in a weighbridge along with ANPR attached with an auto challan facility. This is integrated with the database that is the VAHAN. Therefore, if an overloaded vehicle crosses the weighbridge, it will detect and the algorithm will generate data by capturing its number plate and then a challan will be generated against the vehicle. This challan is not only sent to the transporter electronically but through the post as well. At the end, he mentioned that a similar auto challan facility is being implemented in Raipur city as well. The system aided the authorities big time during the lockdowns that were imposed nationwide to prevent the widespread of COVID.

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Data Analysis Eases Tax Management

Since the onset of the COVID pandemic, governments, private firms, educational institutes, and others have taken the digital route to ensure business continuity. However, with this, the government has evolved and so its revenue generation methods and management. Sharing his vantage point on this, Arvind Mishra, Additional Commissioner, GST, Government of Rajasthan, addressed the Revenue Management & Intelligence Summit 2021 on May 5, 2021. He began by raising a concern that ‘why do we need technology in the first place in tax systems?’. Highlighting the significance of taxes, he said, “Tax revenue has a major contribution to the total revenue generated by a state. Within taxes, Value Added Tax (VAT) and Goods and Services Tax (GST) alone make up to almost 63 per cent of the total tax revenue of a state.” As these taxes are contributing heavily to the total tax revenue, state departments pay more attention to these taxes. Detailing on the tax system, Arvind Mishra said, “Earlier, the taxes were imposed on a particular stage of taxable payment processing. Afterwards, as the economy grew, taxes were being imposed on every successive event in the payment process. It is called multiple-event taxation. With this system, the overall taxation increases substantially. Dealing with this huge data of people’s accounts, who all have to be verified, which transactions should be verified, etc. became a challenge as all of this data has to be selected on the basis of some information. Therefore, to fetch the information data analysis was important.”

Speaking on digitalisation, he mentioned, “Since the onset of GST, every tax processing was shited to online modes. To manage the tax there are three aspects – ensure proper reporting, verifying reported transactions and identifying underreported and unreported transactions.” Firstly, the data of transactions have to be reported. With these submissions, there is a certain set of data that gets available to the department. Next, the verification is done. Whether the report submitted is authentic or not, the data is correct or not, if the data submitted is contradictory to each other, etc. such type of verifications are done by analysing the data available. There is a specific area on the GST portal wherein the verifications can be done, he added. Further, he said that to make the system more transparent, alert and investigation should not be subjective but objective. It should not be driven by a person but the system which can detect anomalies and raise a red flag. “This is important as we cannot check each and every transaction. Also, there was a need to make the system transparent," said Arvind Mishra. Regarding transparency of the system, he said, "Looking for data of underreported and unreported transactions is a major challenge as the department doesn't have the data. Therefore, to fetch such data we need to analyse the data from other departments such as electricity, IT, etc." To improve the overall revenue scenario in the state. The Chief Minister had released a declaration that includes the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Revenue Data Management, he concluded.

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AI-based & Touchless Fingerprint Technologies Driving Innovation in Government Sector

In India where 65.53 per cent population resides in villages, as per a World Bank report of 2019, there is a significant digital divide that exists. Hence, there is a dire need to develop technologies accessible to all and operable by all. Addressing TECH5's initiatives of building AI-based and touchless fingerprint technologies that are inclusive and causing innovation in government, Rahul Parthe, Chief Technology Officer, Co-Founder and Chairman, TECH5, interacted with Harshal Desai of Elets News Network (ENN). Let me begin with the name TECH5, which is an abbreviation of Tech FI, or "Technology for Inclusion." Inclusion is our core principle, and for us, it means that everyone in society should be able to participate in programs that governments have designed for all people. Our technology has been created for inclusion. We have invested and built biometric technologies such as facial recognition, fingerprint recognition, and iris recognition, which allow us to ensure that every available program can be made accessible for every citizen. Aadhaar, a very good example of such a project, implemented all three modalities. In the output of the design phase, the decision was made as to which biometric modality to use. We, as TECH5, are purely technology providers, and our goal is to build the latest and greatest biometric technologies, such as those used in Aadhaar. However, at the same time, we are also focused on building disruptive and innovative solutions for credentialing. These technologies will help to ensure the issuing of IDs that everybody in society can use. As we all know, there is a digital divide that has been made more evident and has widened as a result of COVID-19, we make sure that we build technologies that every person in society can access and leverage in order to improve their standard of living. Could you also brief us about innovations that TECH5 is working on and how R&D has evolved within TECH5 to ensure continuity in bringing innovations to the industry?

TECH5 is a technology provider founded by people who have extensive experience in the field of biometrics and identity management. I was personally involved in Aadhaar from day one, so I have seen how it has grown from nothing to what it is today. My co-founder and other employees come from similar backgrounds and experiences. We are taking the vision of making technology available for everybody very seriously, and are continuously investing in building and improving these technologies. As you may have heard, there is a new revolution called AI and Machine Learning, and we are part of this revolution. We have taken the concepts of AI and Machine Learning and applied them to biometric algorithm development. The benefit has been obvious. Technologies driven by Machine Learning have outperformed traditional approaches and we have achieved exponential growth in accuracy and performance in facial recognition technology. It is now the basic principle that motivates our approach for our other technologies, such as fingerprint and iris recognition. We have already achieved a world top-tier ranking in facial recognition in NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology) – the most well known international benchmark in the industry, where you prove how well your technology performs. Based on that success, we applied our expertise in that approach to fingerprint. We are happy to confirm that we have already achieved groundbreaking results in our fingerprint matching technology that is in line with our face recognition technology. The impact of applying AI to fingerprint recognition has resulted in much-improved accuracy as well as a reduction of the total cost of ownership. Imagine if today Aadhaar could spend less than a fifth of its budget on hardware that is currently required for data centres where biometric matching is performed. I am sure, with these advancements, TECH5 will soon be able to stake the claim as the world's fastest and most accurate fingerprint matching technology in addition to our already successful facial recognition technology. We are currently also working on our iris recognition technology to make it a top-performing solution that we can offer to our customers and business partners.

Fingerprint recognition tends to make errors. How can such issues be addressed to ensure accuracy? This issue also can be solved by applying AI and Machine Learning. For traditional algorithms, an engineered model has usually been used. This basically means that humans thought about how fingerprints looked and then came up with an algorithm that compared fingerprint features. But, the problem is that if something changes, even by a small margin, the algorithm starts to underperform. Machine Learning is like a human brain. For example, if a person shaves, puts on a new pair of glasses or something similar that covers half of the face, both the human brain and Machine Learning will still be able to accurately recognise that person. There is, nevertheless, a fundamental limit. If, for example, I undergo plastic surgery and start to look like Tom Cruise, nobody in the world will recognise me, and the same is true for all biometrics. On the other hand, an event like ageing will not stop the technology from accurately recognising a person. Our mission is to make sure that the technology works well in non-ideal conditions – in virtual darkness, for example. It is a race to zero error. How touchless technologies for fingerprint recognition are different from classic software-hardware solutions, and how the new technology can revolutionize finger capturing, enrolment and recognition processes? As we all know, some time ago fingerprints were captured using ink and paper. This is how it all began. Then, a digital form of fingerprint scanning called live scan was invented. I'm sure most of us have already had some personal experience with this. For example, a single fingerprint scanner is used for opening a door, and a 4-4-2 fingerprint scanner can then be used for enrollment in a National ID project like Aadhaar. This approach involves two components: one is a dedicated piece of hardware that is connected to a computer, phone, or laptop, and is effectively a touch solution – you have to touch the scanner, and the second is a software suite. As a result, there are a lot of logistical issues that have to be faced to make sure that the devices are available because people have to interact with the device. In addition, you also have the traditional issues of supply chain management and supporting the infrastructure.

In the meantime, mobile phone technology has been developing exponentially, not only in terms of penetration as almost everybody now has a phone but also in terms of its functionality. Today's smartphone is as powerful as a laptop was a decade ago, and it not only has very high processing power but also comes with integrated high-end cameras, sometimes four or five cameras on a single phone, with very high resolution, flash, autofocus and other features. We took into consideration the fact that the previous challenges in biometric capture were caused by connected devices and infrastructure, as well as the touch limitation, and took the approach of leveraging the powerful smartphone device that you carry with you to capture fingerprints. And, as you can imagine, it was a no-brainer, because the capability of capturing fingerprints using a mobile phone translated into a significant increase in the range of possibilities. Anyone, anywhere as a part of a particular program can take a medium-range mobile phone, which is very common today, and capture one's fingerprints within seconds. This achievement has solved the problem of distribution and has provided fast access to the technology that helps to avoid any kind of touch, a requirement which has become extremely important during the pandemic. How will contactless technologies perform globally in order to continue to penetrate business, even in times of the pandemic? The move towards touchless technology started before the pandemic and we were trying our best to explain to people why the technology was important. Unfortunately, COVID-19 happened, and now the value of touchless technologies has become very obvious to everyone. In terms of TECH5 biometric technologies, both face and iris are already touchless, and until recently only fingerprint recognition required touch. Now, we have made fingerprint recognition technology touchless as well. This touchless technology not only helps liberate the capture technology, making it accessible for everybody but also makes readily available a method for capturing biometrics safely during this or any other emergency that would require no contact.

It is important to note that this technology does not impact any of the regulatory or security policies. What we are doing is only changing a scanner to a touchless technology and saying, "Let's use the revolutionary AI and Machine Learning-based matching algorithm." Also important to note is that our solution works with old and new technology; they are basically interoperable. The touchless fingerprint technology can be made available to everyone while following security and regulatory policies that ensure that people's data are securely handled, and privacy and security are not breached. We've talked briefly about AI, ML and so on. How can such technologies help to leverage the entire contactless infrastructure, in your opinion? And what are the challenges that you see in this approach? This approach has more advantages than disadvantages. As I previously said, the problem needs to be solved from two ends. Namely, it is not only about improving the capture technology but also about accurately matching the captured fingerprints, while also harmoniously working with traditional systems. We are developing these technologies using Machine Learning and AI, and they can work with existing data while also adopting new emerging concepts not only for capture but also for other facets of IT. For example, if tomorrow Aadhaar decided to go completely contactless, it would not mean that the existing data of 1.3 billion people would have to be discarded. You have probably seen these futuristic videos (by the way, they are not so futuristic anymore), where you walk into a grocery store, pick up your groceries, and walk out. You will not have to do any touch contact or payment, and everything will be handled fairly seamlessly. This is where I see the combination of cloud infrastructure, touchless fingerprint capture and accurate matching technologies to make sure that your privacy and security is not breached and the experience is completely frictionless.

Which are the countries that you will be focusing a lot on in 5 years time? TECH5 is a global company, and we have customers right from Latin America all the way to the far East. India is one of the focus areas for us, and we have a big team in that country. We have great natural pride in India because one of the co-founders is Indian. With respect to verticals, we are in the government sector, as well as in the private sector. We also serve law enforcement and the military. We want to have a presence anywhere, where you can use biometrics for improving both the lives of citizens and security. Our customers are mostly governments, banks, and FinTech (we provide EKYC solutions). You can see our face recognition and fingerprint solutions at work across different industries. We are there to serve our partners. What is TECH5's plan for further development of its technology? As I previously mentioned, we take the company's vision of making technologies available and inclusive very seriously, so we continue to invest in this. We also believe that the potential in AI and Machine Learning has not been fully realized. As such, we are not only focusing on achieving greater results in capturing and matching fingerprints but have also developed a new concept called T5-Mobile ID that can replace Smart card-based solutions and eliminate the need for carrying a physical ID. Everything an individual will need, for example, a health care card, a bus ticket, or a bank card will be available in electronic form. The solution is entirely electronic and as a result, the issuer will not need to spend money on chips or cards, giving the solution the added advantage of being environmentally friendly. All of the solutions that we will continue to build will be meant for every person in the society, and not only for the elite or privileged few. We want to make sure that people with and without digital skills will be able to use our solutions and thereby contribute to bridging the digital gap. To reach our goals, we are continuing to invest in all of the components of the solution that are required to ensure that identity solutions are acceptable, available, frictionless, and private for everyone in society.

Are we making the most of touchless technology in India? Are there sectors that are lagging behind? I believe that every sector that involves fingerprints will be able to use this technology. We are experimenting and running it with customers in different parts of the world, in various use cases. For example, we have law enforcement customers who have used it for a criminal investigation to find a latent print of a crime scene. It has also been used as a part of eKYC for opening a bank account using face or fingerprint recognition technology. The last point that I would like to make is that we are designing disruptive technologies that work in non-ideal conditions to make sure that both capture and remote one-to-one matching based on T5-Mobile ID technology can be delivered even in very remote usually unserved areas without having a need to connect to any backend system. Any message that you would like to give to the industry, your partners, and your current and potential customers? I would like to conclude by saying that TECH5 is a company founded by veterans who have worked in this field for decades. We believe in the revolution that AI is spawning and have already invested in it and proven that with these advancements we will have very good results in a very short period of time. We are working towards educating our partners and customers so that they start looking at these new approaches, not only from the cost-saving perspective but also in terms of the enhancement in accuracy and user experience. At the end of the day, the question is really about whom you are serving. As we build relationships with our partners and customers, the ultimate goal is for users (citizens) to be happy, to like the experience, and do not have to worry about their security and privacy. If the goal is achieved, then everyone benefits. Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to say loud and clear that we are a top player and an expert in the industry, and we are here and happy to talk to anyone who is interested in these advancements in biometric technologies.

From https://egov.eletsonline.com/ 05/31/2021

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: Launching Mentoring Skills Program for Teachers

The "Teaching Mentoring Skills" program has kicked off in Azerbaijan, which will cover about 50 teachers from five universities in the country, the Azerbaijan Innovation Center told Trend. The training will last until the end of May and will be devoted to entrepreneurship, business, innovation, start-ups and project management. “The university professors and other participants will meet with experts in these spheres within this program, so they can exchange views and get answers,” the Center said. “Moreover, in the second stage, participants in the mentoring program within the “incubation program” will be taught the mentoring skills." The training on entrepreneurship, business, innovation, start-ups and project management have been organized within the 'Skills for the Future' project by the State Agency for Public Services and Social Innovations under the president of Azerbaijan. The program will run until the end of May this year. The goal of the project is to support students in promoting their innovative ideas, which plays an important role in the technological development of the country, as well as to train teachers involved in the educational process to develop their skills as mentors in innovation. Another sphere of the Skills for the Future project is incubation programs aimed at teaching students how to develop start-ups with the participation of instructors.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/04/2021

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Cybercriminals Developing "Smart" Swarm Attack Technologies – Fortinet

Classic devices, which include IoT (Internet of Things) and Cloud technologies, are the sectors least protected from cyber threats, Shaig Samadov, Regional Manager of the US Fortinet company for the development of sales channels in Azerbaijan, told Trend. According to Samadov, all "smart" devices, vacuum cleaners, clocks, scales, and a number of others are connected to the Network, and the manufacturer does not provide their protection. The protection of these devices must be ensured by the end user by purchasing data protection technologies specific to each device, he said. The regional manager also noted that the provision of data protection regarding the global transition to cloud technologies is the responsibility of the user. Cloud providers often do not provide solutions to users to protect the data they store, said Samadov. The expert also noted that cybercriminals are developing and optimizing their attack technologies. "Mass (swarm) attacks in most cases are successful for cybercriminals. The object being attacked is practically incapable of repelling these threats. The swarm attack belongs to the "smart" category. Multiple attacks involve interaction and coordination. By means of a swarm, they find the most vulnerable points and massively attack precisely these places," he said. Various cybercriminal groups are also anticipating massive adoption of 5G networks, he said. Due to the high speed that this standard provides, they will be able to penetrate corporate networks, Samadov added.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/08/2021

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GPON-based Technology Being Introduced in Villages of Azerbaijan

Aztelekom LLC, operating under the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan, is building a network based on Gigabyte Passive Optical Network (GPON) technology in the villages of Azerbaijan within projects to expand the coverage area of communication services and improve their quality, Trend reports citing the ministry. According to the ministry, the telecommunications infrastructure is being modernized, optical lines are being laid, and GPON technology is being introduced in the village of Gadashoba in the Khachmaz district and in the villages of Shaftakhal, Ashagi Seyidler, and Mehdiler of the Zardab district. “To create a network, the construction of a fiber-optic line with a length of more than 10 kilometers in Gadashoba village and more than 3,000 kilometers in the specified settlements of the Zardab district has already been completed,” the ministry said. "As a result of the implementation of the project, more than 1,000 families in Gadashoba village and 500 families in the villages of Zardab district will have access to modern telecommunication services. In addition, the introduction of this technology will expand the range of services provided, and the technical capabilities of the network are planned taking points and an increase in the number of new subscribers. Similar work is planned to be carried out in other districts of Azerbaijan," the message said. The ICT sector is one of the leading and dynamically developing spheres of the Azerbaijani economy.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/17/2021

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Azerbaijan Shares Data on Number of Vaccinated Citizens

Some 62,296 people were vaccinated against COVID-19 in Azerbaijan on May 28, Trend reports referring to the Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers. The first dose of the vaccine was injected to 53,155 citizens, and the second one to 9,141 citizens. Totally, up until now, 2,169,185 citizens have been vaccinated, 1,279,356 of whom received the first dose of the vaccine, and 889,829 people - the second. The COVID-19 vaccination in Azerbaijan was launched on January 18, 2021.

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Azerbaijan Launches Beta Version of National Anti-Virus Software

The Computer Incident Response Team (CERT) under the Special Communications and Information Security State Agency of Azerbaijan's Special State Protection Service has presented the first anti-virus software, Trend reports referring to a source in CERT. The CERT team has long been working on launching a beta version of a program designed to detect computer pests. "From the Microsoft corporation, we have received a corresponding certificate of the legitimacy of the application for its further integration into our software," the team representatives said. The beta version works in three languages - Azerbaijani, English, and Russian. A test run of the program will allow you to get user ratings and improve the further work of the program.

From https://en.trend.az/ 04/30/2021

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KAZAKHSTAN: Requiring Sustainable Management Practices for Natural Resources – UNIDO

There is a need for consistently sustainable management practices for natural resources and water in Kazakhstan, the UNIDO official told Trend. The official noted that one of the biggest areas of UNIDO’s technical cooperation is environmental protection. "Industrialization, when not managed sustainably and efficiently, can have drastic consequences for the environment and biodiversity. Therefore, it is essential to ensure sustainable management of water and natural resources, energy efficiency, and clean and low-carbon technologies in order to maintain environmental balance," the official said. "Since Kazakhstan’s economy closely relies on natural resources, including in industry, trade and agribusiness, there is a need for consistently sustainable management practices for natural resources and water, as well as waste management and energy efficiency. UNIDO’s engagement with Kazakhstan has to a great extent focused on these issues, cooperating on topics like clean and innovative technologies, and greening the economy, as well as sustainable management of ozone depleting substances (ODS) and the disposal of persistent organic pollutants (POPs)," the official said. The official added that UNIDO’s reporting on SDG 9 "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure" provides information on the manufacturing sector’s performance through the SDG 9 indicators including CO2 emissions per unit of manufacturing value added (MVA).

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/272021

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Urged to Be a Cool Head in Space

Australia should use its status as a "middle space power" to encourage responsible behaviour as the heavens become increasingly congested, contested and competitive, a leading academic says. As the world's major powers engage in a destabilising space arms race, Australia needs to be careful not to accelerate a "global strategic race to the bottom," according to Australian National University space law expert Cassandra Steer. "One of the greatest risks is the move by major powers over the last decade towards an explicit ambition to dominate space militarily," Dr Steer said in a policy options paper from the National Security College. "Language in military doctrine and space policies in the US and China shows a concerning rejection of the shared historical position that keeping space stable was in one's own national interest, even if one's adversaries were also active in space.

"The expression that space is a 'warfighting domain' or a 'battlespace' has begun to enter informal military parlance and public messaging. "Undoubtedly, space is now part of multi-domain operations. However, it is not, and should not become a battlefield." Dr Steer said a classic security dilemma is emerging with China, India, Russia and the US all testing anti-satellite weapon capabilities. Many nations were now developing forms of interference, and counter technologies that threaten the stability and security of all space-based systems. She said in standing up Space Force in 2019, the US made a powerful statement, while China already had an equivalent, and Russia continues to ramp up its space military program. Canada, India, France, Japan and the UK have created centralised space commands within their militaries, and Australia's Department of Defence has announced it will have its own Space Division in 2022, which Dr Steer said was a prudent move.

"However, Australia needs to be careful that, as it develops sovereign space capabilities, it does not accelerate a global strategic race to the bottom," she said. "Rather, Australia should focus on its ability to become an effective diplomatic space power, building on our history as a strong contributor to space technologies and arms control norms." In a series of policy recommendations, Dr Steer called on the federal government to appoint a space ambassador and invest in space literacy. She also called for more personnel to support the space diplomacy missions of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australian Space Agency.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/27/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Drop in Unemployment Shows Govt Economic Plan Is Working

The Government’s economic recovery plan continues to be reflected in the labour market, with more people in work and unemployment falling. Stats NZ figures show employment rose by 15,000 in the March quarter, with 14,000 more women in work. The unemployment rate fell from 4.9 percent to 4.7 percent. This compares with the Treasury’s Half year Economic and Fiscal Update forecast unemployment rate of 6.5

percent. “The Government’s plan to keep people connected to their job and accelerate the recovery has been reflected in these positive results. An extra 32,000 people are in jobs since September 2020, when unemployment peaked at 5.2 percent,” Grant Robertson said. “The Government’s COVID-19 response to outbreaks in February helped support workers and businesses, through measures such as the Resurgence Support Payment and Wage Subsidy.

“The number of people employed in Auckland hit a record high in the March quarter, to 922,000. “Our focus is on accelerating the recovery. The vaccination rollout and careful re-opening of our borders provides confidence, particularly to those working in firms and sectors such as tourism that have felt the effects of the pandemic more than most. We also continue to invest heavily in education, skills and training to build back better,” Grant Robertson said. “We acknowledge that unemployment is likely to move around a bit due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic. Nevertheless, New Zealand has performed favourably against the countries we measure ourselves against,” Carmel Sepuloni said. On comparable measures, New Zealand’s 4.7 percent unemployment rate stands against 5.9 percent in Australia, 6.2 percent in the United States and 8.4 percent in Canada. The OECD average is 6.7 percent.

“The stronger labour market has also seen a record number people come off the benefit in the March quarter, with nearly 33,000 entering paid work, Carmel Sepuloni said. “We have continued to make interventions to assist those who are disadvantaged in the labour market to re-enter the workforce. Flexiwage, which was launched in February, is already beginning to make a difference. “The statistics also show that people are feeling more secure in their jobs, with an 11.8 percent fall in the number of people who feel they might lose their jobs. “While today’s figures are positive, we know we have more work to do,” Carmel Sepuloni said.

From https://livenews.co.nz 05/05/2021

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Building Stronger Support for Workers Post COVID

The Government, Business NZ and the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (CTU) are jointly designing a Social Unemployment Insurance scheme that would support workers to retain about 80 percent of their income for a period after they lose their jobs. This delivers on a commitment in Labour’s manifesto. “As we secure our recovery from COVID-19, we have an opportunity to better support New Zealanders who lose their jobs through no fault of their own,” Minister of Finance Grant Robertson said. “A Social Unemployment Insurance scheme would strengthen the safety net we have in Aotearoa New Zealand, and would be an appropriate legacy from COVID-19 – one that makes our recovery stronger and more secure.

“COVID-19 has exposed how vulnerable employment can be, and the risk to dramatic income loss from employment to unemployment. Finding a job takes time, and many workers may accept lower-paid jobs that don't match their skillsets, because financial pressures mean they need work quickly. "After the Global Financial Crisis, Canterbury earthquakes and COVID-19, governments have had to institute ad-hoc programmes to support those who have lost their jobs. BusinessNZ and the CTU asked to work with Government to propose a more enduring solution and this is our joint response. "Like ACC for accidents, a Social Unemployment Insurance scheme would cushion the impact of a job loss. It would give workers the financial stability to find the right job for their skills, or to retrain for a new, fulfilling career path. We're looking at a scheme that could provide those who lose their jobs with around 80 percent of their income, with minimum and maximum caps," Grant Robertson said.

"Over the coming months, the Social Insurance Tripartite Working Group (Government, BusinessNZ and CTU) will be consulting targeted stakeholders on what the right settings could be, balancing the support needed for Kiwis to find quality new jobs against the costs of running the scheme. There will be wider public consultation later this year. "We know changing demands and technologies will reduce demand for some skills, and Social Unemployment Insurance is one way to give our workforce more flexibility to respond to this. Many countries have such a scheme and exploring one was a key recommendation of the Productivity Commission's inquiry into technological change and the future of work. "Any Social Unemployment Insurance scheme would be about supporting workers through a job transition. It complements the support available through the welfare system for those out of work for a variety of reasons. The Government remains committed to ongoing reforms to the welfare system," Grant Robertson said.

From https://livenews.co.nz 05/21/2021

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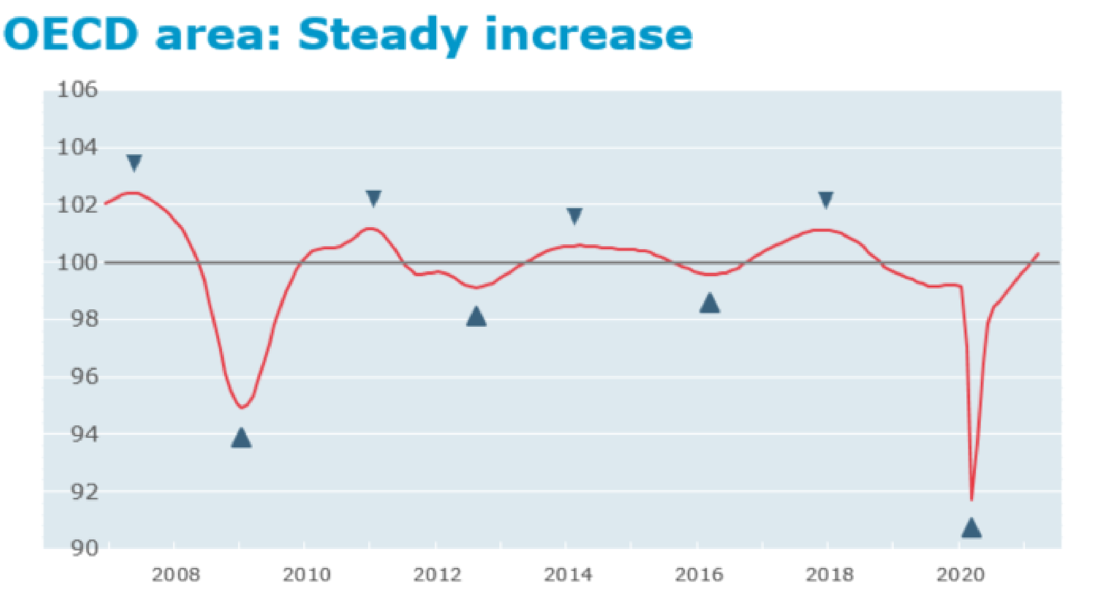
4、Economic and Social Development and ICT

Asia-Pacific

CLIs Increase at a Steady Pace in Most Major Economies

The OECD Composite leading indicators (CLIs), designed to anticipate turning points in economic activity relative to trend, point to a steady expansion in the OECD area as a whole and in most major economies. Among large OECD economies outside Europe, the CLIs for the United States, Japan and Canada continue to expand at a steady pace. In Europe, the CLIs for the euro area as a whole, including Germany and Italy continue to point to a steady increase, but in the United Kingdom and France, the CLIs anticipate stable growth. Among major emerging economies, the

CLIs for Russia and for the industrial sector in China point to steady increases, as previously, whereas in India the pace of expansion of the CLI is now moderating. In Brazil, the CLI continues to point to slowing growth. Despite the gradual lifting of COVID-19 containment measures in some countries and the progress of vaccination campaigns, persisting uncertainties might result in higher than usual fluctuations in the CLI and its components. As such, the CLIs should be interpreted with care and their magnitude should be regarded as an indication of the strength of the signal rather than as a measure of the degree of growth in economic activity.



Visit the interactive OECD Data Portal to explore this data further.

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

From https://www.oecd.org/ 05/11/2021

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Widespread Informality Likely to Slow Recovery from COVID-19 in Developing Economies

A strikingly large percentage of workers and firms operate outside the line of sight of governments in emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs)—a challenge that is likely to hold back the recovery in these economies unless governments adopt a comprehensive set of policies to address the drawbacks of the informal sector, a new World Bank Group study has found. The study, The Long Shadow of Informality:

Challenges and Policies, is the first comprehensive Bank analysis examining the extent of informality and its implications for an economic recovery that supports green, resilient and inclusive development in the long-term. It finds that the informal sector accounts for more than 70 percent of total employment—and nearly one-third of GDP—in EMDEs. That scale diminishes these countries' ability to mobilize the fiscal resources needed to bolster the economy in a crisis, to conduct effective macroeconomic policies, and to build human capital for long-term development.

In economies with widespread informality, government resources to combat deep recessions and to support subsequent recovery are more limited than in other economies. Government revenues in EMDEs with above-average informality totaled about 20 percent of GDP—five to 12 percentage points below the level in other EMDEs. Government expenditures also were lower by as much as 10 percentage points of GDP. Similarly, central banks' ability to support economies is constrained by the underdeveloped financial systems associated with widespread informality. "Informal workers are predominantly women and young people who lack skills. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, they are often left behind, with little recourse to social safety nets when they lose their jobs or suffer severe income losses," said Mari Pangestu, World Bank Managing Director for Development Policy and Partnerships. "This analysis will help to fill knowledge gaps in an understudied area and get policy makers back on track to tackle informality, which will be critical going forward as we work to achieve green, resilient and inclusive development."

High informality undermines policy efforts to slow down the spread of COVID-19 and boost economic growth. Limited access to social safety nets has meant that many participants in the informal sector have neither been able to afford to stay at home nor adhere to social-distancing requirements. In EMDEs, informal enterprises account for 72 percent of firms in the services sector. High levels of informality generally means weaker development outcomes. Countries with larger informal sectors have lower per-capita incomes, greater poverty, greater income inequality, less developed financial markets, and weaker investment and are farther away from achieving the goals of sustainable development. Informality in EMDEs varies widely across regions and countries—as a percentage of GDP, it is highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, at 36 percent. It is lowest in the Middle East and North Africa, at 22 percent. In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, pervasive informality is largely the result of low human capital and large agricultural sectors. In Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa, heavy regulatory and tax burdens and weak institutions have been important factors in driving informality.

The study shows that informality can be tackled in EMDEs—in fact, while it remains high, it had been on a declining trend for three decades before the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 1990 and 2018, on average, informality fell by about 7 percentage points of GDP to 32 percent of GDP. The decline partly reflected policy reforms: over the past three decades, many EMDE governments implemented policy reforms either to increase the benefits of formal-sector participation or to reduce the costs of such activities. These included tax reforms, reforms to increase access to finance, and stronger governance. The study provides five general recommendations for policymakers in EMDEs: first, take a comprehensive approach—because informality reflects broad-based underdevelopment and cannot be tackled in isolation; second, tailor measures to country circumstances because the causes of informality vary widely; third, improve access to education, markets, and finance so that informal workers and firms can become sufficiently productive to move to the formal sector; fourth; improve governance and business climates so the formal sector can flourish; and fifth, streamline tax regulation to lower the cost of operating formally and increase the cost of operating informally.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 05/11/2021

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Spreading the Gains from Trade More Widely

Global trade has contributed to growth and poverty reduction in the past three decades, but gains from trade can be more inclusive, the World Bank said today. Spreading the benefits of trade more widely, within and between countries, can play a key role as the world seeks to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reversed years of poverty reduction. New data and tools developed by the World Bank can allow policy makers to ensure trade delivers more for the poor, according to The Distributional Impacts of Trade: Empirical Innovations, Analytical Tools and Policy Responses report. By identifying in advance those sectors and regions that are most affected by changes in trade patterns, policies can be designed to maximize the gains and mitigate potential losses. “There is no question that the rise in trade over the past 30 years has helped to dramatically reduce global poverty, but the benefits were not shared equally,” said Mari Pangestu, World Bank Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships. “Trade plays a vital role in pandemic response, ensuring food and medicine can cross borders freely and vaccines are distributed where they are needed. Better policies are needed to make trade more inclusive, as we work to build back better and set a path toward green, resilient and inclusive development.”

Policy makers in developing countries can use the new findings, data, and approaches in the report to better under-stand the distributional effects of trade, monitor the implementation of policies to address them, and coordinate responses across government. The rapid increase in global trade has been a key engine of growth and poverty reduction in developing countries. From 1990 to 2017, global poverty fell from 36 percent to 9 percent as developing countries increased their share of global exports from 16 percent to 30 percent. Many countries have used trade to create jobs, boost exports, reduce poverty and increase shared prosperity.

Despite these gains, changes in trade policy have created winners and losers with some communities and workers not gaining as much as others, sometimes undermining popular support for trade liberalization, and increasing support for protectionism.

The aggregate gains from trade are clearly established, but gains and losses have been often heavily concentrated and particularly visible in some sectors, jobs, and regions and longer-lasting than previously understood, according to the report, which looked at the impact of trade on labor markets, consumption, and poverty in Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and Sri Lanka. This report provides policy makers with tools to analyze the impact of trade policy across regions, industries, and workers in developing countries. Governments will better understand how trade will impact income and wages, levels of formal employment, consumption, poverty, and inequality at both national and sub-national levels. A deeper understanding of the distributional impacts of trade is critical to design better policies that spread the benefits of trade more broadly, making trade work better for everyone. Minimizing its negative impact and maximizing its benefits will not only help to combat poverty but also to counter rising economic nationalism.

World Bank Group Response to COVID-19
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 US$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.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 05/19/2021

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G20 Merchandise Trade Reaches Record High in First Quarter of 2021

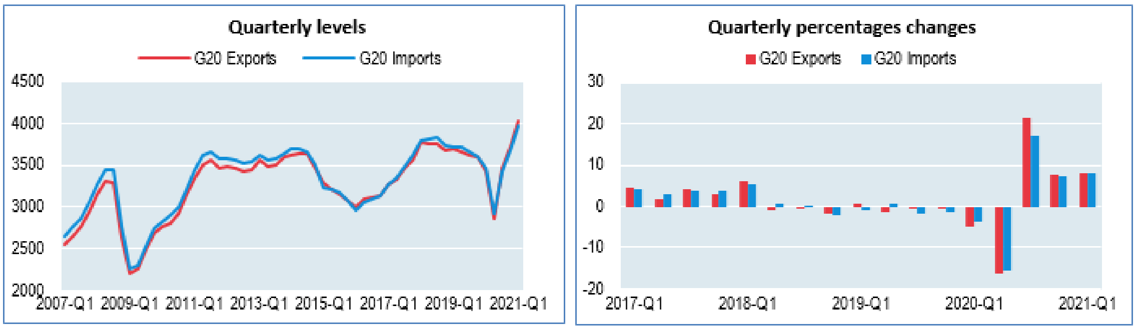
Continuing the recovery initiated in the third of quarter of 2020, **international merchandise trade for the G20 reached record levels in Q1 2021**, as measured in seasonally adjusted current US dollars. Compared with the previous quarter, **exports** and **imports** increased by 8.0% and 8.1%, respectively. With the exception of the **United Kingdom**, all G20 economies recorded positive growth in Q1 2021, with the depreciation of the US dollar and the related increases in commodity prices playing a role in the recovery from the COVID-19 lows. Prices of agricultural commodities, including cereals and vegetable oils, increased by over 10% in Q1 2021, while prices of metals are close to levels last observed in 2011. **Argentina** (exports up 33.3%), **Australia** (exports up 17.5%), **Brazil** (exports up 14.7%), and **South Africa** (exports up 17.3%), among the G20's largest exporters of those products, have benefitted from the rising commodity prices.

Additionally, the nearly 35% increase in crude oil prices in Q1 2021 translated into the rising export values of **Canada** (up 10.8%), **Russia** (up 13.1%), and **Indonesia** (up 12.4%). Since energy products are a major import for most G20 economies, the price increases also resulted in higher import values in the same period. Finally, the pandemic-related boom in purchases of electronics led to a surge in demand for semiconductors and integrated circuits. Along with several other factors, this led to supply failing to keep pace with demand, resulting in shortages and price rises. While higher trade in semiconductors partly contributed to total merchandise trade growth in the **United States** (exports and imports up by 5.7% and 5.3%, respectively), chip shortages affected, in particular, the automotive supply chains. A slowdown in shipments of vehicles and parts weighed on total merchandise exports from **France** (up 2.7%) and **Mexico** (up 0.4%), both markedly below the G20 average.

China, the G20's largest merchandise trader, saw exports (up 18.9%) and imports (up 19.0%) soar in the first quarter of 2021. Chinese import growth was led by metals and metal ores, cereals and integrated circuits, while export growth was led by electronic products including integrated circuits, vehicles, and textiles (including face masks). In the **European Union** exports and imports grew by 3.8% and 5.0%, respectively. The **United Kingdom** was the only G20 economy to record negative merchandise trade growth, both for exports (minus 5.7%) and for imports (minus 10.5%) in Q1 2021. The slowdown follows large increases in the previous quarter, when stockpiling was taking place in view of the exit from the EU Single Market.

G20 merchandise trade

Based on figures in current prices (billion US dollars), seasonally adjusted

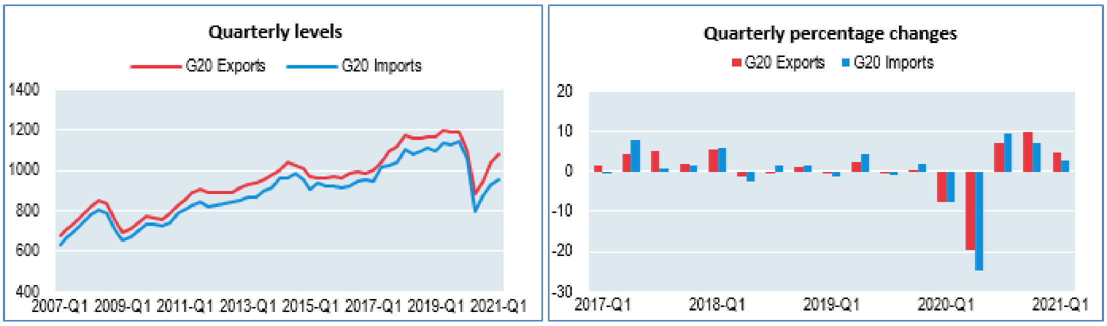


Based on preliminary information available for some G20 economies, services export and import growth for the G20 aggregate is estimated at around 4.4% and 2.5% for Q1 2021, respectively, measured in seasonally adjusted current US dollars. This follows the faster growth in exports (up 9.7%) and imports (up 7.1%) experienced by the G20 in the preceding quarter. According to available data, trade in services in Q1 2021 broadly reflects the trends observed in late 2020. While travel continued to be heavily restrained, the value of trade in transport services soared in Q1, reflecting the surge in both maritime and air freight rates which began in the second half of 2020. Trade in digitally deliverable services, such as telecommunications, computer and business services, continued to expand in Q1 2021, particularly in East Asia. Widespread increases in savings and higher volumes of transactions in financial products contributed to robust trade in financial and insurance services, especially in Europe and North America. In Q1 2021, exports of services increased by 4.0% in **Germany** and 3.6% in **France**, with financial and insurance services, as well as transport, driving the overall increase. Imports increased by 3.6% in Germany and 6.6% in France. In the **United Kingdom**, exports increased moderately in Q1 (up 1.3%), while imports decreased by 3.3%.

Services trade in North America recorded a slowdown in Q1 2021 compared with the previous quarter. Exports from the **United States** and **Canada** grew by 1.0% and 1.6%, respectively, while imports showed slightly higher growth (up 2.4% and 3.0%, respectively). Services exports from **Korea** (up 3.3%) and **China** (up 22.7%) continued to record solid growth in Q1 2021, following robust expansions in Q4 2020. Imports also increased in China (by 3.9%), with telecommunications and computer and business services continuing their expanding trend which began in Q3 2020. Conversely, Korean imports declined (minus 2.4%). In Q1 2021, exports of services from **Australia** and **Japan** contracted by (minus) 1.3% and (minus) 0.1%, respectively, partially owing to weak exports of travel. On the other hand, imports increased by 7.9% and 3.0%, in both cases driven by higher purchases of freight transport services. Exports of services from **Brazil**, **Turkey** and **Russia** recorded double-digit growth in Q4 2020 and continued to expand markedly in Q1 2021 (up by 9.1%, 13.1% and 6.0%, respectively).

G20 trade in services

Based on figures in current prices (billion US dollars), seasonally adjusted



From https://www.oecd.org/ 05/25/2021

TOP↑

Smarter and Safer Cities with Effective Cybersecurity Measures

THE promise of smart cities is clear: a more liveable space for citizens which in turn, fosters a better environment for businesses to flourish and grow, leading to greater economic growth. Governments in South-east Asia have been building up critical infrastructure and rolling out technologies to support their vision of smart cities. Indeed, Singapore is one of the strongest advocates for smart cities, and has been key in proposing the establishment of the Asean Smart Cities Network. Yet, the race to fulfil this vision is not without its risks. Increased connectivity means more opportunities for cybercriminals to launch attacks and with the interconnectivity of smart systems, self-propagating malware can easily take down key systems rapidly and lead to breakdowns of critical services.

Case in point, the most recent ransomware attack launched on the United States' fuel pipeline operator Colonial Pipeline caused the shutdown of its entire network - the source of nearly half of the US east coast's fuel supply. While the damage of such magnitude caused by cyberattacks has not surfaced in Singapore, these incidents hammer home a valuable lesson in the importance of having a clear, effective cyber defence strategy. In today's connected landscape, how can governments mitigate the risks of cyber threats and build secure and safe smart cities? Here are four key considerations that are critical for smart cities to mitigate digital risks and better position themselves against cyber threats.

#1 Stay ahead with strategic cyber intelligence

Staying one step ahead of these cyberattacks will require a thorough understanding of knowing where to look, who the threat actors are, what they are after, when they are planning to launch an attack and how they intend to do so. Smart city cyber-defenders must be proactive to gain a pre-emptive advantage. They need to be looking into the deepest, darkest corners on the Internet. Over 94 per cent of the world's information reside in the deep and dark Webs, which are frequented by cyber-threat actors trading restricted information ranging from academic and research data, to financial and medical records. To minimise the fear of data breaches and cyberthreats, smart cities must adopt an intelligence-centric mindset and leverage deep technology to monitor these platforms. Predictive detection capabilities will take the element of surprise away from these cyberattacks, allowing cybersecurity agencies to take action swiftly and prevent data exfiltration and loss.

#2 Fight AI-powered attacks with AI-powered self-defence systems

Similar to how our immune system continuously self-monitors, learns and heals when faced with anomalies, the next frontier of cybersecurity solutions should have the ability to identify abnormal foreign activities or programmes through adaptive machine learning. An automated, self-defence cybersecurity system powered by AI and predictive analytical technologies will be able to define normal and abnormal statuses, monitor the system 24/7, and respond to and recover from new threats. Having such a system will reduce the risk of attacks significantly and reduce the attractiveness of being a hacking target for threat actors.

#3 Rethink regulatory environment for cybersecurity

While governments may have enacted cyber laws, many are proving to be challenging to enforce. There are a few areas where improvements can be made and scaled. For a start, incident reporting can be made mandatory. This will create a body of research data that can provide insights on threats to the nation (and cities) and inform the government on strategies it can undertake to strengthen their cyber posture. Imposing mandatory risk and vulnerability assessments will also be helpful in identifying threats early and conduct remediations to close any cybersecurity gaps. Commencing attack vector assessments can help uncover new attack surfaces as businesses adopt new digital formats and services. Additionally, nations can cultivate a cyber reward culture where the discovery of bugs and vulnerabilities are rewarded, providing an incentive for the cybersecurity community to share their knowledge and promote joint solutioning.

#4 Adopt a people, technology, process and governance framework

As much as cybersecurity is a technology problem, we (humans) are part of the equation contributing to it. Cyber hygiene needs to be emphasised and practised religiously. Employees and individuals need to be educated on cyber threats and risks, given the prevalence of phishing attacks and social engineering hacking campaigns. From the technology perspective, the public sector and businesses alike should incorporate layered defences with data and endpoint security, gateway-based security, automating scanning, monitoring and malware removal. Antivirus solution, data loss detection and protection, and VPN solutions must not be overlooked. With processes, cybersecurity teams should conduct threat profiling, creation of threat segmentation, zoning and risk containment. A habit of backing data daily would be a good policy to adopt too.

Finally, when it comes to governance, a good cyber threat visibility and intelligence programme will be vital in completing a well-rounded cybersecurity strategy. Cyber threats and risks will always be present in our increasingly connected world. Nonetheless, given the immense potential that smart cities can bring to the economy and in bettering the lives of citizens, nations should not let the risks be a factor that derails their smart city initiatives. By understanding and gaining intelligence of where threats lie, adopting effective cybersecurity measures and putting up strong cyber walls, cities can become smarter and safer.

From https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/ 05/26/2021

TOP↑

OECD Sees Brighter Economic Prospects but an Uneven Recovery

Prospects for the world economy have brightened but the recovery is likely to remain uneven and, crucially, dependent on the effectiveness of public health measures and policy support, according to the OECD's latest Economic Outlook. In many advanced economies more and more people are being vaccinated, government stimulus is helping to boost demand and businesses are adapting better to the restrictions to stop the spread of the virus. But elsewhere, including in many emerging-market economies where access to vaccines as well as the scope for government support are limited, the economic recovery will be modest. The OECD has revised up its growth projections across the world's major economies since its last full Economic Outlook in December 2020. It now sees global GDP growth at 5.8 % this year (compared with 4.2% projected in December), helped by a government stimulus-led upturn in the United States, and at 4.4% in 2022 (3.7% in December). The world economy has now returned to pre-pandemic activity levels, but real global income will still be some USD 3 trillion less by the end of 2022 than it would have been without a crisis.

As long as a large proportion of the world's population is not vaccinated and the risk of new outbreaks remains, the recovery will be uneven and remain vulnerable to fresh setbacks, the Outlook says. Some targeted restrictions on mobility and activity may still need to be maintained, particularly on cross border travel. This will affect the prospects for a full recovery in all countries, even for those with a fast vaccine rollout or low infection rates. Driving the differences between countries are public health strategies, the speed of vaccine rollout, fiscal and monetary support, and the relative importance of hard hit sectors such as tourism. While Korea and the US are already back to their pre-pandemic income levels, much of Europe is expected to take an additional year for them to bounce back. In Mexico and South Africa, it could take another three to five years. Considerable uncertainty surrounds the projections, although risks have become more balanced between potential positive and negative impacts. In countries where vaccination is not widespread, the risk of further outbreaks remains very high, with the possible emergence of new vaccine-resistant variants of the virus. This could trigger further containment measures and delay the economic rebound. On the upside, the high levels of household savings that have built up during the crisis could be unleashed as economies reopen, boosting consumption and growth to higher-than-expected levels, especially in advanced economies.

OECD Economic Outlook projections

Real GDP growth

% change, year-on-year, colours indicate the direction of revisions since the December 2020 Economic Outlook

↓ downward revision, by 0.3pp or more — no change or smaller than 0.3pp ↑ upward revision, by 0.3pp or more

	2020	2021	2022		2020	2021	2022
World	-3.5 ↑	5.8 ↑	4.4 ↑	G20	-3.1 ↑	6.3 ↑	4.7 ↑
Australia	-2.5 ↑	5.1 ↑	3.4 ↑	Argentina	-9.9 ↑	6.1 ↑	1.8 ↓
Canada	-5.4 —	6.1 ↑	3.8 ↑	Brazil	-4.1 ↑	3.7 ↑	2.5 ↑
Euro area	-6.7 ↑	4.3 ↑	4.4 ↑	China	2.3 ↑	8.5 ↑	5.8 ↑
Germany	-5.1 ↑	3.3 ↑	4.4 ↑	India*	-7.7 ↑	9.9 ↑	8.2 ↑
France	-8.2 ↑	5.8 —	4.0 ↑	Indonesia	-2.1 ↑	4.7 ↑	5.1 —
Italy	-8.9 —	4.5 —	4.4 ↑	Mexico	-8.2 ↑	5.0 ↑	3.2 —
Spain	-10.8 ↑	5.9 ↑	6.3 ↑	Russia	-2.6 ↑	3.5 ↑	2.8 ↑
Japan	-4.7 ↑	2.6 ↑	2.0 ↑	Saudi Arabia	-4.1 ↑	2.8 ↓	3.8 —
Korea	-0.9 —	3.8 ↑	2.8 ↓	South Africa	-7.0 ↑	3.8 ↑	2.5 —
United Kingdom	-9.8 ↑	7.2 ↑	5.5 ↑	Turkey	1.8 ↑	5.7 ↑	3.4 —
United States	-3.5 —	6.9 ↑	3.6 —				

The release of pent-up demand in the advanced economies, together with disruptions to supply chains caused by COVID-19, could push up inflation and market interest rates, which in turn risks putting vulnerable emerging-market and developing countries under financial pressure. But, according to the Outlook, the jump in inflation will likely be temporary as the disruptions should start to fade by the end of the year, with production capacity normalising and consumption rebalancing from goods towards services. The OECD adds that with many people still out of work, a cycle of sharp wage rises and price increases is unlikely. Presenting the Economic Outlook, OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría said: “Effective vaccination programmes in many countries has meant today’s Economic Outlook is more promising than at any time since the start of this devastating pandemic. But for millions around the world getting a jab still remains a distant prospect. We urgently need to step up the production and equitable distribution of vaccines.”

OECD Chief Economist Laurence Boone said: “Our latest projections provide hope that in many countries, people hit hard by the pandemic may soon be able to return to work and start living a normal life again. But we are at a critical stage of the recovery. Vaccination production and distribution have to accelerate globally and be backed by effective public health strategies.” “Stronger international cooperation is needed to provide low-income countries with the resources - medical and financial - required to vaccinate their populations. Trade in healthcare products must be allowed to flow free of restrictions.” Ms Boone said income support for people and businesses should continue but evolve and adapt in line with the strength of the economy and the health situation. As containment measures are lifted, better targeting of support to where it is needed most - including through re-training and job placement - will improve prospects, particularly for the low skilled and for youth. Support also needs to focus on viable businesses, to encourage a move away from debt into equity, and to create jobs and invest in digitalisation.

Although government fiscal support throughout the pandemic has pushed up public debt in most economies, the Outlook says current low interest rates make debt servicing more manageable and should open the way for investments in areas such as healthcare, digitalisation and addressing climate change. Ms Boone insisted "Debt sustainability should be a priority only once the recovery is well advanced, but governments should start planning for an overhaul of public finance management. This is no ordinary crisis and no ordinary recovery. Post crisis policies should be reformed in depth to address more effectively today's challenges and those ahead."

From https://www.oecd.org/ 05/31/2021

TOP↑

Asia-Pacific Can Emerge from Pandemic "Stronger Than Before" — ADB President

The Asia and the Pacific region can emerge from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic "even stronger than before" by focusing on five areas to help achieve a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future, Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Masatsugu Asakawa said in remarks to the ADB Board of Governors at its 54th Annual Meeting today. "I believe the path we have laid out will help lead our region out of these uncertain times," Mr. Asakawa said. "We will continue to deliver ADB's unique synergy of finance, knowledge, and partnerships. And we will prioritize the quality of our assistance over quantity, meeting near-term needs with a clear vision for the future. If we stay on this course, I am confident the region will emerge from the current crisis even stronger than before."

Mr. Asakawa outlined a five-point agenda for the region covering areas critical to achieving a lasting and equitable recovery for Asia and the Pacific:
Place ambitious climate actions at the center of development, with increased focus on adaptation and resilience, and with full commitment to the goals of the Paris Agreement. Address inequality including the gender gap—which has worsened during the pandemic—by investing in health, education, and social protection. Promote high-quality green and digital infrastructure, enabling economies to rebuild smartly while closing the digital gap and attracting substantial private investment. Deepen regional cooperation and integration, so that ADB developing member countries can seize the opportunities of renewed globalization and strengthen regional health security. And strengthen domestic resource mobilization, to ensure that governments have the resources they need to finance sustainable growth and respond effectively to future crises.

Action on these priorities can build on ADB's response to COVID-19 in 2020. Its total commitments in 2020 reached a record high of $31.6 billion, with just over half supporting operations to respond to the pandemic. The balance was committed to address long-term development issues such as the gender equality gap, the impacts of climate change, and investments in quality infrastructure. These achievements were supported by record-high cofinancing of $16.4 billion and record-high capital market borrowings of over $35 billion. “During the height of the pandemic, I reassured my staff that we will someday look back with pride at what we accomplished for the people of the region. I believe more than ever that this is true,” Mr. Asakawa said.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/05/2021

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Perseverance and Cooperation Needed to Overcome COVID, say Asia-Pacific Business Leaders

Asia-Pacific business leaders, meeting virtually this week in the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC), emphasised the need for perseverance, cooperation, and sound policies, to overcome the health and economic challenges of COVID-19. “This is a marathon, not a sprint,” said Rachel Taulelei, Chair of ABAC. “But if we don’t work together, we won’t reach the finish line anytime soon.” Ms Taulelei was speaking after the second ABAC meeting of 2021, where the Hon. Damien O’Connor, New Zealand Minister of Trade and Export Growth, opened the proceedings. She said that had finalised a report to be presented to APEC Trade Ministers at their meeting next month.

“This is a decisive moment. We must not lose this window to bring COVID-19 under control by expanding vaccination. Trade can and must be part of the solution by supporting the production and distribution of vaccines and other medical supplies,” Ms Taulelei stressed. “We are utterly dismayed at the catastrophe facing many economies including those in our region. We call on APEC to reject vaccine nationalism and to lead urgent action to achieve quicker and wider vaccination, including through the COVAX initiative.” Ms Taulelei explained that vaccination is one of the key tools to kickstart economic recovery. She noted that a presentation by ANZ Chief Economist Sharon Zollner had highlighted the uneven growth forecasts around the region and considerable downside risk.

“For the last 25 years, our goal of more open markets has helped create jobs and raise living standards. That approach should also help guide our response to the COVID challenge,” she said. “The priorities are clear: coherent, safe border reopening through vaccination and testing; more resilient cross-border supply chains through eliminating non-tariff barriers and locking in progress on digital trade interoperability; and helping to create a more level playing field for small businesses, women and indigenous communities, at home and abroad.” Ms Taulelei said that reforming the World Trade Organisation is also a top priority. “Our WTO Statement, also approved today, urges APEC to lead in shaping a strong, credible and relevant organisation – one that can effectively tackle emerging issues like digital trade, decarbonisation and inclusion, as well as unfinished business in agriculture and fish subsidies, and can enforce the rules."

"COVID poses an immediate threat,, but we cannot lose sight of the next big existential challenge: climate change," Ms Taulelei warned. "ABAC is developing a set of climate leadership principles for embracing a just transition to a low-carbon economy, and advocating for trade levers to help achieve greater sustainability as a matter of urgency," she added. Ms Taulelei concluded by recalling ABAC's theme for 2021 of 'people, place and prosperity' – tāngata, taiao, me te taurikura. "APEC's Putrajaya Vision calls for an open, dynamic, resilient and peaceful community by 2040. We could not agree more with that aspiration – and our 2021 focus underscores its importance. People must be at the heart of this Vision – and so must our planet. And to sustain our collective prosperity, we must start banking concrete outcomes that can serve as building blocks for an eventual Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific", Ms Taulelei concluded.

From https://www.apec.org/ 05/12/2021

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The High-Level Technology (HLT) Fund: 12 Things to Know

High-level technology (HLT) can help improve efficiency and productivity, thereby saving resources. Combining innovative approaches and technologies can create a positive impact on addressing development challenges. In many developing member countries (DMCs) of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), however, it is still quite a challenge to introduce HLT projects. Aside from funds as a major constraint, many DMCs find it hard to adopt and scale up HLT due to gaps in skills and lack of infrastructure to implement new and advanced technologies. Considering the merits of HLT, ADB established the HLT Fund. Established in 2017, the HLT Fund is a multi-donor trust fund to promote the use of HLT into project development and implementation in Asia and the Pacific, with Government of Japan as its first donor.
Source: ADB Establishes Fund to Promote High-Level Technology - Japan First Donor

ADB intends to enhance its use of HLT in areas such as climate change, smart grids, mass energy storage, energy efficiency, renewable energy, toll/ticketing systems, intelligent transport systems, mass transit, smart cities, waste-to-energy technology, desalination, and remote sensing technology.
Source: ADB Establishes Fund to Promote High-Level Technology - Japan First Donor

The fund supports innovative technologies and integrated solutions that are either new or need scaling-up, not only to improve project impact but also to develop the countries' technological capability. Projects from ADB's DMCs are eligible for

financing from the fund.
Source: Establishment of the High-Level Technology Fund

As of December 2020, the HLT Fund has received around $70 million in total from the Government of Japan. Since the inception of the fund, 12 investment projects, 37 technical assistance projects, and 23 direct charges were approved for funding.
Source: High-Level Technology Fund Quarterly Progress Report (October-December 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting an enormous pressure on health systems. To help ADB's DMCs, the HLT Fund is supporting the promotion of HLT on logistics and supply chain and vaccine information system. The adoption of these technologies will contribute to strengthening of health systems by improving the efficiency of health systems and reduction of wastage of vaccines and other medical goods. It will also enhance the monitoring of health services and provide updated information to health decision-makers.
Source: Regional: Regional Support to Address the Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 and Potential Outbreaks of Other Communicable Diseases

Through the support of the HLT Fund, the Chittagong–Cox's Bazar Railway Project will introduce the use of sensor systems, such as thermal imaging cameras or seismic sensors, to detect the presence of elephants near the rail tracks to avoid accidents.
Source: Using Sensor Technology to Avoid Elephant–Train Accidents in Bangladesh

The fund is also supporting the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation National Single Window Project to pilot the use of blockchain technology to improve trade facilitation and supply chain management. The project will focus on the use advanced digital technologies in international trade to improve trustworthiness, efficiency, and timeliness of local and regional supply chains.
Source: How Blockchain Can Improve Supply Chain Transparency in Maldives

The fund aims to help Mongolia implement a new road safety management strategy by installing wire-rope barriers to separate opposing lanes of traffic and reduce fatal road accidents by 95%. This is part of the Regional Road Development Management Project supported by ADB, which aims to preserve and improve important regional road sections linking Mongolia's capital with the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation.
Source: Improving Road Safety in Mongolia

Backed by the HLT Fund, Pakistan is building its first large-scale, grid-connected lithium-ion battery energy storage system to dispatch intermittent renewable energy and improve transmission network stability.
Source: First Grid-Connected Battery Storage System to Improve Clean Energy

Access in Pakistan

Private sector companies and organizations can participate in HLT Fund-financed projects through ADB procurement by providing their expertise as consultants or by providing the necessary equipment.
Source: Establishment of the High-Level Technology Fund

The HLT Fund is also supporting more direct collaboration with the private sector through the Technology Innovation Challenge (TIC). The first TIC was announced in June 2019 targeting three energy sector development challenges, with its call for proposals opened in October the same year. The following firms emerged as winners: HeliosAltas Corp., Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and Asano Taiseikiso Engineering Co., Ltd.
Source: Technology Innovation Challenge

In 2020, the second TIC was launched to look for solutions for challenges in the following areas: healthy oceans, urban development, and transport. The TIC and HLT Fund teams are currently assessing all the submissions. In March 2021, the Disease Resilient and Energy-Efficient Centralized Air-Conditioning Systems TIC was also launched. Supported by the HLT Fund, this challenge aims to look for solutions to introduce disease-resilient and energy-efficient centralized air-conditioning systems in public buildings.
Source: Technology Innovation Challenge

From *https://www.adb.org/ 05/24/2021*

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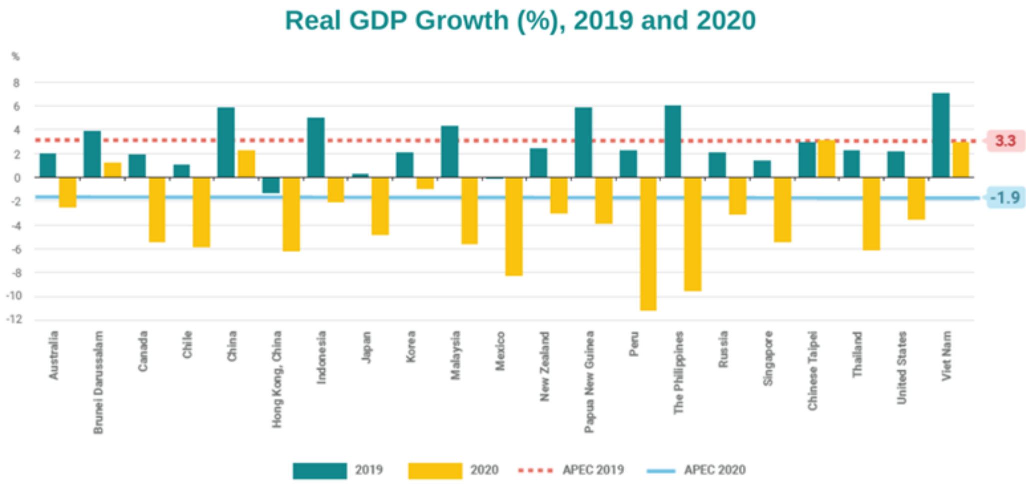
Economic Growth in the APEC Region Better Than Expected; Uncertainty Remains

New economic data from across the APEC region shows a softer economic contraction of 1.9 percent in 2020, with continued fiscal measures leading to a rise in government consumption and improved investment and household consumption. According to the latest **APEC Regional Trends Analysis**, household consumption, APEC's main driver of growth, improved to -3.9 percent in the second half of 2020 on a year-on-year basis, as compared to -7.0 percent in the first half of last year. Investment followed the same trend, recording a smaller decline of -6.1 percent in the second half of 2020 compared to -10.5 percent in the first half. The report notes that governments across the region have learned effective ways to manage the pandemic and people have learned to adapt to new ways of earning a living. This has resulted in a gradual reopening and resumption of economic activities, which boosted consumption.

The region's economy is estimated to grow by 6.3 percent in 2021, with an expected strong increase in domestic and global activity, as pent-up demand is unleashed. The development and production of multiple vaccines also boost optimism for a more durable economic recovery. "The worst fears from last year did not come to pass as we saw stronger economic rebound in the second half of last year, and this will likely continue throughout 2021," said Dr Denis Hew, Director of the APEC Policy Support Unit. "However, the region continues to face significant uncertainties, largely linked to how the pandemic is evolving, while job losses due to the pandemic and expectations of higher inflation this year could suppress consumer spending." The weakness in investments, which is projected to extend to 2021, could also affect growth, according to the report. "The start-stop economic reopening scenario as economies navigate through a resurgence of infections could hold back investment activity," Dr Hew added.



The report warns that the uneven recovery in the region is largely related to differences in vaccine access and availability. The majority of APEC member economies could achieve widespread immunization by mid-2022 onwards, with some anticipated to do so earlier, by the end of 2021. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic is also highlighted in the report. The pandemic affected everyone everywhere, women, young people, the elderly and the poor experienced layers of negative impacts. Most micro, small and medium enterprises lack the capital and technological expertise to make their shift to online, translating into losses and closures and adding to rising livelihood fragility and poverty. "People with insufficient digital skills and equipment or those living in areas where access to the internet is unreliable or expensive are denied the chance to reconnect, unable to continue their work and study," noted Rhea C. Hernando, a macroeconomist with the APEC Policy Support Unit.

Unequal access to vaccines also aggravated the divergence in speed and strength of economic recovery in the region. Lower-income economies that rely largely on the

COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility for their supply of vaccines are in for a longer battle, making the effort to economic recovery very fragile amid higher risk of virus resurgence. “The pandemic has exposed the underlying gaps and inequality that have posed significant challenges to policymakers and societies,” Hernando added. “We need to ensure that no one is left behind in our recovery journey by working together to contain the pandemic, implement structural reforms to boost human capital development and protect the environment,” she concluded.

From https://www.apec.org/ 05/27/2021

TOP↑

East Asia

CHINA: Singles Economy Spurs New Consumption

Walking into a roadside diner and enjoying hotpot alone is no longer awkward for Li Fan, a young man in his 20s. As a habitue to the "one man's restaurant" in Jinan, capital of east China's Shandong Province, he skillfully takes a seat, orders food and makes his sauce. Waiters are "hiding" behind the bamboo shades and will not show up unless summoned. The rising number of single people in China is becoming a new consumption power. Data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Bureau of Statistics show that the number of single adults in China reached 240 million in 2018, with more than 77 million living alone. The number of single adults living alone in China is expected to reach 100 million by the end of 2021. Set meals, internet cafes and karaoke booths for one person are no longer a novel idea, while food companies are rolling out products in small packets to cater to the demands of singletons. Song Xintong is an advocate of the new trend. She lives by herself and often finds rice and flour -- mostly weighing 5 kg per bag -- too large for her to consume before the expiration date. "Now I can simply choose small packages that are often less than 1 kg," she said.

"Though the price may be higher, I still prefer small packages as they're easy to store." Now Song's choices reach far beyond food. She found a small electric cooker, half the size of a regular one, at just over 100 yuan (about 15.4 U.S. dollars), an egg-boiler that cooks two eggs at a time at about 40 yuan and a 12-liter mini oven priced at just 100 yuan. Sales of these products can hit thousands of pieces a month, indicating their undoubted popularity. In first-tier cities like Beijing, apartments specially designed for single people are becoming a hit. Each apartment, with an area of 30-plus square meters, is well-furnished. What makes them more in demand is that the apartments reserve a large public area for renters to chat freely. "The singles economy has not only spurred a unique consumption pattern and culture, but also enriched the consumer market and accelerated its upgrading," said Wang Zhongwu, professor with the School of Philosophy and Social Development under Shandong University.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/04/2021

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Online Retailing Spurs China's Rural Consumption Upgrade: Report

Online retailing is changing the supply structure of goods and services in China's rural areas and accelerating rural consumption upgrade, an industry report said. As rural infrastructure continues to improve and big e-commerce platforms start targeting rural customers, more high-quality products are available for consumers in rural areas, the Academy of China Council for the Promotion of International Trade said in the report. Data showed rural residents are nowadays more inclined to buy home appliances and digital products online, said the report. Rural residents expand the sales channel of agricultural products through online retailing and earn more money, thus leading to robust growth of rural consumption, said the report. In the January-March period, rural online retail sales reached 439.79 billion yuan (about 68 billion U.S. dollars), increasing 35.3 percent from a year earlier, according to data released by the Ministry of Commerce. Online sales of agricultural products amounted to 105.58 billion yuan in the same period, representing a year-on-year growth of 4.9 percent, the ministry said.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/05/2021

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E-commerce Platforms Bring Global Brands Closer to Chinese Customers

As the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift to online shopping and created a surge in cross-border e-commerce imports in China, e-commerce platforms are bringing global brands closer to the world's most promising consumer market. On the first day of the China International Consumer Products Expo, Tmall Global, an online marketplace of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, held four livestreaming sessions to promote products, each garnering more than 1 million viewers. At the four-day expo, which opened on Thursday in south China's island province of Hainan, Tmall Global has showcased products of over 100 foreign brands, ranging from cosmetics, beauty devices, to smart devices for pets and imported wine.

Amid the pandemic, cross-border e-commerce has become an important platform for brands from home and abroad to release their new products. Over 100 brands signed strategic agreements with Tmall Global on Friday, with the aim to sell their new products displayed at the expo via Tmall in the coming year to meet the booming demand of Chinese customers. "The consumer products expo not only serves as an important window to display the progress of the Hainan free trade port construction, but also helps foreign businesses to better understand the Chinese market," said Marcella Li, head of Global Business Development and Operations at Tmall Global. Last year, an average of approximately 400 overseas brands opened stores on Tmall Global each month, according to the company.

To date, more than 29,000 overseas brands from 87 countries and regions have established storefronts on Tmall Global. At the expo, JD Worldwide, the platform for imported products of China's leading retailer JD.com, displayed a number of smart products of domestic and foreign brands. "With the pandemic keeping Chinese customers from shopping overseas, the demand for international brands in China has increased, and cross-border e-commerce platforms have become their preferred choice," said Frank Yu, general manager of marketing and operations for JD Worldwide. Since its launch in 2015, JD Worldwide has attracted nearly 20,000 overseas brands, offering a vast range of product categories including maternal and childcare, nutrition and healthcare, household and kitchenware, food and car accessories.

According to China's Ministry of Commerce, consumer goods imports into China grew 8.2 percent in 2020, reaching 1.57 trillion yuan (about 242 billion U.S. dollars). Such growth was echoed on JD Worldwide during the 2020 Singles' Day shopping festival, with total sales during the period increased by 50 percent year on year. In 2020, the e-commerce platform opened its first brick-and-mortar duty-free store in Sanya City, Hainan, and plans to open an online duty-free shop soon. JD Worldwide will seize the opportunities brought by the Hainan free trade port to promote the upgrading of consumption of Chinese consumers, said Han Rui, vice president of JD.com. With a total population of over 1.4 billion and more than 400 million middle-income residents, China has become the world's most promising consumer market.

Foreign brands are attaching great importance to the Chinese market, especially amid the pandemic, said Viya, one of the most well-known e-commerce livestreaming anchors in China, at the expo. "Some tailored products are designed exclusively for our customers and the products are not only sold in China but also abroad, as design philosophies featuring Chinese characteristics are gaining momentum worldwide," she said. E-commerce platforms are a channel for Chinese consumers to purchase quality products of foreign brands without going abroad, and are also conducive to promoting China's products to the world, she added. Kazunori Tokura, executive vice president of Japanese company Omron Healthcare (China), said Omron expects to accelerate its entry into the Chinese market. Via the expo, the company is willing to cooperate with local firms such as e-commerce platforms to help more customers become familiar with their products and services, he said.

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Hainan FTP to Become World's Largest Duty-free Market: Report

The Hainan free trade port (FTP) will likely become the world's biggest duty-free market in the near term if it continues on its current growth curve, according to a report jointly released by KPMG China and The Moodie Davitt Report. By the end of 2020, offshore duty-free business in Hainan was worth approximately 5 billion U.S. dollars, boosted by an enhanced shopping policy, said the report. It was released on the sideline of the ongoing inaugural China International Consumer Products Expo. In July 2020, the province increased its annual per capita duty-free shopping limit from 30,000 yuan (about 4,638 U.S. dollars) to 100,000 yuan. Noting that the business environment in the Hainan FTP benefits from the country's national strategies, institutional design, and policy supports, the report said its open free trade and offshore duty-free policy have created fertile ground for the development of the retail travel industry. The rapid offshore duty-free sector development in Hainan since 2011 has played a significant role in its growing allure and status as an international tourism consumption center, it said. China released a master plan last June to build the island province into a globally influential and high-level free trade port by the middle of the century. The plan also blueprinted that Hainan should strive to build itself into an international tourism and consumption center.

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China's Bulk Commodity Market Reports Growth Expansion

China's bulk commodity market reported growth expansion in April, industrial data shows. The China Bulk Merchandise Index, a gauge of the domestic bulk commodity market's growth, stood above the boom-or-bust line of 100 percent at 103.3 percent last month, according to the China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing. The index has risen for four consecutive months, indicating a stable and growing domestic bulk commodity market, said the federation. In April, the sub-index for bulk commodity supply rose 1.7 percentage points from March to 102.7 percent, and the sub-index for sales stood at 105.5 percent, up 1.9 percentage points from a month earlier. The sub-index for bulk commodity inventory decreased to 99.1 percent, showing eased inventory pressure.

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China's Consumption Market a Boon for World Economic Growth:

Experts

The release of China's consumption market potential and its wider opening-up will help boost the development of the world economy, experts said at the ongoing China International Consumer Products Expo. China is expected to become the world's largest goods consumption market during the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025), and the world's biggest services trader by 2035, said Chi Fulin, head of the Hainan-based China Institute for Reform and Development, at an expo forum. China's rate of contribution to global economic growth is likely to be maintained within a range of 25 percent to 30 percent over the next five to 10 years, said Chi. Despite the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend of consumption upgrading in China remains unchanged, according to Chi, who estimates China's consumption sector will recover to the level seen before 2020 by the end of this year.

Official data shows that in the first quarter of the year, China's retail sales of consumer goods, a major indicator of the country's consumption strength, increased 33.9 percent year on year to 10.5 trillion yuan (about 1.6 trillion U.S. dollars). Echoing Chi's sentiment, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences researcher Zhang Ming said that for China, the most important growth engines in the next five to 10 years will be the free flow of production factors and regional integration. Running from May 7 to May 10, the expo in Haikou, the capital of the southern island province of Hainan, is the first national expo focusing on consumer products held by China.

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China's E-commerce Logistics Activities Expand in April

China's e-commerce logistics sector reported moderate growth in April, according to an industry survey jointly conducted by the China Federation of Logistics and Purchasing and e-commerce giant JD.com. The index tracking e-commerce logistics activities rose to 111 points last month, up from 109.4 points in March, the survey showed. The total demand for e-commerce logistics fell in the period, with the sub-index tracking the total business volume coming in at 127.8 points, down 0.3 points from the previous month. Demand for e-commerce in rural areas maintained its growth momentum, with the sub-index tracking e-commerce logistics in these regions standing at 129.1 points, up 3.6 points from March. The survey predicted that residents' consumption will continue to increase, and that the e-commerce index will maintain its stable and positive trend in May, influenced by the Labor Day holiday.

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China to Enhance Freight-train Service to Boost Cross-border E-commerce

The China-Europe cargo service will be improved to spur the development of cross-border e-commerce, according to a three-year action plan released at the Fifth Silk Road International Exposition that opened on Tuesday. China will set up a green service mechanism for cross-border e-commerce firms via the China Railway Express (Chang'an), with more new routes developed to facilitate international cargo flows, the plan states. Efforts will be made to support countries intending to construct pavilions for e-commerce products in Xi'an, capital of northwest China's Shaanxi Province, while overseas warehouses will be established in a bid to help reduce costs for enterprises, according to the plan. China will leverage domestic advantages in the cross-border e-commerce sector, providing vendors abroad with outsourcing business, including agency operation, intelligent logistics and distribution, and post-sales service. Talent training bases will be built in Xi'an and abroad to cultivate more talent in the field for countries along the Belt and Road, the plan added.

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China's Guizhou Pools Efforts to Boost Digital Development

Southwest China's Guizhou Province has strived to build the first national big data integrated pilot zone and will continue to pool efforts to boost the development of digital economy, especially the big data industry. Major efforts have been made by the province to boost high-quality development led by big data, and the growth rate of the province's digital economy has ranked first across the country for six consecutive years, said Li Bingjun, governor of Guizhou Province, at a press conference in Beijing on Thursday. With rapid growth of the province's digital economy, data infrastructure facilities have been built, with the Gui'an New Area of the provincial capital Guiyang becoming one of the regions with the largest number of super-large data centers in the world, Li said. The province has also strived to promote the in-depth integration of big data with the real economy, poverty alleviation, rural vitalization and governance, Li noted, adding that the country's first provincial government data platform has been established, allowing the online handling of all government services at the provincial, municipal and county levels. Guizhou has successfully organized six international big data expos, expanding global cooperation in the field, Li said, adding that the 7th international big data expo will be held at Guiyang from May 26 to 28.

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China to Support Integrated Development of Publishing Industry

China will support its publishing industry in pursuit of digitalization and promote in-depth integration of traditional and emerging publishing industries. A campaign to implement the integrated development of the publishing industry will be launched this year, selecting a batch of excellent digital publishing projects and demonstration publishing organizations, according to a circular released by the National Press and Publication Administration. Eligible digital publishing projects, which fall into five categories including themed publishing, public publishing, and education publishing, will receive financial support, said the circular.

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Shanghai Remains Attractive to Foreign Investment

As China's economy continues to recover rapidly, the country's financial hub Shanghai remains attractive to foreign investment. The total foreign direct investment (FDI) into Shanghai rose 20.3 percent year on year to 7.77 billion U.S. dollars in the first four months of 2021, the municipal government said on Monday. During the period, 20 regional headquarters of foreign-funded multinational companies were established, raising the total to 791 in Shanghai. Seven foreign-funded research and development (R&D) centers were established in the same period, raising Shanghai's total to 488. Shanghai will continue to unswervingly promote all-round opening up and improve its business environment to support foreign enterprises in achieving greater and better development in Shanghai, Zong Ming, vice mayor of Shanghai, told a ceremony on Monday. The Shanghai municipal government held the ceremony to issue certificates to regional headquarters and R&D centers of multinational companies.

The participating companies were mainly in advanced industries such as biomedicine, smart manufacturing and high-end services. At the ceremony, leading lubricant manufacturer Fuchs, headquartered in Germany, received certification for its R&D center in Shanghai. The company currently has three R&D centers globally. Its center in Shanghai focuses on developing clean energy and improving energy efficiency. "The automobile market is increasing in China and the demand is changing from the traditional combustion engine to the electric engine," said Kris Van Gasse, CTO of Fuchs Lubricants (China) Ltd. To cater to market demand, Fuchs has developed product lines in China such as BluEV for new-energy automobiles, and established cooperation with Chinese carmakers such as Geely and Chery.

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China to Relieve Minors of Excessive Study Burden

An official with the Legislative Affairs Commission of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, said on Wednesday that he disagrees with those parents who force their children to take extra after-school training courses. Guo Linmao said that, during the solicitation of public opinion on the draft revision to the Law on the Protection of Minors, nearly 20,000 minors raised suggestions about alleviating their educational workload. The revision stipulates that the guardians of minors are obliged to ensure they have time for rest, entertainment and physical exercise, and that schools should work with parents and other guardians to keep study time within a reasonable range. China's top legislature adopted the revised law in October 2020, and it will go into effect on June 1.

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China's Industrial Profits Maintain Rapid Growth in First Four Months

Profits of China's major industrial companies saw accelerated growth in the first four months of this year as the country's economic recovery is further consolidated, official data showed on Thursday. Industrial firms with an annual business revenue of at least 20 million yuan (about 3.12 million U.S. dollars) saw their combined profits surge 106 percent year on year in the January-April period to over 2.59 trillion yuan, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed. When compared with the first four months of 2019, the figure represented a rise of 49.6 percent. The average growth rate over the past two years stood at 22.3 percent, NBS data showed. The accelerated growth in industrial profits came as market demand continued to improve and major industrial firms had seen improved operations since the beginning of this year, said senior NBS statistician Zhu Hong. In April alone, the profits of major industrial firms increased 57 percent year on year to 768.63 billion yuan. All 41 industrial sectors saw increasing profits during the January-April period, with the profits of 10 sectors more than doubling, said Zhu. Compared with the first four months of 2019, a total of 30 industrial sectors logged profit increases, according to Zhu.

During the January-April period, profits of the equipment and high-tech manufacturing sectors respectively jumped 90.8 percent and 88.5 percent year on year, while those of the auto manufacturing industry surged 158 percent. The consumer goods manufacturing sector also saw improved profits, which rose 45.3 percent from the same period of last year, said Zhu. Due to improving market demand and the rising prices of bulk commodities, the mining and raw materials manufacturing sectors saw faster profit growth, respectively rising 103 percent and 366 percent year on year. The operations of industrial firms were further optimized, with rising profitability, declining costs and faster inventory turnovers, according to Zhu. Though major industrial firms have sustained their growth momentum, Zhu noted that the recovery of the industrial economy needs to be further consolidated, taking into consideration the uncertainties of the external environment and the pressures on companies caused by rising commodity prices. Efforts should be made to adopt targeted macro policies, increase the supply of bulk commodities and stabilize their prices to propel the sound development of the industrial sector, said Zhu.

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China SOEs See More Equity Investment from Social Capital in 2020

China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) saw more social capital investments in 2020 as the country steps up mixed-ownership reform to improve SOE efficiency. The country's SOEs received a total of 197.1 billion yuan (about 31 billion U.S. dollars) of social capital through equity transfers in 2020, an increase of 13.4 percent from 2019, according to data by the Chinese State-owned Property Exchanges Association. The country has been optimizing the capital structure of SOEs via mixed-ownership reform, introducing private investors as stakeholders of the firms to enhance their operational efficiency. A total of 5,523 equity transfer projects for SOE mixed-ownership reform were carried out from 2016 to 2020, with the transaction value totaling 1.05 trillion yuan, data by the association showed.

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JAPAN: OECD Raises 2021 Global Growth Outlook While Cutting Japan Forecast

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on Monday upgraded its forecast for global economic growth this year but cut its projection for Japan, citing a resurgence of coronavirus infections and its slow vaccine rollout. The world's gross domestic product is projected to grow 5.8 percent in 2021, up from 5.6 percent previously forecast in March, with progress in vaccinations and governments' fiscal spending expected to underpin the economic recovery, the Paris-based club of 38 mostly wealthy nations said in its latest economic outlook. "In the advanced economies, the progressive rollout of an effective vaccine has begun to allow more contact-intensive activities -- held back by measures to contain infections -- to reopen gradually," the outlook report said.

Additional fiscal stimulus this year is also helping to boost demand in these economies, it said, but warned growth in many emerging economies is likely to be held down for some time due to slow vaccination rollouts, infection outbreaks and steps to contain them. Meanwhile, the projection for Japan's growth was downgraded to 2.6 percent from the previous estimate of 2.7 percent, as the reintroduction of containment measures early this year has dented near-term prospects, the OECD said. Japan's latest emergency steps introduced in April, which include ordering restaurants to shorten their opening hours and stop serving alcohol beverages, "appear to have been insufficient to stop the spread of new variants," it said. It also pointed to slow progress in Japan's vaccination campaign compared with other OECD nations. "Success in reducing transmission and progress in vaccination may allow a stronger recovery, whereas continued infections would hold back any recovery and may disrupt the Olympic and Paralympic games (in Tokyo this summer), causing further damage to the economy," it warned.

Facing a fourth wave of virus infections, the Japanese capital has been under the government's third state of emergency since late April. The measure, along with virus emergencies in other populous prefectures such as Osaka in western Japan, is now scheduled to end on June 20. A University of Oxford tally as of Saturday showed that Japan, which began inoculating in mid-February, has administered at least one shot to 6.4 percent of its population, lower than the world average of 10.6 percent. The organization raised its estimates for other major advanced economies including the eurozone economy, Britain and Canada. The United States is forecast to grow 6.9 percent, revised upward from a previously projected 6.5 percent expansion, supported by "policy stimulus and rapid progress with vaccinations."

Growth in China is predicted at 8.5 percent, up from 7.8 percent in the previous outlook, as the OECD said its output has "already caught up" with the path expected before the pandemic. Growth in India is estimated at 9.9 percent, down sharply from 12.6 percent, due to the rapid virus resurgence there this year. The OECD said that while prospects for the global economy have become brighter, the progress is "to a different extent across economies." Insufficient vaccines reaching emerging economies poses "a fundamental threat" to them, it noted. "More broadly, as long as the vast majority of the global population is not vaccinated, all of us remain vulnerable to the emergence of new variants. Confidence could be seriously eroded by further lockdowns, and a stop-and-go of economic activities," the report said. For 2022, the OECD predicts a 4.4 percent expansion in the global economy, revising upward from the previous forecast of 4.0 percent advance.

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SOUTH KOREA: AI Inevitable Force to Shape Education Riiid

Education has always been slow to adopt new technologies. But with the COVID-19 pandemic and schools forced to move online over infection risks, the time has finally come for it to embrace the artificial intelligence. “COVID-19 is making AI inevitable,” said David Yi, an executive from Riiid, a Seoul-based AI education startup said in an interview with The Korea Herald. “In the US, students are all off campus, students are disengaged and are falling behind. How do we help this lost generation?” According to the executive, who has been in the education field for 19 years, as a lawyer, law school faculty member and entrepreneur, the answer may lie in AI, which enables personalized study in remote learning environments. “The problem with online learning (now) is that students are on the computers, but they are not learning,” he pointed out.

Yi joined Riiid last year to head Riiid Labs, which was established in Silicon Valley in 2020 to help expand the firm’s business across the United States, South America, the Middle East and beyond. Started in Korea in 2014, Riiid gained its fame with the mobile TOEIC test prep application Santa launched in 2017. It is an AI tutor solution based on deep-learning algorithms designed to help English learners raise their test scores. It has been used by more than 2.5 million students in Korea and Japan. “Most AI companies out there would want to show off their fancy dashboards,” Yi said. But Riiid’s proprietary AI technology, based on deep learning algorithms, analyzes user data and content, predicts students’ scores and behaviors, and recommends personalized study plans in real-time to help users optimize their learning potential.

“Our flagship comes out to four things: score prediction after just a short period of time; knowledge tracing, knowing what answers students are going to pick; a recommendation system that suggests content; and dropout prediction, or knowing when students will sign out and suggesting easier and happier content,” he explained. Based on over a year‘s worth of user data, Riiid reported that the average score increased by 165 points out of a possible 990 points after just 20 hours of study. Riiid is currently in talks with over 200 companies to apply its AI to a range of educational content, aimed at enabling personalized instruction for widely-used standardized tests. It has partnered with US Kaplan and launched an app for GMAT. The firm was named one of the top 100 AI companies across the world by CB Insights this year, the only Korean AI company to make the global list.

As stakeholders in education struggled to find ways to address challenges posed by the pandemic, AI as a whole can be a driving vehicle for a new educational paradigm, the Riiid Labs CEO continued. “The biggest question is to use smartphones effectively in learning, like shopping and entertainment companies do,” he said. “AI can do this, and we call this AI tutor -- we are not replacing teachers.” “Before AI, smartphones were not useful for education, but with AI, there’s so much more data to play with and push, making students want to study more," Yi said. Yi predicted that the company's AI tutor solution would be more effective and useful if it goes to voice, seeing how people interact with AI speakers Google Home and Amazon Alexa. "AI will be much more vocal with us," he said. "AI will not be restricted to phones, and eventually all the technologies we have here we can transfer them to other places, and people will be able to interact that way," he said.

From http://www.koreaherald.com/ 05/05/2021

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Eco-Friendly Cars Take Up 71 Pct of New Public Vehicles in 2020 Data

South Korea said Tuesday eco-friendly cars, including electric models, accounted for 71 percent of the total vehicles purchased by public organizations last year, as the country continued its efforts to go carbon neutral by 2050. The country's 609 public organizations purchased 7,736 automobiles in 2020, of which 5,494 were eco-friendly models, according to the government data. Eco-friendly models include electric, hydrogen fuel cell and hybrid cars. The survey was based on public organizations that own six or more cars and that made new purchases in 2020.In a separate survey on a total of 1,538 public organizations, eco-friendly cars accounted for 16 percent of their fleet of 120,000 cars in 2020. Since 2016, South Korea has been requiring state organizations to have green models account for a designated proportion of their newly purchased automobiles. The proportion, which came to 80 percent in 2021, will gradually increase to 100 percent by 2023. South Korea announced last year it will effectively reduce its emissions of carbon to zero by 2050 by cutting its use of fossil fuels.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 05/11/2021

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S. Korea Reviews Cybersecurity Readiness amid U.S. Pipeline Disruptions

South Korea's industry ministry said Tuesday it is examining its cybersecurity readiness of its energy-related infrastructure, as the United States grapples with a major ransomware attack that has disrupted its pipeline system. Industry Minister Moon Sung-wook held a virtual meeting with officials from state-run energy firms to thoroughly prepare for potential cyberattacks, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. Last week, U.S.-based Colonial Pipeline, a major pipeline system operator, suffered a cyberattack, which forced the company to suspend its operation, dealing a harsh blow to the supply of oil in the world's No. 1 economy. "The incident indicates that South Korea should also check the readiness of its cybersecurity for its energy-related infrastructure," Moon said. The ministry added it will closely monitor related situations in the U.S. and its potential impact on the global energy market.

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Telcos Spend Big on Data Centers on Spiking Digital Services

South Korean telecom operators are joining other internet service providers to expand their footholds in data centers as the pandemic drives demand for online services and to tackle a surge in data traffic amid the increased penetration of the 5G network across the country. Telecom giant KT Corp. launched a new internet data center in Seoul's southwestern ward of Guro, the company's 14th internet data center, on Wednesday. Data centers are facilities made up of internet servers and IT equipment that companies rent to store data or use to power their online services instead of operating their own infrastructure. The facilities, popular among small companies and foreign IT firms, have grown in demand as online activities, such as video streaming, social networking services and shopping, have increased in the past year amid the pandemic.

The size of South Korea's server market is estimated to reach 1.8 trillion won (US$1.59 billion) this year, up 2.4 percent from the previous year, and hit 2.6 trillion won by 2025, according to a report from market researcher International Data Corp. While KT has so far operated its own data centers, the latest establishment incorporates the telecom operator's operating system and network at a borrowed facility. "There was a limit to respond to the explosive data center demand, leading to the establishment of the data center in Guro," a KT official said. In its first-quarter earnings, the company said sales from its artificial intelligence and digital transformation business, which includes its internet data center service, rose 7.5 percent on-year to 134.5 billion won (US$119 million).

"With the opening of the center in Yongsan, we've begun to see a good performance in the first quarter," KT Chief Financial Officer Young-jin Kim said in a conference call Tuesday. KT opened its internet data center in Yongsan, central Seoul, in November last year. Smaller rival LG Uplus Corp. has also boosted its profile in the internet data center business, investing 318.1 billion won to build a new internet data center by the end of 2023. The company has seen its internet data center business grow recently, with the service's first-quarter sales rising 8.4 percent on-year to 56.2 billion won. The latest investment brings the number of LG Uplus' major internet data center facilities to seven. For all of last year, sales from the telecom operator's internet data center business stood at 228 billion won, up 16.1 percent from the previous year.

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2G Services in S. Korea to Be Terminated by June

South Korea's ICT ministry on Tuesday said it has approved LG Uplus Corp.'s plan to phase out its 2G services by the end of June, which will mark the complete termination of the country's old telecommunications network. LG Uplus, the country's third-largest mobile carrier, will begin closing its 2G network here on June 11 following the ministry's approval. SK Telecom Co., South Korea's largest wireless provider, ended its 2G services in July last year, while rival KT Corp. shut down 2G operations back in 2012. LG Uplus' exit will mark the end of 2G services in South Korea that first started in 1997. LG Uplus said it will help its existing 2G users switch to LTE or 5G services by offering subsidies for mobile devices and their subscription plans. As of May, the company had 140,000 2G users. Its 2G termination comes as local telecom firms try to expand their 5G networks. As of the end of March, 5G subscriptions stood at 14.48 million, accounting for 20 percent of the total 71.1 million mobile subscriptions in the country, according to data from the ministry.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 05/25/2021

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S. Korea Ranks 4th in Number of AI Patents, but Impact Falls Short Report

South Korea ranks fourth in terms of the number of patents registered in the artificial intelligence sector, but an index showing the impact of the patents shows that the quality of patents from South Korea fell relatively short, according to a report, Tuesday. The report from Clarivate Analytics and KAIST Center for Innovation Strategy and Policy says that the number of patents that South Korea registered in the AI field has reached 6,317 between 2010 and 2019, the fourth highest among the 10 countries included in the report. The report analyzed around 147,000 patents registered by 10 countries, including China, the US, Japan, Korea, Germany, Taiwan, the UK, Canada, France and India. China was ranked first with 81,236 registered patents, accounting for around 60 percent of all patents registered by the 10 countries during the period. The US followed China with 24,708 patents, and Japan followed with 6,754 patents.

The report, however, noted that the quality of South Korean patents in the AI sector were relatively poor, when compared with those held by the US and Canada. According to the report’s combined patent impact index -- an analytic measure that the report used to assess how many useful patents each country holds -- South Korea holds around only 8 percent of the top 10‘s most useful patents. The CPI index for South Korea is lower than the average of the 10 countries included in the report, 14 percent. In terms of CPI, the US was ranked first with 43 percent, followed by Canada with 26 percent. Kim Won-joon, head of the KAIST Center for Innovation

Strategy and Policy, said that state-led initiatives and investments in the AI sector could help countries achieve quantitative growths but impacts of patents may fall relatively short when compared to countries like the US, where the industries have led AI research and actual applications of AI solutions.

From http://www.koreaherald.com 05/25/2021

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Is ‘Real 5G’ Elusive Goal for Korea

Is 5G, the next-generation of wireless technology, worth the hype? This is a question frequently thrown out by multiple groups of 5G users here since the fifth generation mobile networks went into commercial service at 11:00 p.m. on April 3, 2019 in South Korea, in a loudly-trumpeted world first. Over the past two years, the number of 5G users in Korea has steadily grown to account for about 20 percent, or 14.48 million, of total mobile subscriptions in the country as of end March, government data shows. Along with that, consumer complaints over slower-than-expected 5G services have also grown, with some even taking legal action against domestic telecom companies. Korea has a relatively high percentage of 5G subscribers among 26 countries that have launched 5G services, according to a recent report by Ericsson-LG, a supplier of 5G network equipment. However, their satisfaction rate stood at 27 percent, comparatively lower than other countries.

“This lower level of satisfaction could be attributed to exaggerated claims of 5G performance made during the promotion period, unsatisfactory 5G indoor coverage, a lack of more diverse and affordable price plans limiting consumer choices, and an already superior 4G and home Wi-Fi experience as a benchmark,” the report said. The most recent measurement on the quality of Korean 5G telecommunications was 429 megabits per second in average download speed as of March this year, according to a survey by market researcher Speed Check. That compares with 690.47 Mbps -- the average download speed that the Ministry of Science and ICT said the three Korea mobile carriers SK Telecom, KT and LG U+ were offering to their consumers in December. The ministry oversees government policies on 5G investment and service quality.

According to ministry’s data, SKT offered the fastest rate of 795.57 Mbps, which was raised by 6.60 Mbps from the end of June last year. The record speed for KT and LG U+ was 667.48 Mbps and 608.49 Mbps each. Whichever is correct, it falls short of being 20 times faster than the previous 4G Long Term Evolution network, as initially promoted by the telcos. According to the ICT Ministry’s assessment in 2019, the average download speed on the 4G network was 158 Mbps. The Ericsson report, however, said this doesn’t mean that the South Korean 5G deployment is subpar. “To understand the extremely high expectations and benchmarks of South Korean consumers we need to look back at satisfaction levels measured by Ericsson

Consumer Lab in 2012-13, when 4G was launched in South Korea," the report said. It went on, saying "The share of consumers satisfied with 4G back then is similar to the level we see now with 5G, suggesting that when compared to consumers in other markets, South Korean consumers expect much more from their service providers -- superior performance, no gaps in coverage and new innovative services, especially when they are asked to pay a premium for a 5G subscription plan."

Neither the three telcos nor the Korean government came up with the "20 times faster" descriptor for 5G. It actually was the official definition from the International Telecommunication Union. The global body described 5G as having the fastest download speed of 20 gigabits per second and the fastest upload speed of 10 Gbps. That means high-definition movies can be downloaded with seconds. However, experts point out that the dream speed can come true only in an ideal environment of harmonized high-frequency spectrums and wide-enough coverage. "While the Korean government was obsessed with snatching up the world's first title for 5G, the mobile carriers were frantic about promoting 5G services using the theoretical maximum speed set by the ITU at the time," said an industry watcher. "(To really offer that speed,) the telcos would need 10 times more frequency bands to reach the promised speed and additional transmission technologies that now."

The Korean telcos were allocated with 3.5-Gigahertz and 28-GHz frequency bands in 2018 for development of a nationwide 5G network infrastructure. SKT and KT secured 100 megahertz blocks of the 3.5 GHz band, while LG U+ got 80 MHz of the same band. The three firms were equally allotted with 800 MHz of the 28 GHz band. Theoretically, 5G telecom services are deemed possible to be developed using the frequency bands of mid-band spectrums from 1 to 6 GHz, and the millimeter wave spectrums of 26, 28 and 40 GHz. The wider the bandwidth of a frequency band is, the higher the data transmission speed possible. However, the three Korean telcos had put the cost-to-quality ratio first in their initial investment and development in 5G. "To deliver 5G outdoor services, telecom companies need to install five times more base stations for the 28 GHz band than the 3.5 GHz," explained an official at a domestic carrier. "To bring 5G services to the market in a given period time with the government's goal of being the first 5G country, commercializing the 3.5 GHz band first was reasonable in terms of costs and service coverage."

The 3.5 GHz band is also deemed as playing a key role in making 5G go mainstream globally, considering its wider coverage than the 28 GHz band, according to GSMA, a global organization representing the interests of the telecom industry. "The speed, reach and quality of 5G services will depend on the support of governments and regulators for timely access to the right amount and type of spectrum, and under the right conditions," said GSMA. "This spectrum access will be a critical component in bringing 5G technologies to market." However, the organization says, "For 5G to reach its full potential, mobile operators are dependent on getting more widely harmonized spectrum across three frequency ranges sub-1 GHz, 1-6 GHz, and above 6 GHz." New ICT Minister Lim Hye-sook, during her parliamentary confirmation hearing earlier this month, said business models for 28 GHz 5G services remain uncertain.

Korea's telecom technologies and the levels of supporting equipment aren't mature enough, she said on May 10. The remarks were taken as then minister-nominee's public acknowledgement that the government would give up on the establishment of a nationwide 5G network on the 28 GHz band. The three mobile operators had the obligation of building at least 15,000 5G base stations for the 28 GHz band in return for receiving the frequency band and executing a total of 20 trillion won in investments. But the government's tone started to change last year, as technological limits are being proved overseas. For example, US mobile carrier Verizon is in the process of shifting from 28 GHz services to mid-band spectrums. Rather than pushing for a nationwide 28 GHz 5G network, the government and industry have agreed on developing and offering 28 GHZ services for businesses only. However, considering that the limits of 28 GHz technologies are widely known, enterprises are not willing to introduce 5G services for facility operations.

Each telecom company have showcased limited success in uses of 28 GHz 5G in the fields of smart manufacturing, construction, logistics, media, mobility and medicine. "The three carriers plan to establish joint base stations for large-scale smart factories in optimal areas in industrial complexes and provide special 5G networks using 28 GHz for companies that need 5G-specific manufacturing processes or content development," said an official from a local carrier. KT's demonstration of 28 GHz 5G services at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in 2018 is a good example of tapping into 28 GHz. The company had set 28 GHz base stations for the region and operated special network control systems. KT livestreamed the bobsleigh races through Sync View and speed skating races through the 360-degree Time Slice. Currently as many as 20 companies including Samsung Electronics and Naver have shown interests in building the special 5G networks, according to the telecom industry.

As for individual consumers, the telcos are continuing to discover areas that would effectively provide 28 GHz 5G services especially for virtual reality and augmented reality content. The companies have chosen the southern part of Seoul as a special zone for mixed reality content services and are preparing to launch 28 GHz 5G. To soothe public anger over the current 5G network quality and complaints about expensive bills, the telecom industry is making continuous efforts to improve the quality of 3.5 GHz 5G. The three telcos are working to expand 5G coverage nationwide by adding more base stations. Compared to April of 2019 when 5G was first launched, KT runs five times more 5G base stations, which stands at a total of 117,618 stations across the country as of May 25. This year, KT aims to further expand its terrestrial 5G coverage by bringing 5G inside buildings. The mobile carriers also adopt new technologies to support the current 3.5 GHz and low-latency

5G services.

SKT, which has built 134,000 5G base stations as of May 25, is actively applying mobile edge computing, known as MEC, to AR/VR services, cloud gaming, autonomous driving control system and smart factory services. MEC refers to a network technology that processes data nearby users, at close base stations and switching centers, without transmitting data all the way to the backbone network or data centers. It has the advantage of reducing traffic load of the backbone network and drastically reducing the delay time of a specific service. LG U+ is also utilizing the MEC technology to build a smart port system in Busan. By applying MEC to the current 3.5GHz 5G network, LG has developed a remote control system for three to four cranes at once from an office room. The carriers are also striving to maintain the network quality by introducing automatic management systems. SKT has introduced an artificial intelligence-based network management system dubbed ”Tango,” which is designed to predict patterns of data traffic growth and prevent slowdowns in public places like subway stations and bullet trains.

From http://www.koreaherald.com 05/30/2021

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OECD Upgrades South Korea’s GDP Growth Forecast to 3.8 Percent

The South Korean economy is forecast to grow 3.8 percent this year on the back of strong export growth and expansionary macroeconomic policy, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development said Monday, ramping up its previous projection of 3.3 percent. “Strong overseas demand for IT products, which account for about a fifth of total exports and automobiles is lifting exports. A gradual easing of distancing measures and government relief packages have helped vulnerable households and firms,“ the OECD said in a report on the global economic outlook. Although distancing measures have mostly contained the COVID-19 spread, it still weighs on large parts of the service sector, it said. The government has banned gatherings of five or more people across the country under a Level 2 social distancing. The measure, the third highest in a five-tier system, is in place till June 13 in the capital Seoul and its surrounding areas, with Level 1.5 in force in other areas.“When those restrictions can be lifted, the economy will gather momentum,” the OECD said.

The OECD said policy support should continue to target vulnerable households and businesses until the economy is on a “firmer recovery path,” and vaccination should be accelerated. A total of 5.4 million people or 10.5 percent of the total population have received their first shots of COVID-19 vaccines as of Monday. Last week, the Bank of Korea revised up its growth outlook for the country this year by 1 percentage point to 4.0 percent as exports rose more than expected. Prospects for stronger economic growth appear to be attributable to a supplementary budget worth nearly 15 trillion won ($13.53 billion) approved by the National Assembly in March. If BOK's 4.0 percent growth forecast is realized, it would mark the country's fastest economic growth since 2010. Its growth rate 11 years ago reached 6.8 percent after recovering from the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. After experiencing a 1 percent contraction last year, Asia's fourth-largest economy grew by 1.6 percent in the first quarter from the previous quarter, bouncing back to pre-pandemic levels, driven by the heavy industry sectors such as chip and electronic manufacturing, mostly for exports.

Reflecting growth in outbound shipments and recovery of the real economy, local and global financial institutions have been upgrading their forecasts for Korea's GDP growth. The International Monetary Fund last month raised its outlook to 3.6 percent from 3.1 percent. JP Morgan, the Korea Institute of Finance and LG Economic Research Institute expected the annual economic growth would exceed the 4.0 percent level. Despite the sanguine outlook, President Moon Jae-in said last Thursday that it is necessary to maintain an expansionary fiscal policy until at least next year for the economy to achieve a clear rebound and resolve inequality stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. "There are industries and companies that are growing significantly due to the recovery of the manufacturing industry and the second startup boom, while the recovery is slow and difficulties are accumulating in domestic consumption related industries including in-person services," he said. The central bank on Thursday kept its benchmark interest rate frozen at 0.5 percent at the Monetary Policy Committee meeting as it had for the past 11 consecutive months.

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South-East Asia

MALAYSIA: Population Rises to 32.75 Million in Q1

Malaysia's population was estimated at 32.75 million in the first quarter of 2021, an increase of 0.4 percent from the first quarter of 2020, official data showed Thursday. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) said in a statement that the total population comprised 29.91 million (91.3 percent) citizens and 2.84 million (8.7 percent) non-citizens in the Southeast Asian country. Population of the group aged 65 years and over increased to 2.37 million from 2.26 million a year earlier. "This trend is in line with other developed countries that are heading towards an ageing population," said DOSM. According to DOSM, males' population in the first quarter stood at 16.83 million, outnumbering females totaling 15.92 million. Population of the group aged 0-14 in the first quarter decreased to 7.56 million from 7.61 million in the first quarter of 2020. Meanwhile, population of the group aged 15-64 increased to 22.82 million from 22.74 million a year earlier. The number of live births fell 10.8

percent year-on-year to 102,969 in the first quarter. A total of 43,545 deaths were recorded in the first quarter, an increase of 0.7 percent from a year earlier, showed the latest official data.

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PHILIPPINES: Lowering Growth Forecast for 2021

The Philippine government on Tuesday lowered its gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast for 2021 amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The inter-agency Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC) slightly adjusted the GDP growth projection to 6.0-7.0 percent from 6.5-7.5 percent given the emergence of new COVID-19 variants and the reimposition of lockdown measures in Metro Manila and its adjacent provinces during the second quarter of this year. The GDP is projected to return to pre-COVID-19 level by growing at 7.0-9.0 percent in 2022 and will continue to grow by 6.0-7.0 percent in 2023 and 2024, the DBCC said. "Our growth prospects and economic recovery will be underpinned by interventions to arrest the spread of the virus and help the poor cope with the impact of the quarantines," the committee said in a joint statement. The committee maintained the average inflation target for 2021 to 2024 at 2.0-4.0 percent. The Philippine economy shrank by 9.6 percent in 2020 and by 4.2 percent in the first quarter of 2021 as the Southeast Asian country grappled with coronavirus lockdown restrictions imposed over the pandemic. The Philippines reported as of Tuesday 1,154,388 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 19,372 deaths.

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SINGAPORE: Hospital Staff Disciplined for Incident That Led to Unnecessary Patient Treatment

Singapore's Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) has taken disciplinary action against five of its staff members for an incident at its laboratory that resulted in some breast cancer patients receiving unnecessary treatment. In its statement on Monday, KTPH said the incident was caused by human error during the establishment of the staining procedure for human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2) tests. This resulted in the over-staining of lab slides, which affected the interpretation of the results and led to a higher positive rate of HER2 than usual. Some of the patients who were wrongly diagnosed with HER2-positive breast cancer received over-treatment as a result. The disciplinary action meted out ranged from stern warnings to financial penalties and cessation of employment. Chairman of the KTPH Medical Board Pek Wee Yang said they have reached out to all affected patients to offer their support, and they will look into the appropriate compensation for each individual patient. "We are determined to set things right to regain the trust and confidence of our patients. We will expeditiously rectify all gaps in our processes in the laboratory," he added.

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Singapore Maintains GDP Growth Forecast for 2021 at 4 to 6 Pct amid Significant Uncertainties

Singapore's Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) announced on Tuesday that it maintained the GDP growth forecast for 2021 at 4 to 6 percent, in view of the heightened uncertainties in the economic environment, characterized by both upside and downside risks, especially arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The ministry said in the Economic Survey of Singapore First Quarter 2021 that it would review the forecast again in the next quarter, when there is more data, and greater clarity over the global and domestic economic situations. MTI said that countries were experiencing recurring waves of infections, with the emergence of more transmissible strains of the virus, the easing of safe management restrictions, and delays in vaccinating populations. These resurgences, as well as the countries' public health responses to them, will inevitably affect their economic growth. "Given the experience of the last 15 months, there is hope that even if outbreaks flare up again, countries will be able to avoid repeated blanket lockdowns and their high economic cost, but this is far from certain," it said. "As these countries include some of our major economic partners in our region, the uncertainty in their outlook also affects Singapore."

Domestically, while COVID-19 is generally well under control, and Singapore is making good progress in vaccinating the entire population, there remain significant risks and uncertainties in its own COVID-19 situation. These non-economic risks can have a major impact on Singapore's GDP growth this year, the ministry added. The ministry also announced that the Singapore economy expanded by 1.3 percent year on year in the first quarter of 2021, compared to the advance estimate of 0.2 percent growth that was released in April. On a quarter-on-quarter seasonally-adjusted basis, the economy expanded by 3.1 percent, compared to the advance estimate of 2 percent growth. In the previous quarter, the Singapore economy contracted by 2.4 percent year on year and expanded by 3.8 percent quarter on quarter.

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VIETNAM: Human Resources Decisive to National Development

Human resources have decisive significance in national construction and development, and education plays a very important role in human resources development, Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính said at a working session with the Ministry of Education and Training on Thursday. The PM acknowledged the substantial results the education sector has made in implementing Resolution 29 of the Party Central Committee on comprehensive and essential reform of education and training, one of which was the improved quality of general and tertiary education as well as vocational training. PM Chính also highlighted the major problems of the sector, particularly limitations in mechanisms and policies, negative phenomena within the sector and shortcomings in management decentralisation. He required the ministry to focus on key tasks of State management in education and training, which are to build strategies and plans, institutions and mechanisms, and standards and criteria. The ministry should also develop tools to mobilise resources for education development. The Government leader also urged the sector to pay more attention to communication work to provide the public with a better understanding of its problems and get the public involved in addressing them. He reminded the sector to work with relevant agencies to implement COVID-19 pandemic prevention measures to ensure health and safety for the more than 1.2 million teachers and nearly 24 million students nationwide. He also said the sector should study and design measures to fulfil the tasks of the 2020-2021 academic year, including the national senior high school graduation exams. Minister of Education and Training Nguyễn Kim Sơn presented to the PM several proposals regarding the legal framework for education reform, financial investment for the sector, and the development of the contingent of teachers and educational managers.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 05/08/2021

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HCM City to Build 12 Anti-Flooding Projects by 2025

HCM City will spend VNĐ8 trillion for construction of 12 anti-flooding and environmental sanitation projects between 2021 and 2025. Many flood control projects in HCM City have become outdated and are ineffective. The deputy director of HCM City Department of Construction, Đặng Phú Thành, said the city People's Committee has developed anti-flooding plans to 2025. Over the years, HCM City has implemented dozens of anti-flooding projects but many of them have lagged behind schedule. Compared to the master plan, only 46 per cent of the target has been achieved. This can be seen at a sluice gate construction project to control tidal flooding worth VNĐ10 trillion. It has finally reached 96 per cent of the volume, but has been suspended for six months. The delay was due to a disagreement on contract appendices between the investor and the city People's Committee. Authorities said that litter, outdated drainage and ineffective anti-flooding projects have all contributed to the flooding situation in the city. The Department of Construction has proposed construction of 12 key projects, including 11 anti-flooding projects and one environmental sanitation project between now and 2025. They will cost more than VNĐ8 trillion.

Three projects will be in Thủ Đức City, on Road No. 8, Nguyễn Duy Trinh Street and Lã Xuân Oai Street. However, architect Trần Vĩnh Nam, an urban expert, said that current anti-flooding projects are “patchy” and if these projects are implemented at the same time, construction sites will block city streets, causing even more inconvenience for locals. The timing is not ideal because the rainy season is coming, he added. “Many projects are implemented on roads where residential areas have existed for a long time. Road digging and resetting of sewer pipes will cause a great waste of resources,” he said. In a related matter, excessive exploitation of underground water has contributed to subsidence and created more flooding points. Because districts 12, Bình Tân and Bình Chánh are expanding, they need a long-term and sustainable anti-flooding solution. Though the initial cost is expensive, more money will be saved in the long run. Professor Lê Huy Bá, former director of the Institute of Science, Technology and Environmental Management, said that current flood control projects in HCM City are outdated and lack consistent planning, and some have not even started. The long-term solution involves speeding up current anti-flooding projects and planning large-scale projects. Bá said that authorities should consider projects that are regional, linking neighbouring provinces and cities, so that water drainage and tidal prevention measures are more visible.

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Đà Nẵng Tops Vietnam ICT Index for 12 Straight Years

The central city of Đà Nẵng has maintained its leading position in terms of readiness for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) development and application, topping the Vietnam ICT Index rankings for another year in 2020. This was the 12th consecutive year it had secured first place in the ratings of Việt Nam’s 63 cities and provinces, according to a report of the Vietnam Association for Information Processing (VAIP) and the Ministry of Information and Communications’ Department of Information Technology. The coastal resort city posted a total score of 0.9238 in last year’s rankings; 12 per cent higher than that of the runner-up - neighbouring Thừa Thiên-Huế Province (0.8147). The northern province of Quảng Ninh came third with a score of 0.6909, followed by the Mekong Delta city of Cần Thơ (0.6845) and HCM City (0.5852). It scored 1.00 in the category of IT application, leaving all other cities and provinces in its wake. The second highest score went to Quảng Ninh and Cần Thơ (both 0.48). Đà Nẵng also ranked fifth in the national IT Industry Index, after HCM City, Hà Nội, and northern Bắc Ninh and Thái Nguyên provinces, and among the top 5 in the sale and distribution of IT products and services, together with Hà Nội, Cần Thơ, HCM City, and the Mekong Delta’s Long An Province.

The result is expected to lay a basis for the city to move to the next level in its digital transformation process. During the 2021-2025 period, the city plans to ready itself in terms of infrastructure and databases for the full implementation of its smart city efforts and connection to the ASEAN smart city network. It will continue to promote the use of technologies from the Fourth Industrial Revolution in enterprises and in society. Đà Nẵng looks to build a synchronous telecoms infrastructure system along with regional and inter-regional core networks, and expand the 5G mobile coverage to the entire city and broadband connection to all enterprises and households. It will also upgrade the e-Government platform; complete the Local Government Service Platform (LGSP); connect with the National Government Service Platform (NGSP) for sharing data with ministries and central agencies; and put into operation a data service portal to provide information from the municipal government to the public and businesses. The city aims to have at least 30 per cent of online public services using digital signatures in administrative procedures and have 100 per cent of public services performed online at the third and fourth levels.

Đà Nẵng was the first city in Việt Nam to launch an e-Government system in 2014, and transferred this system to 16 cities and provinces around the country in 2016. A report revealed that Đà Nẵng's e-Government system had been used by 225 agencies and 4,000 users. The city had provided 1,200 online administration procedures, including one-stop shops, residential management, public transport, and water supervision, through the e-Government system, while free wireless internet services offer a maximum of 20,000 connections in public places, according to the city's information and communications department. Its IT infrastructure is available for smart connections for air control, water, garbage, meteorology and energy agencies. It can also provide earthquake and tsunami warnings, and data on flooding, erosion, sewage management, and food safety. Launched in Việt Nam in 2005 and based on UN criteria, the Vietnam ICT Index assesses technical infrastructure, human resource infrastructure, IT application, online public services delivery, and the IT industry in cities and provinces. It has secured a prestigious reputation over the years and serves as a foundation for the ministry and local authorities to adopt suitable policies to develop the ICT sector and the IT industry nationwide.

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South Asia

Free Education & Monthly Pension to Children Orphaned Due to COVID

As the COVID cases are surging in the state, the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh Shivraj Singh Chouhan today, on May 13, announced that children whose parents or guardians succumbed to COVID-19 infection will be provided free education and a monthly pension of Rs 5000. According to an international news agency, CM Chouhan said, "We cannot leave such families, we are the government of the state and we will support these children.” Such children need not worry, as they are the children of the state, and the state will take care of them, he added. Addressing women who want to start a business or want to work, the CM announced that for such women the state government will grant loans on the government guarantee.

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Rajasthan Housing Board Ensuring Quality Housing for Everyone

The Government of Rajasthan is actively putting its best foot forward to take the Government of India’s ‘Housing For All’ mission to greater heights. And, Rajasthan Housing Board, under the Rajasthan Housing Board Scheme 2020, is implementing its plans for ensuring housing for all, especially for the economically weaker sects of the society, writes Adarsh Som of Elets News Network (ENN). With the vision to ensure affordable housing with inclusive facilities especially for the economically weaker section, low and middle-income groups, Rajasthan Housing Board (RHB) is taking strides to accomplish the mission of ‘Housing For All’. Under its ambitious scheme of 2020, the Board aims to develop state-of-the-art townships to offer an abode at an affordable price fulfilling the dreams of millions. As per the mission statement of RHB, the townships being developed will host various facilities including modern amenities like community services, hospitals, educational institutes, parking spaces, neighbourhood parks and playgrounds for children. The Board is planning to adopt new technologies in construction works to ensure the product is high on quality and low on cost. Moreover, to cater to the growing needs in an effective manner, RHB is working on a public-private partnership (PPP) model. Grounding houses and delivering it to the people for possession is not the only goal that RHB is heading to but also it is working to maintain and sustain a user-friendly dedicated website with online facilities for the intended services. In addition, an effective public grievance redressal mechanism will also be established for providing people with a hassle-free life. Earlier the Rajasthan Housing Board was considered quite a white elephant in the house. However, with the recurring efforts from the state government, the Board has grounded a total of 2,49,187 housing units in all four categories in the past 50 years, as per the data on the RHB’s official portal. Moreover, of the total houses constructed by RHB, more units account for 2,30,933 that have been given physical possession.

Rajasthan Housing Board Ensuring Quality Housing for EveryoneIn all the schemes developed by the Board, necessary infrastructure facilities like pucca, roads, electricity, water and sewer lines, street lighting, parks etc. had been developed and reserved for commercial centres, schools, hospitals, community centres etc. Some of these schemes include commercial, shops, primary schools, dispensaries, community centres constructed at their own level and the land is allocated to various institutions for the construction of large-scale schools, hospitals and community facilities. The Rajasthan Housing Board has ventured into various projects to make the Board's operations multidimensional. The Board is working on a Coaching Hub that is expected to be a place where as many as 60,000 students can study in a day in two-shifts. The work on the project has already started and all the clearances and administrative formalities have been completed. For this, the board aims to build a university-like complex on 6500 sqm of land area in Pratapnagar. The complex will house eight towers. The towers will not only have classrooms for tuitions but will also have a health and wellness centre for students, a library, recreational space. Besides, consultants will be hired to ensure mental wellness and a stress-free environment for students. Also, the Hub will feature sports facilities for students. Another such project is 'Fountain Square'. RHB had planned to convert its land in Mansarovar into 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 enough open space for people to hang out with friends, spend quality time with their families, and more. This concept is similar to large cities like London, Singapore, Dubai, etc. Furthermore, RHB is working to build 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, street food, and all essential components for people to enjoy their day out.

The ventures of RHB also include All India Service Residency in Pratapnagar. A residential society especially being developed for government officers of Rajasthan cadre or those from Rajasthan but serving in other cadres. The Board's move for developing a residential society for the government officials was well-appreciated not only in the state but all across the country. However, as per Pawan Arora, Commissioner, RHB, the properties in the Residency, earlier, were for Rajasthan cadre officers only, however, after getting huge demands from across India, the Board decided to open it for all the officers in the state of Rajasthan. Another similar and prestigious project was for building around 160 houses for Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) was given to RHB. The project war earlier with som other organisation but looking at commendable works by the Bord, the project was handed over to RHB. The Board has already commenced work on the project. Rajasthan Housing Board offers various scheme to make it convenient for the buyers to own their abode at affordable prices. To help the cause, RHB is also offering housing units in instalments that has helped the people to pay in easy EMIs. Moreover, many schemes are offered by the board and a few of the major ones launched in 2020 include:

Chief Minister Janavas Yojana 2020
Chief Minister of State Employee Housing Scheme 2020
In Jaipur, RHB has introduced Independent Housing Scheme 2020 in Mahala and Vatika and the "Weekend Home" Residential Scheme Nyala.
In Jodhpur, the board has introduced Independent Housing Scheme 2020, and Mahatma Gandhi Sambal Residential Scheme, Badii, Jodhpur Unique Registration

Scheme 2020.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule Residential Scheme, Nasirabad.

Besides this, more Independent Housing Schemes have been launched in 2020 in various parts of the state including Kishangarh, Bhilwara, Niwai, Bhinder, Banswara, Udaipur and Abu road.

RAJASTHAN HOUSING BOARD LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

In the past few years, it was being observed that many housing units developed by the Rajasthan Housing Board were left unsold. To overcome this challenge and to break the fallacy around the use of technology and e-services for selling houses, RHB adopted the e-auction model. The Government of Rajasthan developed an online portal that not only enabled the RHB to auction the units digitally but also allowed buyers to apply online. As per the state government, the new digital method is convenient and saves time, energy and efforts. According to RHB, the e-auction portal made auctioning the housing units easy and fast and online payment gateways added on to streamlining the entire procedure which earlier had taken days. Moreover, to make it a sure success, the Board ran advertising campaigns, announced on television and radio shows, placed banners, etc. Further, a new marketing cell was created and was given the task to market the housing units available at television talk shows, radio shows, conferences, and other modes through which mass audience can be intimated about the e-auctions and more bids can be placed. Also, 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. Taking its e-auction model to step ahead, the Rajasthan Housing Board (RHB) took another innovative initiative “Budhwar Nilami Utsav”. The ‘Budhwar Nilami Utsav’ was a beneficial move that helped the Board 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, it was advertised that people in Rajasthan can bid on the available housing units from Monday to Wednesday and after four in the evening on Wednesdays the bids were enlisted.

Considering announcements from the authorities, there were nearly 24,000 housing units available for the auction and efficiency in the real estate sector, Rajasthan Housing Board (RHB) had launched the first-of-its-kind mobile application ‘RHB Sajag’. Chief Minister of Rajasthan Ashok Gehlot launched the Sajag mobile application on August 25, 2020, amidst the COVID-induced nationwide lockdown. The RHB had partnered with Lockated, an Indian startup that specialises in providing PropTech solutions, for designing the Sajag app. The app has been designed with an aim to digitise the real estate sector and bring in transparency of the projects that are executed and overviewed by RHB. Moreover, the application is meant to aid RHB to track and monitor the real-time progress of the ongoing projects. Besides this, the app also offers many robust solutions including Quality Control Monitoring, Physical Progress Monitoring (Time Overrun & Project Completion), Cost Overrun Monitoring

(Reporting project budget and the actual spending), RealTime Information (with attached project images), Inspection Visit Report, Construction Standards & SOP – BIS, Alerts/ Red Flags Reporting. As cities need housing units, commercial units, and other infrastructure to aid the livelihood of the citizens similarly it needs green and open space to breathe and for improving liveability in the cities. In a noteworthy move to ensure living spaces in residential societies and housing complexes, the RHB has launched the 'RHB Green' mobile app. The move marked the Board's commitment towards the environment, beautification of the city and green development. The app aided the Rajasthan Housing Board in launching a plantation drive seeking support from the citizens. The plantation drive has been planned as a weekly affair wherein, through the app, as many as 50 people will be invited every Saturday and Sunday to plant saplings.

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Liquidity Issues & Low Demands Are Major Challenges

Since the imposition of the nationwide lockdown to break the chain of COVID-19, the economics of the housing sector and various other industries distorted. This was due to a sudden halt on the economic activities across the country. Moreover, migrant labourers lost their work and fled back to their villages that weighed on to the challenges faced by the affordable housing industry. Addressing these, Elets Technomedia Pvt. Ltd. organised the 'National Housing Summit' on August 26, 2020. Delivering his keynote address on the theme, SVR Srinivas, Principal Secretary, Housing Department, Government of Maharashtra, said, "I am of the view that, now, the time has come to go for only affordable housing. This is because due to the COVID pandemic the people are unable to afford houses in big cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, etc." Speaking on the improvement in the housing sector, he said, "The policies have to be city-specific not even state-specific. And, even within the city, the rates and demands are localised, therefore, the policies should be able to cater to the location-specific issues." He also pointed out that under the various policies being implemented through slum development or housing board actually see a less number of housing units being built, hardly 7000-8000, considering the stats of Mumbai. "However, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) was a welcoming step and I am happy to say that the works are being done under it," he added. During the pandemic, the issue is about the demand side, how to revive the demand. Secondly, the issue is of liquidity. "So, there is an urgent need to keep the money in the hands of the project promotors or developers or builders etc. A lot of money is taken through premiums so keeping the money in the hands of the project proponents and ensuring that the projects go forward and the various premiums and fee can be backend with safeguarding the government's interest through sim guarantees etc." Srinivas said. How to ensure liquidity and how to ensure fund flow in the projects? This is important because if the project stops for two or three months then, in India, monsoon steps in. And, if there is no fund flow from October to December then the project will be delayed for about a year which simply means interest payments for one year and opportunity cost to be bourne for the year lost. “So, we have to be very nimble-footed as policymakers and respond very quickly in a calibrated manner,” told Srinivas. Concluding his address he requested the other speakers to deliberate on the two issues majorly, liquidity and demand, through the conference.

From https://egov.eletsonline.com/ 05/20/2021

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SRI LANKA: E-Learning for Continuing University Education

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

Digital teaching and learning (DTL),
Virtual learning communities (VLC),
Technology enhanced learning (TEL),
Mobile learning, web-based learning,
Online learning, distributed learning,
Computer assisted instruction (also called computer-based training or internet-based learning),
Computer mediated communication,
Virtual classrooms,
I-campus
Computer-driven interactive communication.

The term electronic learning represents as “e-learning”. However, due to these inconsistencies of terms and their meanings, there are diverse and conflicting definitions of e-learning. This makes it difficult to find a single definition of e-learning. As studied by researchers, it is a risk in adopting an inclusive definition of e-learning because e-learning definition connects its different elements and features, which can obstruct the understanding of the concept. Therefore, following definitions can be selected as an appropriate definition of e-learning based on technological and teaching/learning perspectives.

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

How to make e-learning sustain and success? Most of higher education institutes in Sri Lanka use their own Learning Management Systems (LMS) as an e-learning method which mostly apply as a supplementary tool to the face-to-face education. During the closure of universities in the light of the rapidly changing situation due to the ongoing Covid – 19 outbreaks in Sri Lanka, the University Grants Commission requested that the use of e-learning for continuing university education to students wherever possible. Therefore, continuing education through fully online mode could be a newer experience for universities, their academics as well as students. Hence, higher education institutes should use strategic dimensions to formulate and implement coherent internal and external processes in order to optimize the learning potential of integrating e-learning into their programs and courses. During this interim crisis period, we cannot expect that all universities have fulfilled the following strategic dimensions but after the prevailing situation in the country returns to normalcy, to face into any situation in near future all universities or higher education institutes should revisit and refine their strategic planning processes and plans for e-learning systematically through building the capacity of universities to drive, sustain and scale up their e-learning practices. Otherwise, due to the sudden requirement e-learning would continue somehow based on capacity of individual departments or faculties but that has limited sustainability and scalability within and across programs in the university. Therefore, it is important to adhere to the following strategic dimensions by each university for building the e-leaning capacity and thereby making e-learning success. These strategic dimensions were identified from previous research on e-learning/blended learning implementation.

1. A clear vision should be grounded in the institution's philosophies for learning and teaching in e-learning environments. Therefore, the universities should design a shared institutional vision by anticipating the ultimate goal and outcomes they want to achieve from institutional, student, as well as academic staff perspectives.
2. Universities should empower students to be future-ready with 21st century skills like collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity and computational thinking, it's becoming increasingly important to equip students with the technology skills they'll need to thrive in a digital economy. Skills like cloud computing, artificial intelligence, machine learning, productivity and more are already in demand in organizations around the world, yet jobs remain unfilled, and the talent gap persists and is set to widen. Therefore, universities can no longer be places for gaining content knowledge through the transmission of PowerPoint presentations; the curriculum should therefore develop higher-order thinking and 21st century competencies at the program and course levels. As an appropriate approach to meet these curricular outcomes, e-learning must therefore be pedagogically appropriate.
3. Academic staff has a crucial role for the successful implementation of e-learning. Although academics are experts in their respective fields, they may not have the expertise and experience to plan for and implement e-learning in their courses. Hence, the introduction of e-learning challenges academic staff to rethink their roles in a technology-enhanced learning environment. Therefore, universities should definitely provide continuing professional development for e-learning.

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

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

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

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

8. E-learning practices have to informed and driven by research and evaluation because revisions and modifications are always mandatory for the quality improvement of learning and teaching in universities. As informed by previous research, pilot projects need to be conducted to test possibilities and potentials before moving to large-scale implementation of e-learning is deliberated. This kind of pilot projects may help universities to identify and address potential problems and evaluate academic staff and students' reactions to a new initiative before moving to its large-scale implementation. However, due to the urgency of current situation in Sri Lanka we should continue e-learning without thinking whether we did the pilot project or not. After the prevailing situation in the country returns to normalcy, we should consider this as a pilot project to identify issues and academics and students' reactions. So that we will be able to implement successful e-learning program in near future under any circumstances. The above mentioned strategic dimensions allow universities or higher education institutes to reflect upon their existing e-learning strategies, identify gaps in these strategies with respect to their vision for how e-learning may enhance learning and teaching and possibly develop new strategies or revise existing ones to address these gaps. There is no argument that e-learning

is the best solution for education in the prevailing situation in the country due to COVID-19. Therefore, we should take this situation as a lesson to go forward with e-earning.

From http://www.dailynews.lk 05/30/2021

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Central-West Asia

Azerbaijan: To Launch Alat Free Economic Zone in 2022

Azerbaijan’s Alat Free Economic Zone will start operating in July 2022, Tahir Mirkishili, chairman of the parliamentary committee on economic policy, industry and entrepreneurship, said, Trend reports on May 4. Mirkishili made the remark presenting amendments to the law ‘On Alat Free Economic Zone’ at the plenary session of the parliament. According to him, the bill was prepared in order to improve legislation in this area in accordance with international experience. The bill envisages the following activities: - clarification of the concept of a free zone resident (individuals who aren’t engaged in entrepreneurial activity); - application of the legislation of Azerbaijan on counteracting the legalization of money or other property obtained by illegal means and the financing of terrorism (currently only the criminal legislation of Azerbaijan applies to the free zone); - expanding the rights of the authorized body of the free zone to ensure the effectiveness of its activities (expanding rights, accepting obligations, acquiring property and disposing of it on its own behalf); - management of taxation issues (adoption of local rules for the regulation and withholding of taxes and other issues in this direction); - when providing financial services to legal entities, the legislation on the main economy will be applied; - changes related to customs issues aimed at eliminating contradictions that may arise in customs relations from the moment the free zone starts functioning; - investing in the free zone, transferring abroad funds received from activities in the free zone, as well as the work and conduct of operations with foreign currency are reserved only for the representatives of the free zone vested with such rights, their investors and shareholders (currently, much more persons can exercise this right).

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/04/2021

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Azerbaijan's Digital Project Wins International Recognition

‘Portal of online appeals of citizens’ project has received recognition of the international community, especially the digital sphere representatives, Deputy Director of Data Processing Center (ICC) under the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of Azerbaijan Inara Valiyeva told Trend. Valiyeva said that 1,270 digital projects from different countries of the world, including

Azerbaijan, were submitted to the WSIS Prizes-2021 competition. "According to the results of the competition, held on the basis of online voting in 18 nominations, 90 projects-champions and 18 projects-winners (Winner) were selected, one of which was the Azerbaijani portal of the electronic appeal of citizens," she noted, adding that this digital solution enables citizens, especially residents of rural areas, to submit applications online. A pilot project of the digital solution was developed and implemented in Shamakhi city, and its residents use the services of this portal. "It's possible to add institutions to the portal in a hierarchical order, that is, integrate as many services into it as citizens need, which made this digital solution extremely important during the COVID-19 pandemic," the deputy director said.

Besides, according to her, the status of requests sent through the portal can be tracked. "If you submitted an appeal to the municipality and want to know about its results in three days, then you can easily familiarize yourself with the status of the appeal on the portal," Valiyeva further noted. “In general, digitalization minimizes bureaucratic obstacles. Since the portal’s focus is the relationship between citizens and officials, the problems arising in connection with these relationships become less,” she pointed out. “Moreover, if an official ignores the citizen's appeal and doesn’t do his job properly, then the management of the institution sees this and has the opportunity to timely intervene.” According to her, in fact, this and similar projects are an integral part of Azerbaijan’s digital transformation. “Last month, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on improving governance in the field of digital transformation. The introductory part of the decree reads that ‘the state policy on management, implemented in the field of digital transformation, requires the improvement of mechanisms of management, coordination and control, the effective performance of the functions of state and public importance, as well as commercial activity,” she reminded. The ‘portal of online appeals of citizens’ also serves the effective performance of functions of state and public importance," the DPC’s representative added. Valiyeva emphasized that the portal not only meets the requirements of the pandemic but also prevents loss of time and additional costs, that is, a citizen doesn’t have to spend time and money in order to visit the centers or institutions to which he must apply. The ‘portal of online appeals of citizens’ developed by the DPC became the winner of the competition of the World Summit on the Information Society in 2021 (WSIS Prizes - 2021) and took first place in the ‘Electronic Government’ category.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/25/2021

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Azerbaijan Presents Biometrics-Based Digital Solution

A digital solution based on biometric technology has been presented in Azerbaijan, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies told Trend on May 26. According to the agreement signed between the Data Processing Center under the ministry and AzPul LLC non-bank credit organization, when issuing small loans, the identity of a client will be identified by means of biometric technology online. "A one-time electronic signature certificate will be issued to sign the loan agreement. This solution combines face recognition technology and the provision of an electronic signature public key," the ministry said. "With these capabilities, one can conduct any type of online transactions requiring an electronic signature. Besides, transactions carried out through this solution are carried out in an automated mode, which makes the process even more operational." The ministry emphasized that the biometric technology is safe, automated and operational, which creates a number of advantages and opportunities: Obtaining an electronic signature certificate online; Using the service regardless of place and time; Fraud prevention (impossibility to conduct transactions on behalf of a person without his knowledge and participation); System integration with any device; Receiving data online. The proposed solution can be used by both representatives of the public and private sectors. The transition to digital transformation in our country makes the use of this technology more relevant.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/29/2021

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Azerbaijan Confirms 141 More COVID-19 Cases, 486 Recoveries

Azerbaijan has detected 141 new COVID-19 cases, 486 patients have recovered and 4 patients have died, Trend reports on May 30 citing the Operational Headquarters under Azerbaijani Cabinet of Ministers. Up until now, 333,864 people have been infected with coronavirus in the country, 324,103 of them have recovered, and 4,907 people have died. Currently, 4,854 people are under treatment in special hospitals. To reveal the COVID-19 cases, 5,535 tests have been carried out in Azerbaijan over the past day, and a total of 3,509,174 tests have been conducted so far.

From https://en.trend.az/ 05/30/2021

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IRAN: Internet to Be Free of Charge – Minister

The internet will be free of charge for all citizens in Iran for a month, Iranian Minister of Information and Communications Technology, Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi wrote on his Twitter page, Trend reports. The minister said that internet packages will be free of charge for the organization of election campaigns in Iran in connection with the president elections in Iran. Azari Jahromi added that in this regard, the National Committee to Combat Coronavirus in Iran has approved the necessary decision and will cooperate with the Plan and Budget Organization of Iran. Reportedly, the Guardian Council of Iran will announce the names of presidential candidates in Iran on May 26. In total, 592 people, including 40 women, have registered for the 13th presidential election in Iran. It should be noted that Iran's presidential and municipal elections will be held on June 18, 2021. There are 31 provinces and 450 counties in Iran.

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UZBEKISTAN: Electric Vehicles Are Given a Privilege

At a regular meeting of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis, deputies considered in the first reading the draft law "On Amendments and Additions to the Tax Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan." As noted, the draft law reflects norms aimed at further supporting business entities, mitigating the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic on economic sectors and increasing the income of the population. The draft law envisages exemption from payment for the purchase and (or) temporary import of vehicles with electric motors into the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In addition, until 1 January 2024, newly created business entities in the areas of activity defined as "growth points" of each city and districts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan are provided with a 50 percent reduction from the established tax rate on profits and water. In the case of rational use of benefits by entrepreneurs, an opportunity will be created for further expansion of their activities at the expense of these taxes. The adoption of the draft law will serve to mitigate the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic on economic sectors and increase income, systematize the regulations governing relations in the spheres. At the meeting, the draft law was conceptually adopted by the deputies in the first reading.

From http://www.uzdaily.com 05/18/2021

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Mobile Groups to Be Created in Uzbekistan to Improve the Qualifications of Teachers of Foreign Languages

Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UzDaily.com) - A government resolution “On measures to effectively organize the popularization of the study of foreign languages” was adopted. According to the resolution, the activity of the Republican Scientific and Practical Center for the Development of Innovative Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages at the Uzbek State University of World Languages was terminated. Under the Agency for the Promotion of Foreign Language Learning, mobile groups will be created to improve the qualifications of teachers of foreign languages in educational institutions. Mobile groups will primarily focus on improving the qualifications of teachers of educational institutions located in remote areas or having low rates of teaching foreign languages. In accordance with the resolution, a list of educational institutions (207 schools) was approved under which schools specializing in teaching foreign languages will be created, as well as higher educational institutions assigned to them. The procedure for assessing the participants of the republican Olympiads in foreign languages in 4 skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) is being introduced. From the 2022/2023 academic year, a procedure is being introduced to conduct a special test to determine the level of foreign language proficiency of certain graduates of the 4th grade, and from the 2024/2025 academic year, graduates of the 9th grade of secondary schools. Also, an open competition will be held in each district (city), as a result of which at least 2 teachers of English and one teacher of another foreign language from the Republic of Karakalpakstan, regions and the city of Tashkent will be sent to foreign countries for short-term professional development. By the end of 2021, centers (courses) for teaching foreign languages to teachers and students will be created at HEU on the basis of a public-private partnership. Also, the activity of TV and radio channels, broadcasting 24 hours in foreign languages, will be launched. At the same time, every day at least 3 hours in the program will be allocated for online learning of foreign languages.Also, the activity of TV and radio channels, broadcasting 24 hours in foreign languages, will be launched. At the same time, every day at least 3 hours in the program will be allocated for online learning of foreign languages.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Jobs Rise in Weeks After JobKeeper Ended

Employment rose in mid-April, but the Australian Bureau of Statistics says it remains inconclusive what impact the end of the JobKeeper wage subsidy has had on the labour market. The ABS' payroll jobs report, a precursor to the official labour force figures later this month, showed employment rose 0.4 per cent in the fortnight to April 24, following a 1.6 per cent drop in the previous two weeks. "Seasonality around Easter in the previous fortnight makes it difficult to gauge any effect of the end of the JobKeeper wage subsidy on March 28," ABS head of labour statistics Bjorn Jarvis said. "The latest fortnight of payroll jobs data continues to show some of the seasonality around school holidays." Treasury had forecast that up to 150,000 people could have lost their jobs as a result of the end of JobKeeper.

However, economists are growing in confidence that job losses could be absorbed as a result of the strength of the jobs market. "Other indicators suggest the labour market has continued to improve despite the end of JobKeeper," National Australia Bank economist Taylor Nugent says. Labour force figures for April are due on May 20. "Overall, the partial indicators of the labour market are pointing to another strong employment figure with the risk that the unemployment rate continues to fall faster than even recently upgraded official forecasts," he said. This will be music to Josh Frydenberg's ears as he prepares to hand down his budget on Tuesday night. The treasurer has committed to pursuing an unemployment rate below five per cent in this budget. The jobless rate was 5.6 per cent in March. Meanwhile, Australians more broadly may need some budget cheer with confidence dropping in the past week.

The ANZ-Roy Morgan consumer confidence index sank one per cent, which was largely seen as being the result of the mystery COVID-19 case in Sydney. Confidence among Sydneysiders plunged 7.6 per cent. However, ANZ head of economics David Plank points out the proportion of respondents expecting 'bad times' in the 'current economic conditions' component dropped to just 12 per cent, its lowest level in over 40 years. "This sharp improvement ... points to positive sentiment about the near-term outlook being very widespread," Mr Plank said.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/11/2021

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Jobless Rate Falls for Six Months in a Row

Josh Frydenberg has seized on the latest labour force figures that show the unemployment rate has fallen for a sixth consecutive month to 5.5 per cent. The treasurer said it highlights the strength of Australia's economic recovery, even as the JobKeeper wage subsidy came to an end in March. "It shows that the Morrison government's economic plan is working," Mr Frydenberg told reporters in Hobart on Thursday. He said the underemployment rate - those people who are employed but are seeking extra work - has fallen to its lowest level in seven years and youth unemployment is down at a 12-year low. The Australian Bureau of Statistics did revise up the jobless rate for March to 5.7 per cent from 5.6 per cent, but Thursday's labour force report still showed it steadily declining from 6.9 per cent in October.

However, the ABS figures show that overall employment fell by 30,600 in the month, largely as result in a sharp drop in part-time workers. Economists had expected a 20,000 increase. The number of part-time workers fell by 64,400 in April but was partly offset by a 33,800 rise in full-time staff. Employment Minister Stuart Robert said full-time employment is at a record high of 8.9 million and is now 24,600 higher than its pre-COVID level in March 2020. "With a jobs-led recovery at the heart of the 2021/22 budget, the government is securing Australia's future by rebuilding the economy and creating more sustainable jobs," Mr Robert said. But deputy Labor leader Richard Marles said the government's plan is not delivering for Australians, with wage growth around record lows.

"What Labor stands for is to have a plan that builds the economy and people see their circumstances getting better," he told reporters in Melbourne. Figures released on Wednesday showed annual wages growth at 1.5 per cent, only marginally above inflation at 1.1 per cent. It was the first jobs report since the JobKeeper wage subsidy ended in March. However, the ABS said the end of JobKeeper did not have a discernible impact on employment between March and April. "We have not seen large changes in the indicators that would suggest a clear JobKeeper impact," ABS head of labour statistics Bjorn Jarvis said. "Some of the 31,000 fall in employment may relate to the end of JobKeeper, but it could also reflect usual month-to-month variation in the labour market and some larger than usual seasonal changes similar to those we saw earlier in the year."

In a speech this week, Treasury secretary Steven Kennedy was more optimistic about what impact the end of JobKeeper might have on employment, having previously estimated up to 150,000 jobs could be lost. Dr Kennedy said the early indications are that while there have been job losses, many workers appear to have already found employment thanks to the strong labour market. "The evidence to date from indicators like job vacancies is that employers are keen to take on more staff," Commonwealth Securities chief economist Craig James said. "So much so that there are fears about whether all of the available positions will be filled." However, the Reserve Bank's goal of a 4.5 per cent jobless rate is still some way off, suggesting ultra low interest rates will be around for sometime yet. Even so, Commonwealth Bank economists are expecting the jobless rate to keep falling in coming months to five per cent by the end of this year and 4.7 per cent by the end of 2022.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/20/2021

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University Leads Way on 2030 Emissions Cut

The Australian National University is the first tertiary institution in the nation to commit to reducing greenhouse emissions to below zero by 2030. It is only the second university in the world, and the first of its size, to set the target. ANU Vice Chancellor Brian Schmidt said the university would not only reduce emissions under the new strategy, but offset any emissions it cannot avoid. "As Australia's national university, we are committed to not only reducing and offsetting our emissions, but also taking more carbon out of the atmosphere than we put in," the Nobel Prize winning scientist said. "Climate change is already here. The past decade includes nine of the 10 hottest years on record around the world - 2019 was Australia's hottest year ever."

Under the Paris agreement, governments are seeking to limit global warming to below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and, if possible, to 1.5 degrees Celsius. But Prof Schmidt said the world was on track to warm by between 2.8 and 3.2 degrees Celsius by the end of this century. "Reducing our greenhouse gas emissions to zero as soon as possible is essential, but this alone won't be enough to meet our global goals." The university has set an interim target of net zero emissions by 2025. The Below Zero Initiative, led by the university's Professor Mark Howden, covers energy, waste, business travel and direct on-campus emissions. Only carbon offsets that have a research and teaching connection at the university will be used. Professor Howden said meeting the below-zero target will require change at an institutional and individual level. "More than 90 per cent of ANU staff and students are either concerned or alarmed about climate change, compared with 52 per cent of the Australian population, according to a recent survey," he said. "Most ANU staff and students feel that the institution and individuals both have critical roles to play in addressing climate change."

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/20/2021

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ABC Ups Spend for Cyber Security Measures

Australia's national broadcaster will more than double its spend on cyber security measures in the wake of an attack on the Nine Network. ABC managing director David Anderson has revealed the broadcaster's cyber security costs would increase from $1.7 million this financial year to $3.9 million next financial year. "It is something that, frankly, for any media organisation you have to invest in to stand still," he told a Senate estimates hearing in Canberra on Wednesday. "The sophistication of the attacks that you see, or that I see certainly on our organisation, increases. So (does) the money you must spend to constantly make sure that you're ahead of that curve." But Mr Anderson doesn't expect the cost to continue rising at that rate, saying it should stay constant at best. The Nine Network was the target of a cyber-attack in March, which had broad disruptions to its live programming and publications.

Since the incident, the ABC and Nine shared knowledge on how to better protect their companies. Mr Anderson also said the broadcaster was ready to finalise deals with Facebook and Google for the tech giants to pay for its content. Letters of intent have been signed with the two technology companies over the news media bargaining code. While Mr Anderson would not say how much the deals would be worth, the money is expected to go towards regional services. "These investments will provide a huge boost to the regions at a time when many areas of regional and rural Australia have experienced a withdrawal of media services," he said. Google has signed deals with News Corp, Seven West Media, Junkee Media, Nine, Australian Community Media, Schwartz Media, The Conversation, Solstice Media, The Guardian and Times News Group. Facebook has struck deals with News Corp, Seven, Nine, Private Media, Schwartz Media, ACM and Solstice.

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Aussies Put Emissions Above Bills: Survey

A majority of Australians say the federal government's highest energy policy priority should be the reduction of carbon emissions - and not lower prices. That's the outcome of a poll of almost 3300 Australians conducted by the Lowy Institute think tank on the country's climate change views. The mid-April poll of 3286 people found 55 per cent of Australians want the government's foremost priority for energy policy to be "reducing carbon emissions", eight points higher than two years ago. In comparison, 32 per cent of people wanted the lowest possible energy price. Three quarters of respondents, meanwhile, said the future benefits of taking action on climate change outweigh the contemporary costs. This includes the subsidisation of renewable energy technologies, with more than 90 per cent of people saying Canberra should tip in more money.

Despite the repeal of Australia's carbon price seven years ago, more than six in 10 Australians also continue to advocate for an emissions trading scheme. "Several important results in this new poll show overall concern about climate change has increased in 2021," the Lowy Institute report notes. Elsewhere, the Lowy report found 63 per cent of people think there should be a ban on new coal mines in Australia, and coal exports should also be reduced. Two thirds of people in 2016 believed Australia should keep exporting coal. And as November's Glasgow climate summit inches closer, seven in 10 Australians believe the country should boost its climate pledges. Yet while 60 per cent of respondents said Australia should do more to combat climate change, a greater proportion of Australians said other countries - such as China, India and the United States - should also do more.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/26/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Employment Boost for Rural Communities

The Government is continuing to create opportunities for at-risk rangatahi overcome barriers to employment, education or training with the next tranche of He Poutama Rangatahi programmes, Minister for Social Development and Employment Carmel Sepuloni announced today. “We’re focused on supporting rangatahi to get what they need to progress in the real world, which is why we’ve announced funding for four programmes that aim to support rangatahi with driver license and work experience, digital skills and support with documentations for employment. “He Poutama Rangatahi is a successful and worthwhile initiative. For example, if you don’t have a driver license, qualifications or practical work skills, it is very difficult to tackle these challenges alone which is why this investment boost in these rural communities is important.

“I expect over 160 rangatahi and their whānau to benefit from participating in these programmes. The four employment and skills programmes are Te Ara Poutama in Tairāwhiti/Gisborne, the School of Hard Knocks in the Bay of Plenty and Life Talk and Mauri Mahi, Mauri Ora, both in Tai Tokerau/Northland. “Three of the programmes – Te Ara Poutama, School of Hard Knocks and Life Talk – are already established with successful track records. Just as important is the ongoing pastoral care all four of these programmes are providing to help rangatahi keep to the path they’ve worked so hard to forge. “It is exciting to see the success stories coming through from these trusts which have previously run programmes with He Poutama Rangatahi funding.

“On average, over 80 percent of graduates from these three programmes have gone on to enrol in further education or training or got jobs. Providing additional funding for programmes like these with proven track records means more positive outcomes for participating rangatahi.” “These results show that tailoring programmes to the needs of young people and their region is not only helping them overcome challenges, but is paying dividends in getting them into sustainable employment, education or training. “The vast majority of rangatahi complete these programmes so they can move forward in their lives better equipped to choose career and life pathways that will not only better their own futures, but the future of their whānau and their communities.” Carmel Sepuloni said.

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Rail Builds Platform for Economic Recovery

Transport Minister Michael Wood and State-Owned Enterprises Minister Dr David Clark today released the Government’s long term vision for a sustainable rail network that supports our economic recovery. New Zealand Rail Plan lays out how the Government is building a resilient, reliable and safe network, as well as the indicative investments over the next decade. Michael Wood said rail is key to keeping New Zealand moving and is supporting our economic recovery. “The disruptions to the supply chain due to COVID have shown how important it is to have a reliable rail network to keep freight flowing, which keeps our economy moving. The Rail Plan shows how we’re getting rail back on track after the former government let it slide into managed decline. “Rail is worth up to $2.1 billion to our economy every year and reduces emissions and congestion. Annually it prevents 2.5 million tonnes of CO_2 emissions and 26 million car trips in Auckland and Wellington,” Michael Wood said. David Clark said investing in infrastructure like rail creates jobs, which is part of the Government’s COVID economic plan. “KiwiRail’s work renewing the Northland Rail line supported more than 560 jobs, and work to replace the existing maintenance building at Hillside will support around 100 more. “Our investments like the new Hamilton to Auckland service Te Huia meant 40 new staff and apprentices have been taken on at Hutt Workshops. We’re building a sustainable 21st century rail network and supporting jobs,” David Clark said.

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More Young Kiwis Supported with Mental Health and Addiction Services

Nearly quarter of a million more young New Zealanders will have access to mental health and addiction support in their communities as the Government’s youth mental health programme gathers pace. New contracts to expand youth-specific services across the Northland, Waitematā and Auckland District Health Board areas have been confirmed, providing services for 240,000 young people. “Youth are at the greatest risk of developing mental health issues because of the rapid changes that occur between the ages of 12 to 24,” Health Minister Andrew Little said during a visit to one of the services in Whangārei today. “We need to wrap support around our rangatahi and ensure they have access to the right kind of help, when and where they need it – that includes embedding services within communities. “We need to work on preventing mental health and addiction issues from developing, and intervening early when challenges start to arise.

“We need to be flexible in our approach and make it easy for people to get the help they need.” Across Auckland and Waitematā, Emerge Aotearoa is being funded to expand its EaseUp mobile service based on an assertive outreach model that ensures easy access for rangatahi. In Northland, Te Kaupapa Mahitahi Hauora Papa o Te Raki Trust will expand its He Kakano Ahau service. He Kakano Ahau is an integrated service which, as well as providing mental health and addiction supports, ensures pathways for youth into wider community support, including social services, if it’s needed. “These latest contracts are further evidence that the roll out of youth-specific services is well and truly under way,” Andrew Little said. “We now have contracts for dedicated services to support rangatahi with mild-to-moderate mental health and addiction needs in 13 DHB areas across New Zealand, and there are more to come.”

These youth-specific services for Northland and Auckland will cost of $4.6 million over two years, are part of the $455 million programme to increase access to, and choice of, free mental health and addiction services. Youth are a priority within the programme, alongside Māori, Pacific and young Rainbow New Zealanders. The programme also includes an initiative to develop a new frontline mental health and addiction workforce within general practices. As at the end of March, 191 general practices across New Zealand were offering the service. “These services supported more than 9500 people in March, giving them help that was not previously available,” Andrew Little said.

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An Economic Recovery for All New Zealanders

An economic recovery for all New Zealanders Projected 221,000 more people to be in employment over the forecast period, with unemployment set to decrease to 4.2 percent. Up to 33,000 children to be lifted out of poverty on the after housing costs measure, benefits boosted by between $32 and $55 a week. $57.3 billion infrastructure investment over five years, including $11.6 billion for housing. Budget 2021 will secure Aotearoa New Zealand’s recovery from COVID-19, creating jobs and investing to address the long-term challenges of child poverty, housing and climate change. “This Budget targets investments that will set Aotearoa New Zealand up to both recover from COVID-19 and be stronger than when we entered the pandemic,” Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said.

“By targeting investments in reducing child poverty, building houses and other critical infrastructure and tackling climate change we are creating jobs and stimulus, while also laying the foundations to recover stronger. “Our economic plan is working. We have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the OECD, growth has exceeded expectations and debt is lower than forecast. Coupled with our successful management of the virus, we are well placed to seize the opportunities the recovery now presents. “Previous economic downturns have made inequality worse. We’re taking a different approach. By investing in those who need it the most, we are driving the recovery by reducing need, at the same time as providing stimulus for our economy.

“As well as investing in the homes, family and whanau who need it most, we will continue to invest in critical services like health, education and social housing, in order to support the recovery.” “With ongoing global uncertainty we will need to remain cautious. To ensure we can weather the uncertain times ahead we need to keep managing the economy responsibly,” Jacinda Ardern said. Budget 2021 strikes a careful balance between securing the economic recovery and keeping a lid on the debt we took on during COVID-19 to protect lives and livelihoods, Grant Robertson said. “This year is also the 30th anniversary of the so-called ‘Mother of All Budgets’ that saw benefits slashed and other social programmes cut. We are repairing some of that damage by boosting main benefits by up to $55 per week, in line with the recommendations of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group.

“Not only will this give a sense of dignity and hope to those who receive that boost in income, it will also help reduce inequality and provide ongoing stimulus to the economy. “As we emerge from the impacts of COVID-19 it is critical that we do not make the mistakes of the past where some New Zealanders benefit from the recovery and others are left behind. Ours will be an investment-focused recovery that supports all New Zealanders and ensures our finances remain sustainable. “While we recover and rebuild, we will also continue making progress on our most challenging long-term issues: housing, climate change, and child wellbeing. To do this, we’ll be making sure new spending is directed toward the greatest need. “New Zealanders have weathered the storm of COVID-19, today we take the next steps in our recovery together,” Grant Robertson said.

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Emergency Screening of Overseas Investments to End, as Economy Recovers

The temporary regime, introduced to protect New Zealand assets from falling unnecessarily into foreign ownership during the COVID pandemic, will end on 7 June. The emergency notification regime was introduced in mid-2020 as a precaution to minimise the risk that cornerstone businesses would be sold to overseas investors contrary to the national interest. “The temporary power was put in place to protect

Kiwi businesses from being snapped up and opportunities potentially lost as they recovered from the damage caused by the pandemic," David Parker said. Finance Minister Grant Robertson, Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta and David Parker have completed the fourth 90-day review of the regime to assess whether the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic justified it remaining in force.

"Our successful management of the health impacts of the pandemic and the recovery of the economy, with lower unemployment and stronger growth than forecast last year, mean we can remove the temporary protection. "This is another welcome sign that the economic recovery continues apace," David Parker said. The repeal of the emergency notification regime will take effect on June 7 and bring into place a narrower national security and public order call-in power. This allows screening of investments in strategically important businesses that do not normally require consent under the Overseas Investment Act, such as those involving the acquisition of military technology or critical national infrastructure. The call-in power is part of the Government's reform of overseas investment rules and adds to the changes to rules covering foreign purchases of housing and farmland. The reform aims to strike the right balance between facilitating productive investment and managing risks where they arise.

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Next Step for Regional Economic Recovery

The government has taken the next step to boost regional economic recovery with the establishment of the new fund to replace the Provincial Growth Fund. Economic and Regional Development Minister Stuart Nash told the annual conference of economic development agencies, local government representatives and chambers of commerce the new fund is a vital part of post-COVID recovery efforts. "Today we are launching the $200 million Regional Strategic Partnership Fund, which delivers on a manifesto commitment to keep supporting economic recovery in the regions," Mr Nash said. "Over this Parliamentary term the RSPF has three goals. It will work in local partnerships to enable economic and business development, accelerate Māori economic aspirations, and support sector transformation. Each region will help decide its own priorities.

"Central government will partner with local government, iwi, businesses, community organisations and other agencies to identify priorities and co-funding opportunities. "Regions will identify priority investments which support the Government's vision of creating more productive, resilient, inclusive, sustainable and Māori-enabling regional economies. "Year one funding is set aside in Budget 2021, from reprioritised funding administered by the Provincial Development Unit (PDU). Further reprioritisation will occur by the PDU to reflect the Minister of Finance's expectation of value for money and targeted investment where it is most needed. “The $200 million fund will be seed funding for regional priorities, with further funding decided on a case by case basis. The investments will be strategically designed to unlock various other sources of capital to get projects underway.

“The PGF invested more than $3.11 billion in regional economic development in its three year life. Existing PGF projects will continue to be progressed. “Our regions are a vital part of New Zealand’s economic strength but have been neglected in the past, stifling economic growth and living standards in regional communities. “We are taking a new approach, focussing on building strong partnerships to help regions realise their economic potential. The PDU will work in consultation with other parts of government and the private sector to ensure a more effective all of government regional economic development strategy. “Creating the Regional Strategic Partnership Fund is a significant move and represents another step toward creating a productive, innovative resilient and sustainable economy.

“Investments are creating enhanced regional and community assets, improving the environment, diversifying economic activity, enabling opportunities for wider investment by local government, iwi and businesses, and boosting employment. “The PDU will continue to have management and oversight of the new fund. It has a track record of regional investment in loans, equity and grants, and manages $4.5 billion in eight separate funds which are contributing significantly to building our regional economies. “This process will overcome longstanding issues and barriers which have previously held back regions, while contributing to our economic recovery from COVID-19 and laying the foundation for our future,” Mr Nash said. The PDU will adopt a new name to reflect its new focus. It will be known as Kānoa, or the Regional Economic Development and Investment Unit. Kānoa has a broad meaning through proverb and whakataukī, with reference to home fires, and to the guardian of the store house who helped others to thrive.

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5、Public Finance

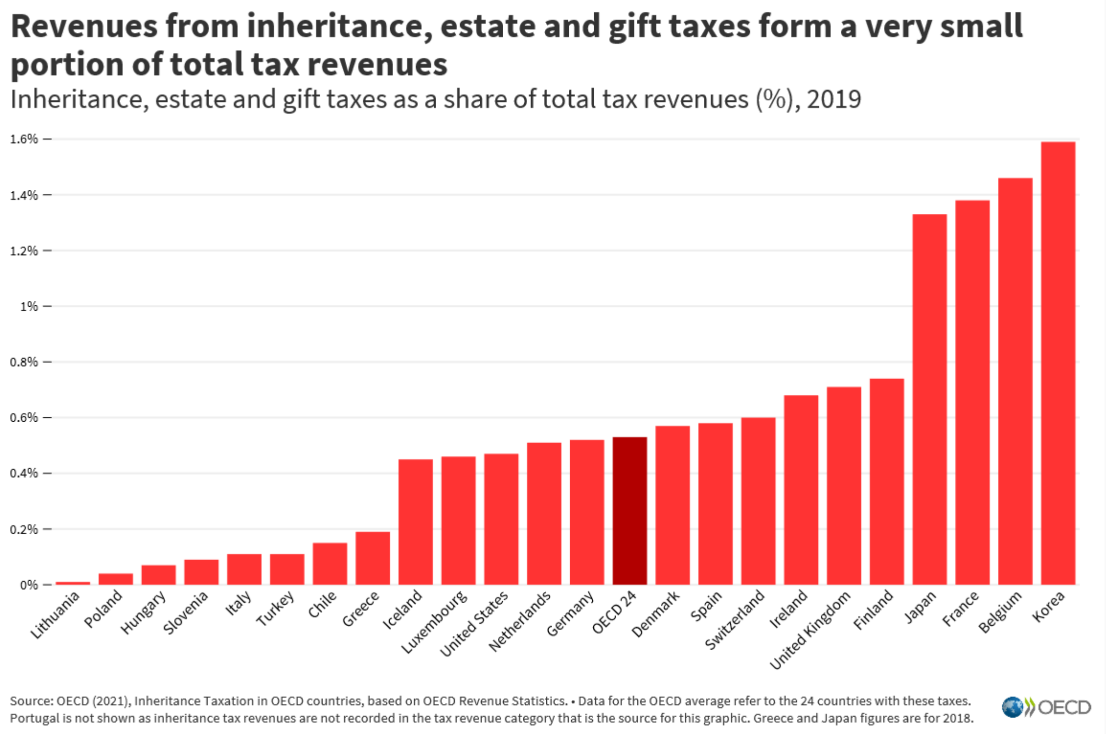
Asia-Pacific

Inheritance, Estate and Gift Taxes Could Play a Stronger Role in Addressing Inequality and Improving Public Finances

Inheritance taxation can be an important instrument to address inequality, particularly in the current context of persistently high wealth inequality and new pressures on public finances linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new OECD report.

Inheritance Taxation in OECD Countries provides a comparative assessment of inheritance, estate and gift taxes across the 37-member OECD, and explores the potential role these taxes could play in raising revenues, addressing inequalities and improving the efficiency of tax systems in the future. The report highlights the high degree of wealth concentration in OECD countries as well as the unequal distribution of wealth transfers, which further reinforces inequality. On average, the inheritances and gifts reported by the wealthiest households (top 20%) are close to 50 times higher than those reported by the poorest households (bottom 20%).

The report points out that inheritance taxes - particularly those that target relatively high levels of wealth transfers - can reduce wealth concentration and enhance equality of opportunity. It also notes that inheritance taxes have generally been found to generate lower efficiency costs than other taxes on the wealthy, and to be easier to assess and collect than other forms of wealth taxation. A majority of OECD countries currently levy inheritance or estate taxes – 24 in total. However, these taxes typically raise very little revenue. Today, only 0.5% of total tax revenues are sourced from inheritance, estate and gift taxes on average across the countries that levy them.



Generous tax exemptions and other forms of relief are a key factor limiting revenue from these taxes, according to the report. In addition to limiting revenue, relief provisions primarily benefit the wealthiest households, reducing the effective progressivity of inheritance and estate taxes. Individuals are often able to pass on significant amounts of wealth tax-free to their close relatives thanks to high tax exemption thresholds. Tax relief is also common for transfers of specific assets (e.g. main residence, business and farm assets, pension assets, and life insurance policies). In a number of countries, inheritance and estate taxes can also largely be avoided through in-life gifts, due to their more favourable tax treatment. These provisions reduce the number of wealth transfers that are subject to taxation, sometimes significantly so. For instance, across eight countries with available data, the share of estates subject to inheritance taxes was lowest in the United States (0.2%) and the United Kingdom (3.9%) and was highest in Switzerland (12.7%) (Canton of Zurich) and Belgium (48%) (Brussels-Capital region).

“While a majority of OECD countries levy inheritance and estate taxes, they play a more limited role than they could in raising revenue and addressing inequalities, because of the way they have been designed,” said Pascal Saint-Amans, director of the OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration. “There are strong arguments for making greater use of inheritance taxes, but better design will be needed if these taxes are to achieve their objectives.” The report underlines the wide variation in inheritance tax design across countries. The level of wealth that parents can transfer to their children tax-free ranges from close to USD 17 000 in Belgium (Brussels-Capital region) to more than USD 11 million in the United States. Tax rates also differ. While a majority of countries apply progressive tax rates, one-third apply flat rates, and tax rate levels vary widely. The report proposes a range of reform options to enhance the revenue potential, efficiency and fairness of inheritance, estate and gift taxes, while noting that reforms will depend on country-specific circumstances.

It finds strong fairness arguments in favour of an inheritance tax levied on the value of the assets that beneficiaries receive, with an exemption for low-value inheritances. Levying an inheritance tax on a lifetime basis - on the overall amount of wealth received by beneficiaries over their lifetime through both gifts and inheritances - would be particularly equitable and reduce avoidance opportunities, but could increase administrative and compliance costs. Scaling back regressive tax reliefs, better aligning the tax treatment of gifts and inheritances and preventing avoidance and evasion are also identified as policy priorities. To make these taxes more acceptable by the public at large, the report underlines the need to provide citizens with information on inequality and the way inheritance and estate taxes work, as these tend to be misunderstood. “Inheritance taxation is not a silver bullet, however,” said Mr Saint-Amans. “Other reforms, particularly in relation to the taxation of personal capital income and capital gains, are key to ensuring that tax systems help reduce inequality. The OECD will be undertaking new work in that area, in particular as the progress made on international tax transparency and the exchange of information is giving countries a unique opportunity to revisit personal capital taxation.”

Experts from the OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration will lead a webinar discussion of the report on Wednesday 12 May 2021 at 11:00 CEST. Register. Further information on Inheritance Taxation in OECD Countries is also available at:

http://oe.cd/inheritancetax. Media enquiries should be directed to Pascal Saint-Amans, Director, OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration (+33 1 4524 9108), David Bradbury, Head of the OECD's Tax Policy and Statistics division (+33 1 4524 1597), or to Lawrence Speer (+33 1 4524 7970) in the OECD Media Office (+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.

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Defying Predictions, Remittance Flows Remain Strong During COVID-19 Crisis

Despite COVID-19, remittance flows remained resilient in 2020, registering a smaller decline than previously projected. Officially recorded remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries reached $540 billion in 2020, just 1.6 percent below the 2019 total of $548 billion, according to the latest Migration and Development Brief. The decline in recorded remittance flows in 2020 was smaller than the one during the 2009 global financial crisis (4.8 percent). It was also far lower than the fall in foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to low- and middle-income countries, which, excluding flows to China, fell by over 30 percent in 2020. As a result, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries surpassed the sum of FDI ($259 billion) and overseas development assistance ($179 billion) in 2020.

The main drivers for the steady flow included fiscal stimulus that resulted in better-than-expected economic conditions in host countries, a shift in flows from cash to digital and from informal to formal channels, and cyclical movements in oil prices and currency exchange rates. The true size of remittances, which includes formal and informal flows, is believed to be larger than officially reported data, though the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on informal flows is unclear. “As COVID-19 still devastates families around the world, remittances continue to provide a critical lifeline for the poor and vulnerable,” said Michal Rutkowski, Global Director of the Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice at the World Bank. “Supportive policy responses, together with national social protection systems, should continue to be inclusive of all communities, including migrants.”

Remittance inflows rose in Latin America and the Caribbean (6.5 percent), South Asia (5.2 percent) and the Middle East and North Africa (2.3 percent). However, remittance flows fell for East Asia and the Pacific (7.9 percent), for Europe and Central Asia (9.7 percent), and for Sub-Saharan Africa (12.5 percent). The decline in flows to Sub-Saharan Africa was almost entirely due to a 28 percent decline in remittance flows to Nigeria. Excluding flows to Nigeria, remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa increased by 2.3 percent, demonstrating resilience. The relatively strong performance of remittance flows during the COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted the importance of timely availability of data. Given its growing significance as a source of external financing for low- and middle-income countries, there is a need for better collection of data on remittances, in terms of frequency, timely reporting, and granularity by corridor and channel.

“The resilience of remittance flows is remarkable. Remittances are helping to meet families’ increased need for livelihood support,” said Dilip Ratha, lead author of the report on migration and remittances and head of KNOMAD. “They can no longer be treated as small change. The World Bank has been monitoring migration and remittance flows for nearly two decades, and we are working with governments and partners to produce timely data and make remittance flows even more productive." The World Bank is assisting member states in monitoring the flow of remittances through various channels, the costs and convenience of sending money, and regulations to protect financial integrity that affect remittance flows. It is working with the G20 countries and the global community to reduce remittance costs and improve financial inclusion for the poor.

With global growth expected to rebound further in 2021 and 2022, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to increase by 2.6 percent to $553 billion in 2021 and by 2.2 percent to $565 billion in 2022. Even as many high-income nations have made significant progress in vaccinating their populations, infections are still high in several large developing economies and the outlook for remittances remains uncertain. The global average cost of sending $200 remained high at 6.5 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, more than double the Sustainable Development Goal target of 3 percent. Average remittance costs were the lowest in South Asia (4.9 percent), while Sub-Saharan Africa continued to have the highest average cost (8.2 percent). Supporting the remittance infrastructure and keeping remittances flowing includes efforts to lower fees.

Regional Remittance Trends

Formal remittance flows to the East Asia and Pacific region fell by an estimated 7.9 percent in 2020 to around $136 billion due to the adverse impact of COVID-19. Positive growth in remittances from the United States and Asia helped to mostly offset declines from the Middle East and Europe, which fell by 10.6 percent and 10.8 percent respectively in 2020. The top recipients in terms of the share of remittances in GDP in 2020 include many smaller economies such as Tonga (38 percent), Samoa (19 percent), and Marshall Islands (13 percent). For 2021, a modest growth of about 2.1 percent is expected due to anticipated recovery in major host economies such as Saudi Arabia, the United States and the United Arab Emirates. Remittance costs: According to the World Bank Remittances Prices Worldwide, the average cost of sending $200 to the region fell slightly to 6.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020. The lowest-cost corridors in the region averaged 3 percent for transfers primarily to the Philippines, while the highest-cost corridors, excluding South Africa to China, which is an outlier, averaged 13 percent.

Remittances to Europe and Central Asia fell by about 9.7 percent to $56 billion in 2020 as the global pandemic and weak oil prices had a significant impact on migrant workers across the region. The economic crisis of 2020 was not unprecedented compared to the past crises of 2009 and 2015, which saw remittances to the region fall by 11 and 15 percent, respectively. Nearly all the countries in the region experienced declines in remittances in 2020. The depreciation of the Russian ruble significantly lowered the US dollar value of remittance flows to the region. For 2021, remittance flows are estimated to fall further by 3.2 percent as the region's economies are expected to recover from the crisis slowly. Remittance costs: The average cost of sending $200 to the region fell modestly to 6.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020. Russia remained the lowest-cost sender of remittances globally, with the cost of remitting from the country falling from 2.1 percent to 1 percent. Within the region, the differences in costs across corridors are substantial: the highest costs for sending remittances were from Turkey to Bulgaria, while the lowest costs for sending remittances were from Russia to Georgia.

Remittances flows to Latin America and the Caribbean grew an estimated 6.5 percent to $103 billion in 2020. While COVID-19 caused a sudden decrease in the volume of remittances in the second quarter of 2020, remittances rebounded during the third and fourth quarters. The improvement in the employment situation in the United States, although not yet to pre-pandemic levels, supported the increase in remittance flows to countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras and Jamaica, for whom the bulk of remittances originate from migrants working in the United States. On the other hand, the weaker economic situation in Spain negatively affected remittance flows to Bolivia (-16 percent), Paraguay (-12.4 percent) and Peru (-11.7 percent) in 2020. In 2021, remittance flows to the region are expected to grow by 4.9 percent. Remittance costs: The cost of remittance transfers to the region was 5.6 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020. In many smaller remittance corridors, however, costs continue to be exorbitant. For example, the cost of sending money to Cuba exceeds 9 percent. Sending money from Japan to Brazil is also expensive (11.5 percent).

Remittance flows to the Middle East and North Africa region rose by 2.3 percent to about $56 billion in 2020. The growth is largely credited to strong remittance flows to Egypt and Morocco. Flows to Egypt increased 11 percent to a record high of nearly $30 billion in 2020, while flows to Morocco rose 6.5 percent. Also registering an increase was Tunisia (2.5 percent). In contrast, other economies in the region experienced losses in 2020, with Djibouti, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan posting double-digit declines. In 2021, remittances to the region is likely to grow 2.6 percent due to moderate growth in the euro area and weak outflows from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Remittance costs: The cost of sending $200 to the region fell slightly in the fourth quarter of 2020 to 6.6 percent. Costs vary greatly across corridors: the cost of sending money from high-income countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to Lebanon remained very high, mostly in the double digits. On the other hand, sending money from GCC countries to Egypt and Jordan costs around 3 percent in some corridors.

Inward remittance flows to South Asia rose by about 5.2 percent in 2020 to $147 billion, driven by surge in flows to Bangladesh and Pakistan. In India, the region's largest recipient country by far, remittances fell by just 0.2 percent in 2020, with much of the decline due to a 17 percent drop in remittances from the United Arab Emirates, which offset resilient flows from the United States and other host countries. In Pakistan, remittances rose by about 17 percent, with the biggest growth coming from Saudi Arabia followed by the European Union countries and the United Arab Emirates. In Bangladesh, remittances also showed a brisk uptick in 2020 (18.4 percent), and Sri Lanka witnessed remittance growth of 5.8 percent. In contrast, remittances to Nepal fell by about 2 percent, reflecting a 17 percent decline in the first quarter of 2020. For 2021, it is projected that remittances to the region will slow slightly to 3.5 percent due to a moderation of growth in high-income economies and a further expected drop in migration to the GCC countries. Remittance costs: The average cost of sending $200 to the region stood at 4.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020, the lowest among all the regions. Some of the lowest-cost corridors, originating in the GCC countries and Singapore, had costs below the SDG target of 3 percent owing to high volumes, competitive markets, and deployment of technology. But costs are well over 10 percent in the highest-cost corridors.

Remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa declined by an estimated 12.5 percent in 2020 to $42 billion. The decline was almost entirely due to a 27.7 percent decline in remittance flows to Nigeria, which alone accounted for over 40 percent of remittance flows to the region. Excluding Nigeria, remittance flows to Sub-Saharan African increased by 2.3 percent. Remittance growth was reported in Zambia (37 percent), Mozambique (16 percent), Kenya (9 percent) and Ghana (5 percent). In 2021, remittance flows to the region are projected to rise by 2.6 percent, supported by improving prospects for growth in high-income countries. Data on remittance flows to Sub-Saharan Africa are sparse and of uneven quality, with some countries still using the outdated Fourth IMF Balance of Payments Manual rather than the Sixth, while several other countries do not report data at all. High-frequency phone surveys in some countries reported decreases in remittances for a large percentage of households even while recorded remittances reported by official sources report increases in flows. The shift from informal to formal channels due to the closure of borders explains in part the increase in the volume of remittances recorded by central banks. Remittance costs: Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most expensive region to send money to, where sending $200 costs an average of 8.2 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020. Within the region, which experiences high intra-regional migration, it is expensive to send money from South Africa to Botswana (19.6 percent), Zimbabwe (14 percent to), and to Malawi (16 percent). Detailed analysis of global and regional trends are available in the Migration and Development Brief 34 at www.knomad.org and http://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/.

World Bank Group Response to COVID-19 (coronavirus)
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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World Bank USD 2.5 Billion 5-Year Bond Mobilizes Finance for Sustainable Development

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) priced a 2.5 billion 5-year Sustainable Development Bond maturing in July 2026. The deal attracted a wide variety of investors with more than 75 orders and an order book reaching over $3.1 billion with strong demand from central banks and official institutions. Investors included those integrating Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) criteria in their investment process, as well as those seeking to achieve positive impact through the selection of issuers, like the World Bank, that incorporate climate action and sustainability throughout their operations. BofA Securities, Citi, J.P. Morgan, and Nomura are the lead managers for the transaction. The bond will be listed on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange. Against a market tightening backdrop, the bond priced at a spread vs. the reference US Treasury of +13.55 basis points, resulting in an equivalent annual yield of 0.963%. *"We are grateful to the investors in today's issue, and all who support the World Bank's mission through the purchase of its bonds,"* said **Jingdong Hua, Vice President and Treasurer, World Bank**. *"Their investment leverages World Bank shareholders' capital to mobilize financing in support of sustainable development to achieve positive environmental and social impact, including critical COVID-19 response projects and programs."*

Investor Distribution

By Geography		**By Investor Type**	
Asia	45%	Central Banks/Official Institutions	63%
EMEA	38%	Banks/Bank Treasuries/Corporates	19%

Americas	17%	Asset Managers/Insurance/Pension Funds	18%

Lead Manager Quotes

"On this transaction, the World Bank demonstrated once again its strong sponsorship from the global investor base, particularly central banks and official institutions. In a difficult market backdrop, they succeeded in securing over 60% of support from this investor segment. This US dollar benchmark rounds off an incredible series of seven-dollar financings for a total of US dollar 40 billion from the funding team over the fiscal year," said **Adrien de Naurois, Managing Director & Head of EMEA Investment Grade Syndicate, BofA Securities.** *"We are delighted to be involved in one of the World Bank's final US dollar benchmark outing for their 2020/21 fiscal year and first 5-year benchmark since October 2020. With this transaction, the World Bank has achieved their tightest pricing spread vs. mid-swaps since 2018 and one of the lowest Treasury spreads in the sector year-to-date. This transaction comes near the end of the World Bank funding year in the public USD market, and caps a series of landmark issues. Congratulations to the World Bank Treasury team on the success of their dollar funding program this year,"* said **Philip Brown, Head of SSA DCM, Citi.**

"The World Bank remains a market leader in US dollar Sovereign, Supranational and Agency (SSA) issuance since the pandemic started, having now issued its seventh US dollar fixed rate benchmark in the 2020-2021 fiscal year. The USD 2.5 billion Sustainable Development Bond was priced at IBRD's tightest mid-swap reoffer spread for the 5-year tenor since 2018. J.P. Morgan was proud to again partner with the World Bank team in this important funding exercise, whose net proceeds will go towards achieving the World Bank's twin goals of eliminating extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity," said **Keith Price, Head of Frequent Borrower Group, J.P. Morgan.** *"In what has been an extraordinary period of unprecedented market conditions, the World Bank continues to demonstrate broad market access supported by the highest quality real money investors. In today's trade, central banks and official institutions continued their strong run of dominating the orderbooks (63%), ably supported by the usual granular participation of real money, especially from the United States where the World Bank continues to be held in particularly high esteem. This reflects not just the World Bank's top tier credit quality but more importantly a continued investor relations effort to engage and educate investors,"* said **Spencer Dove, Head of SSA DCM, Nomura.**

Transaction Summary

Issuer:	World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD)
Issuer rating:	Aaa /AAA

Amount:	USD 2.5 billion
Settlement date:	May 25, 2021
Maturity date:	July 15, 2026
Issue price:	99.559%
Issue yield:	0.963% semi-annual
Denomination:	USD 1,000
Coupon:	0.875% p.a., payable semi-annually in arrear
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	US459058JX27
Clearing system:	Fedwire, Clearstream, Euroclear
Lead managers:	BofA Securities, Citi, J.P. Morgan, Nomura
Senior co-lead managers:	Castle Oak, Daiwa

For more information on the World Bank Group and COVID-19: www.worldbank.org/en/who-we-are/news/coronavirus-covid19

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 05/18/2021

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Fiera Capital Invests in World Bank Sustainable Development Bonds and Raises Awareness for the Importance of Water and Ocean Resources

The World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, Aaa/AAA) issued today a COP 37.275 billion (USD equivalent 10 million), 5-year Sustainable Development Bond. The World Bank launched the bond as a part of a campaign to raise awareness for the vital role of the world's freshwater and marine resources and the importance of addressing water and ocean pollution. Fiera Capital was the sole investor in this transaction which was purchased for the Fiera Multi-Strategy Income fund. J.P. Morgan was the sole underwriter and distributor of the bond. This bond is the latest example of the World Bank's engagement with investors around specific development challenges and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through this engagement, the World Bank and Fiera Capital are raising awareness for SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation, and SDG 14, Life Below Water. The COVID-19 pandemic poses additional threats to water and oceans as difficult short-term choices between health and the environment result in an increased use of single-use plastics and increased production of medical waste, which can end up in the Earth's oceans.

The World Bank, as the largest multilateral funder for ocean and water projects in developing countries, is committed to ensuring access to safe and clean water and the sustainable use of ocean and marine resources. The World Bank's overall oceans program includes projects that range from implementing large regional fisheries programs, to tackling all sources of marine pollution, protecting critical marine habitats and supporting coastal development around the globe. The World Bank champions the Blue Economy agenda more generally, finding solutions and providing the analytical work needed for governments to create an enabling environment for the sustainable development of coastal, marine economies. This includes through support from PROBLUE, a multi-donor trust fund housed at the World Bank. *"We are extremely pleased to once again be partnering with the World Bank, a global leader in the impact investing space, in a bond that combines financial return and contributes to a more sustainable future. Water is a critical aspect of human life and these Sustainable Development Bonds are a focused way to raise awareness for Sustainable Development Goals ("SDG") 6, Clean Water and Sanitation, and SDG 14, Life Below Water."* said **Nicolas Vaugeois, Vice President & Co-lead Portfolio Manager.**

"Fiera Capital and the World Bank share a common vision of integrating ESG factors into financial decisions and the firm belief that responsible investing is profitable. Similar to our 2019 investment, the transaction announced today will have a direct and positive impact by supporting sustainable development activities financed by the World Bank. It also helps to raise awareness for the environment, protecting water and ocean resources that are essential to sustaining health and well-being across the globe. We are very proud of this second collaboration with the World Bank." said **Alexandre Cousineau, Vice President & Co-Lead Portfolio Manager.** *"We are grateful to again have the opportunity to work with Fiera Capital and support their efforts to highlight the critical need to protect water and ocean resources – especially since COVID has exacerbated the challenges to ensure clean water and oceans. We appreciate Fiera Capital's ongoing interest in the World Bank's sustainable development activities and investment in our bonds,"* said **Heike Reichelt, Head of World Bank's Investor Relations and Sustainable Finance.**

The World Bank supports programs and activities in its member countries designed to achieve a positive social and environmental impact in line with the World Bank's twin goals of eliminating extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity. These "twin goals" are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). World Bank bonds are consistent with the sustainability bond guidelines published by the International Capital Markets Association. A key priority for the World Bank's engagement in the capital markets is to build strategic partnerships with investors to raise awareness for the role of private sector financing in sustainable development. *The project examples mentioned in this press release are for illustrative purposes only and no assurance can be provided that disbursements for projects with these* *specific characteristics will be made by the World Bank during the term of the bonds described herein.*

Transaction Summary

Issuer:	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD
Issuer rating:	Aaa/AAA (Moody's / S&P)
Maturity	5-year
Amount:	COP 37.275 billion
Settlement date:	27 May 2021
Coupon:	4.75% per annum
Coupon payment dates:	1 July annually from and including 1 July 2022 up to and including the maturity date
Maturity Date:	1 July 2026
Issue price:	100.00%
Listing:	Luxembourg Stock Exchange
ISIN:	XS2347286952
Clearing system:	Euroclear/Clearstream
Lead manager:	J.P. Morgan Securities plc

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 05/27/2021

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ADB Launches Tax Hub to Enhance Domestic Resource Mobilization and International Tax Cooperation

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) today launched an Asia Pacific Tax Hub to create an open and inclusive platform to promote strategic policy dialogue, improve knowledge sharing, and strengthen coordination on tax policy and administration among ADB, its members, and development partners. The hub will maximize regional and international resources to strengthen domestic resource mobilization (DRM) and international tax cooperation (ITC) in ADB's developing member countries (DMCs). "Domestic resource mobilization has emerged as a major strategic priority for our DMCs at this moment. It will be vital in the effort to address debt sustainability and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals," ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa said in a seminar at ADB's 54th Annual Meeting. "The lack of a pan-regional tax community has been a unique and significant shortcoming for Asia and the Pacific. To address this, I would like to announce today the official launch of the Asia Pacific Tax Hub." The hub will support DMCs on three main building blocks: preparation of medium-term revenue strategies (MTRS); roadmaps for the automation of tax administration, and proactive participation in international tax initiatives.

The hub aims to play a key role in these agendas by stimulating regional dialogue and knowledge sharing on needed reforms. Through the hub, ADB will:

coordinate closely with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to support DMCs as they formulate country-specific MTRS, with activities such as regional workshops in collaboration with the Platform for Collaboration on Tax and diagnostic tools like the Tax Administration Diagnostic Assessment Tool;

conduct needs assessments to prepare roadmaps for the automation of tax administrations in DMCs, and support their implementation in collaboration with development partners and leading countries in this area;

facilitate policy dialogue with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and stimulate proactive participation of DMCs in the Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) and the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes;

and apply its financial instruments, such as policy-based and project lending, and technical assistance to promote DRM, adoption of international tax standards, and strengthened technology investment by revenue agencies.

ADB is establishing a secretariat to operationalize the hub and plans to organize a Steering Committee to bring together key development partners and DMCs willing to actively engage in the hub. It will work closely together with the hub secretariat to lead the operation of the hub.

The hub will organize a first High-Level Conference by the fourth quarter of 2021 to report on progress and discuss next steps on the three building blocks of the hub, including details of the operations of the hub secretariat and Steering Committee. Mr. Asakawa was joined in the seminar by Japan Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, and Minister of State for Financial Services Taro Aso; IMF Assistant Director of Fiscal Affairs Department Katherine Baer; World Bank Group Acting Vice President for Equitable Growth, Finance, and Institutions and Director of Prospects Group Ayhan Kose; and OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration Director Pascal Saint-Amans. Singapore Deputy Commissioner of Inland Revenue Authority Huey Min Chia-Tern moderated the panel. The panel also included representatives from tax authorities from Australia, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand, and the Department of Finance of the Philippines.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/03/2021

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COVID-19 Pandemic Spurs Asia's Focus on Tax, Resource Mobilization Reform

After spending heavily to support their economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, countries in Asia and the Pacific need to look to tax and financial management reforms to mobilize resources for a sustainable, equitable recovery. “The health crisis offers a unique opportunity for countries to mobilize domestic resources and reshape their tax systems to create more equitable and environmentally sustainable societies for the long term.” Since early 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic, the worst health crisis in a century, has forced governments in Asia and the Pacific to carry out unprecedented1 levels of spending to try to preserve services, prop up businesses, and protect jobs as economies slumped and tax revenue plummeted.

In developing Asia, alone, governments had committed close to $3.7 trillion2 to respond to the pandemic as of March 2021 but even with this eye-wateringly large sum, economic losses for the region are estimated by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) at between $1.4 trillion to $2.2 trillion for 2020 alone.3 ADB also estimates the region will lose up to 167 million jobs with 78 million more people falling into extreme poverty, undoing several years of progress in poverty reduction.4 Income inequality, already, a significant problem in the region, has become even more marked as the vulnerable, including women and informal workers, have suffered job losses and slumping incomes at a faster rate than other groups. The rollout of vaccines is providing some light at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel, but it will take time for economies to gear back up to their pre-pandemic growth rates. Many fiscally fragile nations, which have already spent heavily to shore up their economies, will face a prolonged period of low revenues, while further borrowing to fund short-term needs will exacerbate that fragility.

Higher tax yields would boost government coffers

If the region is to make up lost ground and continue progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals in areas from poverty reduction to climate change and gender inequality, governments need to find new ways to mobilize domestic resources through the likes of reshaped tax systems, deeper local currency bond markets, and financial and spending reforms. This is no easy task. Tax yields in developing Asia average about 17.6% of gross domestic product (GDP), well below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 24.9%,5 with many economies below the 15% threshold6 required to drive sustainable development. Even before the pandemic slashed government revenue, many economies had low levels of tax income with inequitable tax systems, high levels of tax evasion, and weak tax administration.

Tax hub to help find collective solutions

Sweeping reforms, however, are not easy for countries to carry out on their own, so the ADB in September 2020 announced it would set up a regional tax hub for sharing knowledge and experiences, strategic dialogues, and development coordination to improve domestic resource mobilization and international tax cooperation. “Putting in place progressive tax systems, cracking down on tax evasion and adopting carbon and environmental taxes can provide fresh resources that governments need for long term development programs." One of the pressing issues the hub aims to address is stronger international cooperation to reduce or eliminate aggressive forms of tax planning by multinational enterprises which seek to exploit gaps in tax systems to artificially reduce their taxable incomes. This practice is known as base erosion and profit shifting, or BEPS. At present, many of Asia and the Pacific's developing member countries do not participate in an initiative to address this issue—the Inclusive Framework on BEPS, or another to reduce tax evasion—the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes. In providing a venue for collaboration with international organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the OECD and the World Bank and regional tax associations, the hub will, among other things, help countries develop medium-term revenue-raising strategies. It will also support tax administrations to digitalize their systems and to design International Tax Cooperation programs.7

Many options for broadening revenue

The options for cash-strapped governments to mobilize fresh resources are wide. Removing exemptions for personal income tax, imposing wealth and intergenerational taxes and putting in place, or strengthening, carbon and environmental taxes will all help expand a country's tax base. In, addition shifting to a multilateral consensus-based system for taxing the digitalized economy will provide resources, while avoiding the potential for double, or even triple, taxation. Establishing more progressive tax systems and cracking down on tax evasion will strengthen compliance and tax equitability. This will go a long way to building trust and support amongst groups who often feel the richest citizens don't pay their fair share. Property taxes in particular offer significant scope for raising revenue. In the Philippines, the national government is carrying out a property valuation reform program which is expected to boost real property tax collections by local government by 25% from 2023.8 This offers a model for potential replication by other developing countries in the region. "An overriding principle must be to ensure tax systems are equitable, particularly as countries move from crisis to recovery and many groups remain highly vulnerable." To strengthen compliance, governments need to make it easier for unregistered businesses and individuals to get onto the tax roll. They can also make greater use of online tools to smooth and speed up the tax lodgment and payment processes, while increasing supervision of the wealthiest taxpayers, including multinational enterprises and high net worth individuals.9

COVID-19 pandemic brings fresh challenges and opportunities

A fresh challenge for governments comes from changing global trends that have accelerated as a result of COVID-19, such as the shift towards cashless digital financial transactions and the rise of online businesses and independent gig economy workers. "Tax actions while vital on their own, need to go hand in hand with other measures, including improving financial management and developing medium-term budget plans to reduce resource wastage, and lessen reliance on external borrowings." A number of developing economies in the region have been responding to these changes already by taxing domestic e-commerce businesses, as well as drawing up or imposing taxes on foreign-based technology companies which provide digital products and services. For example, Thailand now requires foreign digital platforms that lack a local subsidiary company and make more than $57,000 a year to pay a 7% value-added tax on sales, which could generate $96 million in annual revenue for the government.10 Scaling up this source of income can make up for shortfalls from traditional tax sources but at the same, imposing taxes on offshore entities needs to be carefully designed or it could invite harsh reciprocal action in overseas markets.

"Stressed economies will need support to move forward and ADB is providing wide-ranging assistance to its developing member countries to help them transition from crisis to recovery." Tax authorities can also do more to use big data and advanced analytics to pinpoint noncompliant individuals and companies to either encourage them to meet their obligations, or, if necessary, deploy auditing teams for high-risk cases.11 These tax options need to be tailored to the needs of each country, reflecting their national circumstances. An overriding principle must be to ensure tax systems are equitable, particularly as countries move from crisis to recovery and many groups remain highly vulnerable.

Coordinating revenue-raising with targeted spending

"Developing more progressive and comprehensive tax systems, strengthening financial management and working with partners will give developing economies in Asia and the Pacific the fiscal resources they need to hold fast on a path to a greener and more equitable future." Tax actions while vital, need to go hand in hand with other measures, including improving financial management and developing medium-term budget plans to reduce resource wastage. There is also a need to lessen reliance on overseas borrowing, and for governments to provide policies that encourage more investment. These measures need to be supported by strong communications so that tax reforms are accepted and complied with. Developing more progressive and comprehensive tax systems, strengthening financial management, and working with partners, including ADB, will help give developing economies in Asia and the Pacific the resources they need to remain on a path toward a more sustainable, and inclusive future.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/03/2021

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ADB's Net Allocable Income Reaches $1.13 Billion

The Board of Governors of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) today approved the bank's annual financial statements. It also adopted a resolution to allocate $1.13 billion in net allocable income from 2020 ordinary capital resources, the highest in

ADB's history. The 2020 net allocable income is $62.5 million higher than in 2019, largely led by an increase in income from equity investments and sovereign lending operations. ADB's ordinary reserve will be allocated $734.3 million to support the bank's capital adequacy and provide an earnings base to generate net income. The Asian Development Fund, which provides grants to ADB's low-income developing member countries (DMCs), will receive $292.4 million. The Technical Assistance Special Fund, which provides a stable and predictable funding source for ADB's technical assistance, will receive $90 million. The Asia Pacific Disaster Response Fund, which provides assistance to DMCs for life-saving purposes in the immediate aftermath of major disasters triggered by natural hazards, will receive $15 million.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/05/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Increasing Financial Support for Rural Water Conservancies

China's Ministry of Finance has allocated 57.4 billion yuan (8.88 billion U.S. dollars) to subsidize local water conservancy projects in 2021, up 3.1 percent from the previous year. The funds aim to help resolve weak links in water conservancies in rural areas. To reduce damages caused by floods and droughts, 45 percent of the funds, or 25.9 billion yuan, will be used to reinforce small dilapidated reservoirs, harness small and medium-sized rivers, and enhance the prevention of mountain torrents. Better efforts will be made to control over extraction of groundwater in northern China. The funds are expected to raise water use efficiency and upgrade water-conservation facilities in medium-sized irrigation areas, while soil erosion and drinking water safety in rural China will also be addressed.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/03/2021

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China to Step Up Financial Services for New Agricultural Businesses

Chinese financial and agricultural authorities have demanded efforts to improve financial services for new types of agricultural business entities amid the country's push for rural vitalization and agricultural and rural modernization. The rural inclusive financial reform experiments will be expanded, while pilot zones for financial service supporting rural vitalization will be built, according to a document jointly released by the People's Bank of China (PBOC), the central bank and five other government departments. New types of rural business entities such as family farms and farmers' cooperatives have gradually become a vital force in ensuring farmers' income growth, the supply of agricultural products and the transformation and upgrading of the agricultural sector, it said.

The document has specified requirements on strengthening information sharing, promoting the development of credit loans, the innovation of exclusive financial products and services and expanding and diversifying financial channels, as well as improving agricultural insurance service, among others. Financial services for new types of rural businesses will be taken into account in assessing the financial institutions' service performance on rural vitalization, according to the document. The PBOC said it will next work closely with relevant departments, local governments and the financial system to promote industrial integration in rural areas and improve the quality, efficiency and competitiveness of the agricultural sector.

From http://www.news.cn/ 05/25/2021

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JAPAN: Vaccine Drive May Spur Economic Boost from 'Forced Savings' -BOJ

The Bank of Japan expects the national COVID-19 vaccination programme to spur an economic boost from households venturing out, armed with $183 billion in “forced savings” accumulated last year during pandemic-busting, stay-at-home policies. The government is set to decide this week whether to extend a state of emergency in major areas to combat a resurgence in novel coronavirus infection, reinforcing broad expectations that any economic recovery will be slow and fragile. Still, consumption may rebound relatively quickly once vaccines have been distributed widely, as households tap 20 trillion yen ($183 billion) in money they were “forced” to save when measures adopted to stop the spread of the coronavirus, such as early store closing, deprived them of opportunities to spend, showed a Bank of Japan estimate released last week. The amount is roughly 7% of Japan’s disposable income with over half likely held by middle- and high-income households, which spend large amounts on services, the central bank said. “Until effective vaccines become widespread, the spread of COVID-19 may push down private consumption through public health measures and households’ self-restraint behaviour,” it said. But forced saving may come to a sudden end as vaccinations become widespread, the BOJ said.

From https://newsonjapan.com 05/06/2021

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Japan Debt Grows by Record of Over 100 Tril. Yen

Japanese government debt surged at a record pace in fiscal 2020 that ended in March, as spending rose to deal with the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. The

Finance Ministry says the balance of debt stood at about 1,216.4 trillion yen, or about 11.1 trillion dollars, hitting a record high for the fifth straight year. The figure was up 101.9 trillion yen, or about 936 billion dollars, from the previous year. It marks the first growth of more than 100 trillion yen since fiscal 1997, when comparable data became available. Ballooning social security costs are partly to blame. Another factor is the pandemic, which prompted the government to issue bonds worth more than 100 trillion yen for the first time in fiscal 2020. The balance of government bonds stands at 1,074 trillion yen, or about 9.8 trillion dollars, accounting for the bulk of the national debt. The rest are borrowings and short-term financing bills. With the pandemic still raging, Japan's fiscal situation is likely to deteriorate further. The government's budget for the current fiscal year calls for the fresh issuance of bonds worth 43.5 trillion yen, or about 400 billion dollars.

From https://newsonjapan.com 05/11/2021

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Japan Remains World's Biggest Creditor in 2020 for 30th Straight Year

Japan remained the world's largest creditor at the end of 2020 for the 30th straight year, although the yen's appreciation against the U.S. dollar cut the value of its foreign assets, the government said Tuesday. The country's net balance of external assets held by its government, companies and individual investors stood at 356.97 trillion yen ($3.3 trillion), down 0.01 percent from a year earlier and the first decline since 2017, the Finance Ministry said. The yen strengthened against the dollar by nearly 6 yen from a year before, reducing the balance by around 22.9 trillion yen, an official told reporters by a ministry estimate. Japan's total external assets grew 5.1 percent to a record 1,146.13 trillion yen as foreign direct and securities investments increased, with the value of foreign securities held by domestic investors rising.

Its overseas liabilities climbed 7.6 percent to a record 789.16 trillion yen, reflecting more investments in Japan by nonresidents and the higher value of Japanese securities held by foreign investors. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic does not seem to have significantly weakened appetite for foreign investment, the official said, adding that instead it appears that ample funds provided by governments and central banks in their crisis responses led to more transactions to and from overseas. In the reporting year, Germany ranked second with net external assets of 323.47 trillion yen, followed by Hong Kong with 223.09 trillion yen and China with 222.83 trillion yen, according to the ministry. The United States was the biggest net external holder of debts, which were worth 1,460.36 trillion yen.

From https://english.kyodonews.net 05/25/2021

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BOJ Assets Quadruple to ¥714.56 Tril Under Kuroda's Aggressive Easing

Total assets held by the Bank of Japan rose to 714.56 trillion yen ($6.5 trillion) in fiscal 2020, according to the central bank's data, quadrupling in eight years under Governor Haruhiko Kuroda's aggressive monetary easing and growing to 1.3 times the size of the country's economy. Massive purchases of assets such as Japanese government bonds as part of ultra loose monetary policy and increased funding support for companies reeling from the coronavirus pandemic expanded the BOJ's balance sheet in the year through March 31. Before embarking on a raft of bold monetary easing steps under Kuroda, the BOJ's total assets stood at 164 trillion yen at the end of March 2013. The total assets rose from the previous year's 604.48 trillion yen and are bigger than Japan's nominal gross domestic product of 535.72 trillion yen in fiscal 2020. Despite the aggressive monetary easing, the BOJ has yet to achieve its 2 percent inflation target. The goal will still be unattainable when Kuroda's tenure ends in April 2023, according to BOJ projections.

The ratio of assets to GDP is larger than other major central banks including the U.S. Federal Reserve, which has also purchased assets to provide funds to the banking system. Of the BOJ's assets, Japanese government bonds totaled 532.17 trillion yen, up 9.5 percent from a year earlier, and loans to financial institutions marked a 2.3-fold gain to 125.84 trillion yen. Its holdings of exchange-traded funds, or investment funds traded on stock exchanges, jumped 20.7 percent to 35.88 trillion yen. The BOJ is stepping up purchases of ETFs in times of market turmoil. The ETF holdings are currently valued at 51.51 trillion yen with the BOJ having an unrealized profit of 15.44 trillion yen at the end of March. But the central bank would suffer a latent loss on the holdings if the benchmark Nikkei stock average falls to around 20,000, according to its estimate. The pandemic has moved the BOJ's inflation goal further away, prompting it to tweak policy tools to make monetary easing sustainable while addressing the side-effects.

One of the changes made in the March review was to carry out flexible asset purchases by removing its target for buying ETFs at an annual pace of 6 trillion yen, in response to criticism that the BOJ's aggressive buying, which had made it a top holder of Japanese stocks, distorted market mechanisms. BOJ policy board member Hitoshi Suzuki said Wednesday that the central bank needs to continue with ETF purchase but should "constrain" the pace of rise in holdings due to its impact on the balance sheet. In the policy review, the BOJ also decided to allow 10-year Japanese government bond yields to move in a wider range than before by adjusting its purchases, apparently in response to criticism that the bank's massive buying had soaked up liquidity in the market As the BOJ seeks to keep both short-term and long-term interest rates low and stable, it has already gobbled up large amounts of Japanese government bonds, owning over 40 percent of those outstanding.

From https://japantoday.com 05/30/2021

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SOUTH KOREA: To Emerge As No. 1 Chip Powerhouse with 510 Tln-Won Investment by 2030

South Korea said Thursday it plans to provide massive tax incentives and state subsidies to chipmakers to encourage them to spend a combined 510 trillion won (US$453 billion) by 2030, in line with its vision to become a global powerhouse in both memory and non-memory chips. Under the plan dubbed the K-semiconductor blueprint, the government will also draw up a 1.5 trillion-won budget to support the development of next-generation power semiconductors and AI chips, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. Another batch of 1 trillion won worth of low-interest loans will be provided to support facility investment by local chipmakers, including 8-inch wafer foundry lines. South Korea is home to leading global players including Samsung Electronics Co. and SK hynix Inc. The 510 trillion-won investment plan includes 41.8 trillion won in investment estimated for 2021. Aided by a set of supporting measures, South Korea aims to more than double its annual outbound shipments of chips to reach a whopping $200 billion in 2030 from $99.2 billion tallied in 2020.

President Moon Jae-in received a related report in person, as he visited Samsung's semiconductor manufacturing center in Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi Province, which is being developed as the world's largest chip production complex. He pointed out that global competition is getting fiercer in the sector. "The semiconductor industry has moved to an era of competition among countries, beyond competition among companies," he said in a speech at the facilities located 70 kilometers south of Seoul. Other attendees at the event included Gyeonggi Gov. Lee Jae-myung, South Chungcheong Gov. Yang Seung-jo and North Chungcheong Gov. Lee Si-jong, as well as senior executives of such companies as Samsung and SK hynix. Moon stressed that South Korea will "overcome the strong wave of global supply chains being reorganized, through the K-semiconductor strategy, with the public and private sectors joining forces."

Citing some other nations' aggressive support for their chip-making industries, like subsidies and tax breaks, he stated, "Our government will also be united with businesses for (the goal of making the country) a semiconductor powerhouse." The government will designate semiconductors as a "national innovation strategy technology" and increase tax benefits to as much as six times the current level, he said. "Regarding research and development investment, tax deductions of up to 50 percent will be provided," he added. The semiconductor sector has been the key driver of the country's exports, taking up around 20 percent of the country's annual outbound shipments. The sector especially has been among a few winners amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Exports of chips advanced 30.2 percent on-year in April to $9.3

billion, extending their gains to a whopping 10 consecutive months.

South Korea, however, has been lagging behind global peers in terms of non-memory chips. For example, Samsung Electronics accounted for 17 percent of the global foundry market in the first quarter of 2021, falling behind the 55 percent market share held by Taiwan-based TSMC. The foundry business refers to making chips for other companies that do not have a semiconductor plant, such as fabless firms and non-memory chip firms. In terms of the fabless sector, South Korea currently takes up less than 2 percent of the global market. To beef up the sector's competitiveness, the country will establish a new semiconductor cluster covering Pangyo and Yongin, just south of Seoul, which will help local chipmakers operate a stable supply chain, according to the ministry. Pangyo will become the hub for South Korea's fabless industry, with Giheung focusing on the foundry business. Hwaseong and Pyeongtaek will continue to serve as the hub for the production of memory chips.

South Korea's No. 2 chipmaker SK hynix Inc. said earlier it plans to build a new semiconductor complex in Yongin with a budget of 120 trillion won, which has won state approval. To induce chipmakers to carry out scheduled investment plans, the country said it will offer various tax benefits and subsidies. For example, South Korea will offer around 40 to 50 percent tax credits for investments made in R&D projects for new chip technologies, along with 10-20 percent tax benefits for related facilities. The new policy is significant as South Korea currently offers only a 3 percent tax credit for conglomerates' facility investments. The government and the state-run Korea Electric Power Corp. (KEPCO) will support up to 50 percent of the costs needed to build power infrastructures for chip lines. Other plans include lifting unnecessary regulations in terms of chemicals used at the chip production lines.

From https://en.yna.co.kr 05/13/2021

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Domestic Demand on Mild Improvement Track Finance Ministry

South Korea's domestic demand is gradually improving as a slump in the service sector caused by the pandemic has eased, the finance ministry said Friday. In its monthly economic assessment report, the ministry presented a more positive assessment about private consumption than the previous month, when it said a slump in domestic demand has gradually eased. "The manufacturing sector and investment have continued to improve on the back of robust exports, and domestic demand is on a mild improvement path as a slump in the in-person service sector has eased," the Ministry of Economy and Finance said in the Green Book. Asia's fourth-largest economy is recovering from the pandemic as exports of chips and autos, key items, remained solid amid the global economic recovery. Exports, which account for half of the country's economy, jumped 41.1 percent on-year in April to extend their gains to the six month.

The country's industrial output rose for the second straight month in March as the economic recovery has gathered pace. Private spending grew 1.1 percent in the first quarter from three months earlier, rebounding from a 1.5 percent contraction in the final quarter of last year. The domestic use of credit cards grew 18.3 percent on-year in April, marking the third straight month of gains. Sales at department stores rose 26.8 percent on-year last month, slowing from a 63 percent jump in March, according to the ministry. Amid an economic recovery, the county reported the largest job growth in almost seven years in April, with the number of employed people increasing by 652,000 from a year earlier. Last month, consumer inflation grew at the fastest on-year pace in almost four years due to last year's low base and higher prices of farm and oil products.

The Bank of Korea (BOK) froze its key interest rate at a record low of 0.5 percent in April amid a flare-up in COVID-19 cases. The BOK aims to keep inflation at 2 percent over the medium term. President Moon Jae-in said Monday the government will make efforts to help the Korean economy grow at least 4 percent this year. The finance ministry earlier penciled in the growth rate in the mid-to-high 3 percent range. The ministry cited a resurge in COVID-19 cases in emerging countries and growing inflation concerns as potential downside risks for the global economy. Global inflation concerns mounted as U.S. consumer prices shot up 4.2 percent on-year in April, the fastest in 13 years, topping market expectations. Kim Young-hoon, a senior ministry official, said it is doubtful whether U.S. inflationary pressure will be sustainable as the job market remains sluggish.

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BOK to Conduct Mock Test on Functionality of Digital Currency

The Bank of Korea (BOK) said Monday it plans to carry out a mock test on the functionality of a central bank-issued digital currency (CBDC), as the bank seeks to study the potential introduction of a new cryptocurrency. The BOK said it plans to pick an operator of the mock test via bidding to check how CBDC functions in a virtual space. The test is expected to start in August and run until June next year. The central bank will mainly check whether the CBDC can serve as a currency for settlement and remittance and whether holders of CBDC can use it to buy goods and services. In March last year, the BOK began reviewing legal and technological issues to check its capabilities for the possible issuance of such a currency under its three-step scheme. The BOK has said the planned test does not necessarily mean a step toward the actual issuance of a cryptocurrency, but the bank is making necessary preparations "just in case." Global central banks are accelerating their research on digital currencies to brace for a fall in demand for cash and the emergence of cryptocurrencies in the private sector. The central banks in China and Sweden are aggressively preparing to issue CBDCs.

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Investments at Registered Cryptocurrency Exchanges Can Be Protected Regulator

Money deposited at cryptocurrency exchanges that are registered with the government can be protected, but investors would not be protected against price fluctuations, the head of the financial regulator said Wednesday. Eun Sung-soo, chairman of the Financial Services Commission (FSC), called for cryptocurrency investors to move their money to "safer" exchanges. Eun made the remarks as the FSC will enforce a revised law from September that requires cryptocurrency exchanges to register with the regulator under strict requirements. The revised law, which went into effect in March with a six-month grace period, requires banks to issue real-name accounts under stricter guidelines to prevent money laundering. Under the rule, banks will assess a cryptocurrency exchange's transparency, business risks and the possibility of criminal activity. The law makes it impossible for a cryptocurrency exchange to withdraw an investor's money without the investor's consent, Eun said. Currently, only the four biggest exchanges -- Bithumb, Upbit, Coinone and Korbit -- have real-name bank accounts issued by commercial banks, including Shinhan Bank and NH Nonghyup Bank. Minor cryptocurrency exchanges, which are estimated to number around 100, have been using opaque accounts to lure investors. Such accounts enable cryptocurrency exchanges to manage investors' money with their corporate bank accounts. From September 25, minor cryptocurrency exchanges will be banned from withdrawing money for cryptocurrency trading if they have no real-name bank accounts.

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S. Korea to Levy 20 Pct Tax on Cryptocurrency Transactions Starting Next Year As Planned Gov't

South Korea plans to impose a 20 percent income tax on capital gains from cryptocurrency transactions starting next year as planned, the government announced Friday, despite growing investor calls for delaying the taxation plan. The government announced the plan after discussing the matter during a vice-ministerial interagency meeting chaired by Koo Yoon-cheol, head of the government policy coordination under the Prime Minister's Office. Gains from cryptocurrency transactions will be classified as "miscellaneous income" and will be subject to a 20 percent tax starting next year. Virtual asset gains must be reported when filing for general income taxes in May 2023. The Financial Service Commission (FSC), the nation's financial regulator, was also designated as the top government office tasked with overseeing and regulating the virtual asset market. The science ministry was chosen to handle the promotion and growth of the related blockchain industry. Authorities also decided to extend the government's special campaign period for monitoring and clamping down on illegal activities in the virtual asset market until September.

Last month, Finance Minister Hong Nam-ki said the government will press ahead with taxation on transactions of cryptocurrency, which financial authorities categorize as "virtual assets," not virtual currencies. The government also reiterated its stance that "virtual assets cannot be recognized as (real) currency or financial products" and that "no one can ensure" the currently-traded market value of virtual assets. Authorities also plan to restrict cyrptocurrency-related business operators from making transactions using their own companies, in order to prevent price manipulation and unfair activities. According to FSC, the number of domestic cryptocurrency trading companies stood at around 60 as of May 20. Of those, 20 companies have received Information Security Management System certifications to prove their information protection systems are secure. Four firms were found to have adopted systems using real-name withdrawal accounts.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Records Trade Surplus of 2.19 Bln USD in April

Indonesia recorded a trade surplus of 2.19 billion U.S. dollars in April 2021, according to the Central Agency of Statistics on Thursday. Indonesia's export value was 18.48 billion dollars and the import value was 16.29 billion dollars in April, recording a trade surplus for the 12th consecutive month, said the agency's head Kecuk Suhariyanto. Specifically, Indonesia posted a trade surplus with the United States at 1.22 billion dollars, the Philippines at 554.10 million dollars, and India at 439.9 million dollars, while trade deficit occurred with China at 652.1 million dollars, Australia at 418.3 million dollars, and Thailand at 248.1 million dollars. Cumulatively, Indonesia has a trade surplus of 7.72 billion dollars from January to April 2021, up from 2.22 billion dollars in the same period last year.

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CAMBODIA: Central Bank Calls for Cashless Payments to Beat

COVID-19

The National Bank of Cambodia (NBC), also known as the country's Central Bank, on Monday urged customers and retailers to make use of e-wallets and apps to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Southeast Asian nation has been enduring the third wave of COVID-19 community transmission since Feb. 20. The country reported a daily record of 556 COVID-19 cases on Monday, bringing the national case tally to 25,761, with 179 deaths and 18,359 recoveries. "Using digital banking could help reduce the number of COVID-19 transmission by lessening the need for person-to-person transactions," the NBC said in a press statement. NBC is also encouraging the country's major banks and institutions to provide incentives to consumers and businesses who choose cashless transactions over those involving banknotes. "As the regulator in banking sector in Cambodia, it is vital that we work with the industry as part of our concerted national effort to battle the COVID-19 pandemic," NBC's director-general Chea Serey said. "This is why we are encouraging all Cambodians to use e-wallets and payment platforms such as Bakong because they minimize contact and risk," she added.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has urged caution when handling banknotes and advises people to wash their hands thoroughly after handling money, especially when touching or eating food, the statement said. "While we realize that many Cambodians prefer to conduct their transactions in person and often in cash, we would like retailers and customers to become more used to a cashless life and for the payment platforms to do their best to educate and attract people to their apps," Serey said. "Digital transactions are now the new normal." Last year, the NBC launched Cambodia's only integrated payment system, Bakong, that allows customers to do everything-e-wallets, mobile payments, online banking and financial applications-all in one place. NBC's Bakong Pay App connects the country's 23 major financial institutions including banks and mobile payment service providers, allowing consumers and institutions far more flexibility and efficiency in their digital transactions. "With its mandate to promote financial inclusion throughout Cambodia, NBC has been at the forefront of the promotion of digital and electronic payment services," the statement said. "More than 59 percent of Cambodians currently conduct their payment transactions online." Serey said digital payment platforms are one of the country's most effective tools for ensuring that all segments of society have access to banks and banking. "Now, the safety of our population in the face of COVID-19 gives the NBC and other financial institutions another incentive to promote a cashless society," she said.

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MALAYSIA: Central Bank Keeps Policy Rate at 1.75 Pct

Malaysian Central Bank, Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), decided on Thursday to maintain the overnight policy rate at 1.75 percent. The central bank said in a statement that the latest indicators point to continued improvements in Malaysia's economic activity in the first quarter and into April. While the recent re-imposition of containment measures in select locations will affect economic activity in the short term, the impact will be less severe as almost all economic sectors are allowed to operate, said the central bank. The growth trajectory is projected to improve, driven by the stronger recovery in global demand and increased public and private sector expenditure amid continued support from policy measures. Meanwhile, the growth will also be supported by higher production from existing and new manufacturing facilities, particularly in the electrical and electronic products (E&E) and primary-related sub-sectors, as well as oil and gas facilities. The central bank noted that the progress of the domestic COVID-19 vaccine program will lift sentiments and contribute towards recovery in economic activity.

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PHILIPPINES: Central Bank Maintains Interest Rate at 2 Pct

The Philippine central bank on Wednesday maintained the interest rate on overnight reverse repurchase facility at 2.0 percent. The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said the interest rates on the overnight deposit and lending facilities were likewise kept unchanged at 1.5 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively. "Latest inflation forecasts indicate that inflation is likely to settle within the target range in 2021 and 2022," BSP Governor Benjamin Diokno said in an online briefing. "The risks to the inflation outlook are also broadly balanced," Diokno said, adding that the Monetary Board expects the domestic economy to continue to recover in the coming months, supported by the government's targeted fiscal interventions and sustained rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine. Improved prospects overseas should also support the outlook for domestic economic activity, he added. Meanwhile, Diokno warned that the recent surge in COVID-19 infections and the resulting measures to contain it continue to temper market confidence and pose substantial downside risks to domestic demand. Diokno said the Monetary Board believes that sustained support for domestic demand remains a priority for monetary policy, especially as risk aversion continues to hamper credit activity despite ample liquidity in the financial system.

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Philippines' Gross International Reserves Rises to 107.25 Bln USD in April

The Philippines' gross international reserves (GIR) level rose monthly by 2.77 billion U.S. dollars to 107.25 billion U.S. dollars as of April-end, the Philippine central bank said on Friday. The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said the latest GIR level "represents a more than adequate external liquidity buffer, which can help cushion the domestic economy against external shocks." "This buffer is equivalent to 12.3 months' worth of imports of goods and payments of services and primary income," the BSP said in a statement. "It is also about 7.5 times the country's short-term external debt based on original maturity and 5.2 times based on residual maturity," the central bank added.

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Philippines Posts 2.61 Bln USD Balance of Payments Surplus in April

The Philippines' overall balance of payments (BOP) recorded a surplus of 2.61 billion U.S. dollars in April, higher than the 1.67 billion U.S. dollars BOP surplus recorded in the same month last year, the Philippine central bank said. The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) attributed the BOP surplus in April to inflows arising mainly from the national government's bond issuance deposited with the BSP. In a statement released on Wednesday, the BSP said the BOP surplus in April reduced the cumulative BOP deficit for January-April to 231 million U.S. dollars. "Based on preliminary data, this cumulative BOP deficit was partly due to the country's merchandise trade deficit and net outflows of foreign portfolio investments," the central bank said.

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VIETNAM: Tax Payment Extension Totals VNĐ115 Trillion

The total value of taxes and land lease fees under the Government's recently-issued decree on the extension of deadlines for tax payment is VNĐ115 trillion (US$4.97 billion), heard a press conference of the Government on Wednesday. Minister-Chairman of the Government Office Trần Văn Sơn said Decree No 52/2021/NĐ-CP aims to support enterprises, organisations, family businesses and individuals who are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the Decree, a five-month extension will be given to value-added tax of the assessment periods of March, April, May, June, the first quarter and the second quarter this year. This means the payment of VAT of March assessment period will be extended to September. The timeframe for payment of value-added tax of July and August will be extended by four and three months, respectively. Payment of corporate income tax in the first and second quarters will be extended by three months, according to the

Decree. A six-month extension will be given to payment of land rent fees, starting from May 31, 2021. This is the third time the Government has introduced tax and land rent payment deadlines since the first COVID-19 cases were reported in Việt Nam on January 23, 2020. Earlier, the Government promulgated Decree No 41/2020/NĐ-CP dated April 8, 2020 on the extension of deadlines for tax and land rent fee payment and Decree No 109/2020/NĐ-CP providing the extension of time limits for excise tax payment for domestically manufactured or assembled cars. In implementing the two previous decrees, a total of 184,900 dossiers on tax and land lease payment extensions were passed with a total sum of VNĐ87.3 trillion.

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Gov't to Allow HCM City to Retain 23 Per Cent of Its Budget Revenues

Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính has asked the National Assembly to allow HCM City to retain 23 per cent of its budget revenues, up from the previous 18 per cent, to create conditions for sustainable development. HCM City is the country's economic powerhouse with a significant GDP contribution to the national budget, the PM said. Professor Trần Hoàng Ngân, director of the HCM City Development Research Institute, said the decision would help resolve a number of challenges related to road infrastructure, social security, healthcare, and other issues. "If the city received a 1 per cent increase in retained revenue, it would then have an additional VNĐ2 trillion (US$86.748 million), and an increase of 5 per cent would yield an additional VNĐ10 trillion." Dr. Huỳnh Thế Du, public policy lecturer at Fulbright University, said the city needs to be highly competitive to attract large businesses, a highly skilled workforce, and well-off people compared to other cities in the region and in the world. China, for example, has spent a lot of resources on big cities, he added.

At a recent meeting with the PM, Nguyễn Thành Phong, chairman of the city People's Committee, proposed that the government approve the budget retention rate of 23 per cent instead of the current 18 per cent over the next five years. "HCM City has one of the lowest budget retention rate of all cities in the world, and this should change," Phong said. The city contributes 27 per cent to the national budget, and has the lowest retention rate in the country. In the first four months, the city posted a budget collection of VNĐ140 trillion ($6 billion), up 15.7 per cent year-on-year, Phong said. The low budget retention rate has prevented the financial hub of HCM City from addressing traffic jams and school shortages. With only 9 per cent of Việt Nam's total population, the city contributes 24 per cent of the country's GDP. Experts said the city does not have enough money to build more roads as the percentage of retained budget revenue is too low. The city also needs 10,000 additional classrooms every half decade to keep pace with the population increase, with each classroom hosting a standard 30 students. It currently has to pack 40-60 students into a single room, they said. Budget retention ratios for Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, Đà Nẵng and Cần Thơ for the 2016-2020 period are 35, 78, 68, and 91 per cent, respectively, far above HCM City. With a 30 per cent retention rate, Tokyo ranks just above HCM City, with Oslo the highest at 60 per cent. According to the Department of Planning and Investment, the city's total retail sales of goods and revenue from consumer services in the first four months was up 7.9 per cent year-on-year. The city's Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) reached VNĐ329.6 trillion in the first quarter, up 4.58 per cent year-on-year.

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Việt Nam Moves to Establish $1 Billion COVID-19 Vaccine Fund

The Ministry of Finance is seeking the Government's approval for the establishment of a COVID-19 vaccine fund, it announced on Wednesday. The Ministry of Health plans to buy 150 million doses of vaccine to inoculate about 75 million people at an estimated cost of VNĐ25.2 trillion (US$1.09 billion). Of the amount, VNĐ21 trillion will be used to purchase vaccines and the remainder will cover transportation, preservation, distribution and vaccination costs. The MoF said VNĐ16 trillion for vaccine procurement will come from the State budget, while the remaining VNĐ9.2 trillion will be mobilised from localities, businesses and organisations. If the pandemic persists, leading to an annual demand for vaccines, it will be difficult to fulfill the target of having all people inoculated if Việt Nam depends on the State budget only, according to the finance ministry. Therefore, the establishment of the COVID-19 vaccine fund is necessary to meet urgent requirements in the fight against the pandemic and speed up vaccine purchases and imports for the sake of the immunisation drive.

The non-profit fund will manage and co-ordinate its finances for sponsorship, purchase and usage of COVID-19 vaccines. Its operation will be placed under the supervision of State financial management institutions and the State Audit Office of Việt Nam. It must report its budget collection and spending to the Government and the National Assembly, as well as publicise its sources of funding, list of donors and balance. The Government earlier issued a resolution promulgating the purchase and use of vaccines, given the complex developments of COVID-19 across the world and decisions of the Politburo and the Party Central Committee's Secretariat to buy vaccines with money mainly from the State budget along with other legal financial sources. The resolution stipulates that the sources include allocations from the State budget, assistance of organisations, individuals at home and abroad and other legal sources of funding, as well as sums voluntarily paid by vaccine users. By May 19, 1,011,395 doses of COVID-19 vaccines - primarily AstraZeneca - have been administered for frontline workers and medical staff in Việt Nam. About 28,800 people have received the full two doses.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 05/20/2021

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Ministry of Health Receives VNĐ160 Billion and 4 Million Doses of COVID-19 Vaccine

The Ministry of Health has received grants of VNĐ160 billion and 4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine sponsored by the banking industry, Vingroup, Sovico Group and HD Bank. Nguyễn Thanh Long - Minister of Health and other leaders of Departments/Offices under the Ministry of Health were receiving the grants on behalf of the Government at a ceremony at the ministry's headquarter on May 21. Also present at the ceremony were Nguyễn Thị Hồng - Governor of the State Bank of Vietnam, Nghiêm Xuân Thành - Chairman of the Joint Stock Commercial Bank for Foreign Trade of Vietnam (Vietcombank), Lê Đức Thọ - Chairman of Vietnam Joint Stock Commercial Bank for Industry and Trade (Vietinbank), Phan Đức Tú- Chairman of Joint Stock Commercial Bank for Investment and Development of Vietnam (BIDV), and Phạm Đức Ấn - Chairman of Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam (Agribank). The four banks contributed VNĐ100 billion (VNĐ25 billion each) to the COVID-19 vaccine purchasing fund. Vingroup also sponsors 4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to be distributed to the Ministry of Health.

Previously, Vingroup sponsored VNĐ20 billion to the Institute of Vaccines and Medical Biologicals (IVAC) under the Ministry of Health to conduct a research and clinic trial of the "Made in Vietnam" COVID-19 vaccine COVIVAC. Vingroup also sponsors projects to prevent and combat COVID-19 waves including ventilator manufacturing, medical equipment, machines and chemicals for testing SARS-CoV-2 virus; three research studies on rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On behalf of Sovico Group, Phạm Quốc Thanh, General Director of HDBank, said the bank had sponsored VNĐ60 billion for the COVID-19 vaccine purchasing. "We will continue accompanying the Ministry of Health, frontline doctors and nurses fighting against the pandemic." Long said the Ministry of Health was making every effort to guarantee 150 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine for 75 per cent of the Việt Nam's population. Also on May 21, the Government decided the entire amount of money received for COVID-19 prevention through the Vietnamese Fatherland Front will be used to purchase COVID-19 vaccines.

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ADB Signs Green Loan to Build Wind Farms in Vietnam

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) signed on Thursday a 116-million-U.S. dollar green loan to build and operate three wind farms in Vietnam. The Manila-based bank said the project in Quang Tri province in the North Central Coast region will increase Vietnam's wind power capacity by 30 percent, helping the Southeast Asian country meet the rapidly growing demand for energy. The project will generate an average of 422 gigawatt-hours of electricity and avoid an average of 162,430 tons of CO2 emissions annually, said ADB. The ADB said the loan is part of a green loan project financing package arranged and syndicated by the ADB. "It is ADB's first financing of a wind power project in Vietnam and is certified by the Climate Bonds Initiative," the ADB said in a statement.

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South Asia

INDIA: Digitising Land Records Raised Revenue Collections

As government and private bodies shift to digital models for continuity of operations in times of COVID pandemic, the Revenue Department of the Government of Madhya Pradesh is no exception. The department has adopted a digital model of operations and implemented several technology solutions to optimise its revenue generation. Throwing light on the initiatives of the State, Dynaheshwar Patil, Secretary, Department of Revenue, Government of Madhya Pradesh, addressed the Revenue Management & Intelligence Summit 2021. He commenced his address showing consensus with Dr Prithvi Raj's deliberation saying, "I agree that data analytics can play an instrumental role in optimising revenue management for any state. But, to implement such technology-powered tools we need to have data in digital format beforehand." Therefore, not only quality data but also real-time data is required for such solutions, he added. Calling the availability of digital data a challenge, he pointed out that in Madhya Pradesh the challenge of unavailability of data in a digital format. "Till 2019 we had not shifted to online portals and digital services and data unavailability was a major reason for it. However, from 2019 we shifted all the digitised data to an online portal – Bhulekh. Following the shift, we started exploring several other avenues for revenue generation," said Dynaheshwar Patil. Speaking on the potential of revenue generation from land and other related sectors, he said, "In India, Land revenue from agriculture land has been a neglected area due to some historical blunders that happened during the British rule. The sector has been exploited to an extent that today people avoid tapping revenue generation potential from agricultural lands, majorly due to a rise in price. Secondly, the non-agricultural land also called diverted land has a lot of potential for revenue generation such as taxation on residential land, industrial land, etc." These areas of generating revenue are possible but this needs good quality of revenue records. In the pre-independence era, we had a good quality of records as the taxes were collected in an organised manner. But, since the people started ignoring the tax revenue from the land the quality of land records also perished.

“Since 2019 we have started a single portal Bhulekh and we started cleaning the data. Also, we introduced innovative tools to generate revenue.” Mentioning different areas of revenue generation, he said, “As agricultural land is not a preference, we explored other ways like selling copies of land records. This is an important source of revenue for us as we are generating over Rs 100 crore from extending citizen services like Khasrra and others through a digital platform.” Therefore, today we have kiosks to aid citizens to get a copy of the land records. Also, those who have sound knowledge of the internet can even access these from their homes through the Bhulekh portal. Further speaking on digital initiatives, he mentioned, “Apart from this, we have introduced a Revenue Accounting Management System for non-agricultural land. Earlier the taxation and management of non-agricultural land and agricultural land were working in silos and inter-department coordination had gaps. Now Bhullekh portal has been made the primary source to cater to all land schemes.” Inducing these changes in the operations it was seen that in the previous year the target was Rs 400 crore, but even with the COVID pandemic, the state has already collected Rs 500 crore, he added. He mentioned another initiative saying, “We have identified many pieces of land across Madhya Pradesh which have site value. So with this, we can auction these lands to generate more revenues. Hence, to explore more of this area we have a dedicated department Public assessment management department and through this department, we are targeting to collect Rs 5000 crore revenue via online auctions.” While ending his address, he spoke on a few more initiatives. He highlighted that the department is harnessing the potential of the Centre’s ‘Swamitva’ scheme. “Under the scheme, we have covered over 1500 villages in our drone survey creating digital land records, GIS records, the record of rights. Our potential has increased and we have estimated that these digital records will aid us in raising our revenue generation capacity. In the coming years, we would be able to earn around Rs 100 crore through this data. Also, we’ve realised that data monetisation can be another important aspect. So, we are in constant touch with Banks, private agricultural companies and other such government and private bodies who require data.” Moreover, the department has developed the Revenue Court Management System which is an online system through which cases regarding revenue is taken care of.

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SRI LANKA: Govt and ADB Sign USD200Mn Loan Agreement for Rural Road Development

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Government of Sri Lanka recently signed a $200 million loan agreement for the Second Integrated Road Investment

Program Tranche 3 to continue ADB's assistance to upgrade Sri Lanka's rural road network connecting vast rural populations to jobs and services. "Economic growth is hindered by poor transport infrastructure, particularly some poorly maintained provincial and local roads," said ADB Country Director for Sri Lanka Chen Chen. "Access to markets and business opportunities, especially along agricultural value chains, can be significantly improved with better transport infrastructure and can serve as the key to poverty reduction and shared prosperity in rural areas." Secretary to the Treasury and Ministry of Finance S. R. Attygalle signed the loan agreement for the Government of Sri Lanka and Mr. Chen signed on behalf of ADB. A project agreement was also signed between ADB and the implementing agency, Road Development Authority, represented by Chairman C. P. Athuluwage. Despite the present challenges of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the project is being implemented while adhering to health guidelines and the well-being of its workers. It is expected to support the post-pandemic economic recovery in rural areas through job opportunities and by obtaining services from rural populations, such as the hiring of vehicles, buildings, equipment, etc. "Providing all-weather road access will help link rural communities to socioeconomic centers in Sri Lanka, thereby enabling rural communities to reap and enjoy the fruit of inclusive economic growth," said Mr. Attygalle. "This is very much in keeping with the government's development policy and will contribute to the government's development plan." This loan is the third of five tranches under the Second Integrated Road Investment Program, which was approved by ADB's Board of Directors in 2017. The program will deliver a total financing of $900 million to rehabilitate and improve about 3,400 kilometers (km) of rural access roads and 340 km of national roads in the Eastern, Northern, Uva, and Western provinces. It will improve the capacity of the country's road agencies on road safety, maintenance, research, road design, and construction. The program is due for completion in 2027.

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Central-West Asia

AZERBAIJAN: VISA, Central Bank of Azerbaijan Sign Agreement on Development of Non-Cash Payments

The Central Bank of Azerbaijan (CBA) and VISA signed an agreement on strategic cooperation to expand digital payments in Azerbaijan, Trend reports citing the CBA. The new strategic agreement will accelerate the development of non-cash payments in the Azerbaijani market, the introduction of innovative payment solutions, as well as through mobile devices, as well as the implementation of initiatives to expand financial literacy and inclusiveness. A number of successful agreements have been signed with VISA within the implementation of the State Program on Expansion of Digital Payments in Azerbaijan for 2018-2020. "The appropriate campaigns are being carried out as part of stimulating non-cash payments in the country," the message said. "A number of banks have introduced the innovative Visa Token Service solution, which envisages the process of conducting the payments by using mobile devices." "Moreover, a project on contactless payment of train trips by using bank cards has been implemented," the message said.

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Azerbaijan Discloses Insurance Fee for Rice Fields

Azerbaijan has announced the number of insurance fees for the rice fields, Trend reports on May 16 with reference to the Azerbaijani Agricultural Insurance Fund. "Rice plants are planted on a 3,000-hectare-area in Azerbaijan, of which 1,800 hectares account for Aran district while 1,200 hectares - Lankaran district," the Agricultural Insurance Fund said. The main districts of the country for cultivating rice are Lankaran, Masalli, Astara, Agdash, Ujar, Zardab, Bilasuvar, Goychay and Yevlakh. The average yield of sown areas in the country is 32.8 centners while after cleaning - 31 centners. The Fund also stressed that the average price of one kilogram of rice averages 2.2 manat ($1.3) while the total cost of each hectare is about 6,800 manat ($4,000). In accordance with the agricultural insurance rules, the rates for insurance of plants in Azerbaijan differ by districts of the country, taking into account climatic and natural conditions. Thus, the insurance tariff for sowing rice is 0.78 percent in the Lankaran district and 0.93 percent in the Aran district. Taking into account the yield, price and insurance tariff, the average insurance fee for one hectare of rice field in Aran district is about 63 manat ($37), of which 31.5 manat ($18.5) is paid by the farmer, the rest 31.5 manat ($18.5) - by the government. The fee is about 53 manat ($31.2) for the Lankaran district. Some 26.5 manat ($15.6) is paid by the farmer while the rest 26.5 manat ($15.6) - by the government. The calculation was made taking into account the average statistics data for Azerbaijan. The volume of insurance fees may differ in individual farms depending on the yield and the price of the crop. In all cases, the farmer pays only 50 percent of the insurance fee, the government pays the remaining 50 percent of the amount to support farmers.

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Azerbaijan's State Budget Maintains Positive Dynamics on Insurance Fees – Minister

Positive dynamics in receipts to the state budget of Azerbaijan on fees from compulsory state social insurance and insurance against unemployment remains, Azerbaijani Minister of Economy Mikayil Jabbarov wrote on Twitter, Trend reports.

The minister noted that in the first four months of 2021, the collection on these premiums was 112.6 and 111.4 percent, respectively. "In total, over 140.4 million manat ($82.5 million) has been transferred to the budget for both types of insurance fees," Jabbarov wrote. Earlier, Mikayil Jabbarov noted that thanks to the transparency in the labor market, fees for compulsory state social insurance increased, as a result of which the dependence of the State Social Protection Fund of Azerbaijan on the state budget decreased. If in 2017 the share of financing from the budget was at the level of 38.1 percent, then at the end of 2020 this figure was less than 25 percent.

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Azerbaijani Finance Ministry to Put Up State Bonds for Auction

Baku Stock Exchange (BSE) will hold an auction on placement of state medium-term bonds of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Finance worth 50 million manat ($29 million) on June 1, 2021, Trend reports referring to a source in the BSE. Bonds with a face value of 100 manat ($58.8), a circulation period of 1,092 days and a yield of 7.5 percent will be offered. The interest (if any) payment dates are November 30, 2021, May 31, 2022, November 29, 2022, May 30, 2023, November 28, 2023 and May 28, 2024. The deadline for payment on the bonds is May 28, 2024. PASHA Capital Investment Company is an underwriter on issuing of the ministry's state bonds. For 2021, the Ministry of Finance plans to issue 17 million bonds amounting to 1.7 billion manat ($1 billion).

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ADB Approves Project to Support Startups in Azerbaijan

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved technical assistance for the INNOLAND Incubation and Acceleration Center as part of its partnership strategy for Azerbaijan for 2019-2023, Trend reports referring to the ADB. The project is funded by the South Korean Partnership Fund and the amount of technical support is $500,000, which will contribute to the creation of effective and efficient institutional mechanisms at the local level in the country to support technology start-ups. According to ADB, incubation and acceleration services in Azerbaijan will be provided in the cities of Ganja and Shaki through the Ganja State University and the Azerbaijan State Agrarian University, as well as through the Innoland Sheki branch. Since 1999, the ADB has allocated funds in the amount of $4.4 billion to the country within the framework of cooperation with Azerbaijan.

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Concerns of Missed Opportunities in Budget

Despite the promise of a big spending budget by Treasurer Josh Frydenberg in a week's time, there are concerns it will be one of missed opportunities. BIS Oxford Economics chief economist Sarah Hunter believes the success of Australia's economic recovery to date has been the pre-emptive stance taken by the Morrison government through budget policy. She told the National Press Club in Canberra on Tuesday the response to a recession usually comes too late, when the economy is already in the midst of a downturn. But this time around it was in the face of a pandemic with the need to protect lives and health. "Because we saw it coming, the government was able to pre-empt in a way they would never normally be able to," she said. "We had JobKeeper, JobSeeker, other support payments, other social security beneficiaries announced before they needed them."

The treasurer has promised to fuel the recovery through further targeted support measures. But chartered accountants William Buck expects the budget will again be focused on shorter-term economic stimulus rather than much-needed longer-term improvements to the tax system. Its director for tax services Greg Travers says this is a missed opportunity that is going to make it more difficult for Australian private businesses to grow and succeed post pandemic. "Genuine tax reform will support Australian businesses to employ more people and make it easier for owners to invest in growing their businesses," Mr Travers said. There is speculation the budget will extend the low and middle income tax offset (LMITO) for another year, which provides a tax benefit of up to $1080 a year. But Westpac chief economist Bill Evans believes in doing so the government will miss the opportunity to bring forward tax reform.

"It will be a break of four years when no tax reform will be delivered," Mr Evans said. He believes the government should instead bring forward the stage three tax cuts legislated for 2025 to 2022 at a cost of $17 billion rather than paying out $7 billion for an extended LMITO, which was only supposed to be an interim measure. Stage three cuts will lower the current 32.5 per cent and 37 per cent marginal tax rates to 30 per cent, making a flat tax structure between $45,000 and $200,000. Mr Frydenberg's third budget is also expected to be aimed at women and support issues like narrowing the gender pay gap. But gender equality economist Leonora Risse is not hopeful the current government will deliver what is needed. "This government is still on a bit of a learning curve, and making baby steps at the moment," Dr Risse told the Press Club.

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Federal Budget Cash Splash Targeting Jobs

Fuelling job creation and driving up economic confidence will be the Morrison government's key goals in next week's federal budget. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg is putting the finishing touches on the nation's economic blueprint ahead of delivering his third budget on Tuesday. Labor is urging the coalition to target record low wages growth and measures to help the two million Australians out of work or not receiving enough hours. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said protecting jobs from coronavirus incursions was his central focus. "That is what next week's budget is going to be all about - securing the COVID-19 economic recovery for Australia," he told reporters in Newcastle on Friday. Mr Frydenberg has signalled a cash splash after resetting his benchmark to begin budget repair at employment falling below five per cent.

The latest jobless figure was 5.6 per cent. A long list of spending measures has been revealed in the lead up to the budget including $1.7 billion for child care subsidies. Another 10,000 places will be added to a scheme allowing first-time purchasers to build or buy new homes with a deposit of as little as five per cent. First-time home buyers will also be allowed to make voluntary contributions of up to $50,000 from superannuation. The government is expected to announce a major women's safety and economic security package after copping months of political pressure over the issue. A package worth around $10 billion for the ailing aged care sector has been mooted with the coalition committed to major spending after a scathing royal commission report. Mental health is slated to receive a hefty funding increase. Infrastructure will also feature heavily with $1.3 billion already announced for roads in Western Australia.

Regional voters have been targeted with a $600 million disaster recovery agency, $371 million for biosecurity to protect agriculture and $250 million for local projects. A low and middle-income tax offset is set to be extended for a year but the the third stage of tax cuts is unlikely to be brought forward. More than $1 billion has been promised for boosting technologies designed to lower emissions through international agreements, hydrogen and carbon capture and storage. The coalition's gas-fired recovery is also getting $58.6 million to fuel at least four proposed projects. There is speculation Mr Frydenberg is preparing to dump the JobMaker hiring credit, one of the headline items in October's budget. The scheme to boost employment for under 35s supported just 1100 jobs despite the government spruiking 450,000 positions.

Skyrocketing iron ore prices are set to boost the government's coffers with economists predicting a deficit of around $60 billion, down from $108.5 billion in the mid-year budget review. Government debt is edging towards $1 trillion, while the Reserve Bank expects the economy to grow 4.75 per cent over this year and 3.5 per cent in 2022. The budget is shaping as a critical opportunity for the government to wrest back some political momentum after criticism on multiple fronts. The usual stream of pre-budget announcements and leaks has been largely swamped by a controversial travel ban on Australians trying to return from coronavirus-ravaged India. Unions have signalled a campaign for pay rises after many workers accepted wage freezes during the worst of last year's virus-induced recession.

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Budget Spending Big on Infrastructure

The federal budget will include $10 billion in funding for infrastructure projects to be spent over the next decade. The funding aims to make roads safer, reduce travel times and support thousands of jobs. The government has detailed where half the money will be spent, with the remainder to be announced in Tuesday night's budget. Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack said the extra funding was a key plank of the government's plan to help Australia bounce back from the coronavirus pandemic. "More money for infrastructure means more jobs, more local procurement and a better future for businesses across the country," Mr McCormack said. But Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese was unimpressed, saying the government was all about announcements and not delivery. "The so-called new infrastructure announcements around the states and territories today are again a sleight of hand," Mr Albanese told reporters in Canberra. "Some of these announcements have been made three times."

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Budget to Be 'Full Response' to Aged Care

The federal budget will include record funding on aged care and a "full response" to the damning findings of the royal commission into the sector. Health Minister Greg Hunt declined to confirm reports the aged care package could be almost $18 billion over four years, but noted it would be a "fundamental line in the sand". "We will be responding in full to the royal commission," Mr Hunt told reporters in Canberra on Monday. Mr Hunt said it was more than just about investing in the sector. "It is about the deep and profound respect for older Australians." Treasurer Josh Frydenberg has only confirmed the package will be worth more than $10 billion over the forward estimates. However, even if the latest figure proves to be true, it is still seen as inadequate.

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians points out the royal commission into aged care estimated successive government cuts had already left a shortfall of almost $10 billion annually. "The findings of the royal commission were damning," RACP spokesman John Maddison said. "They mandate a more significant commitment from government that makes delivering all their recommendations possible - not a temporary boost that kicks the can down the road." But Finance Minister Simon Birmingham disputed some of the budget reductions being reported in aged care. "We have seen continued growth in investment, and indeed under our government we have also substantially invested in recent times in home care packages," he told ABC radio.

In the latest round of budget leaks, Mr Frydenberg will also announce $10 billion worth of infrastructure spending over the next decade, as well as some adjustments to superannuation for older Australians. However, Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese was unimpressed. "This is like a showbag budget, a budget that looks pretty flashy but when you take it home it only lasts a few days or a few weeks," Mr Albanese told reporters in Canberra. "There is no lasting legacy from this government except for a trillion dollars of debt, no substantial economic reform, no plan to deal with stagnant wages, no plan to deal with living standards under real pressure." Only half of the $10 billion spend on road and rail projects over the next 10 years has been confirmed. One of the projects is a freight terminal in Melbourne which will receive $2 billion, and another $2 billion will be spent upgrading the Great Western Highway in NSW.

"Rest assured, it is supporting tens of thousands of workers," Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack told reporters in Canberra. "Rest assured, it's building the infrastructure that Australia needs and it's working with the states co-operatively to get that infrastructure prioritised." Tuesday's budget will also include funding to extend a scheme where Australians are able to bolster their retirement savings when they downsize the family home. It will extend to people aged 60, down from 65, with the initiative also aimed at freeing up housing stock. As well, the work test for self-funded retirees - which limits super top-ups - will be scrapped for those aged between 67 and 74 years. At present, this group has to be employed for at least 40 hours in a consecutive 30-day period in a financial year before they can make contributions.

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Businesses in 'Stunning' Pre-Budget Mood

Businesses are heading into the federal budget in an upbeat mood with both confidence and conditions reaching record highs in April, in what one economist described as "simply stunning". It will be music to Treasurer Josh Frydenberg's ears as he pens his budget speech for Tuesday night. The influential National Australia Bank monthly business survey showed confidence jumped nine points to a record 26 index points in April. Conditions also rose eight points to 32 index points, surpassing the record peak seen in March. "The April survey result is simply stunning," NAB chief economist Alan Oster said. All components of the conditions index - trading, profitability and employment - set new highs, while the strength of confidence points to ongoing strength in conditions in the near term. "It looks like we have moved past the rebound phase of the recovery and are now seeing healthy growth in most of the economy," Mr Oster said.

Demand for workers remains strong, further suggesting the impact from the end of key support measures put in place during the pandemic will be limited. Both the JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme and JobSeeker coronavirus supplements ended in March. The National Skills Commission's preliminary vacancy report for April showed job advertisements posted on the internet rose by a further 3.3 per cent. It was the 12th consecutive monthly rise, and now stands a staggering 245.8 per cent higher compared to a year ago when job ads shrank to a record low from the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A separate survey of more than 3500 adults by the Australian National University found employment stayed at around 60 per cent of the population between January and April 2021. Matthew Gray from the ANU said there had not been a dramatic decline in employment.

"This is even more impressive given our findings cover the period immediately following the cessation of the JobKeeper scheme and the JobSeeker supplement," Professor Gray said. "This is good news for many Australians, the economy and our economic activity, particularly as we look to rebuild in the wake of the COVID recession." Treasury had estimated that up to 150,000 people would lose their job as a result of the end of JobKeeper. However, like the ANU survey, economists are growing confident these jobs can be absorbed by a surprisingly strong rebound in the market. Meanwhile, retail spending figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics also showed a solid 1.3 per cent increase in March, only a touch below the 1.4 per cent reported in earlier preliminary figures. However, sales fell 0.5 per cent over the March quarter, following a 2.4 per cent increase in the previous quarter. "Although this would typically be seen as disappointing, the fall actually reflects the beginning of household spending patterns moving back towards pre-COVID trends," BIS Oxford Economics chief economist Sarah Hunter said. "The continued opening up of the economy and reduced fears about contracting the disease have led households to increase their spending on services, particularly hospitality and travel."

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Budget Set to Boost Mental Health Funding

Australia's mental health and aged care systems will receive record funding in the federal budget with billions of dollars to be spent on the ailing sectors. But experts have warned the packages may only begin to claw back ground after years of funding shortfalls. Treasurer Josh Frydenberg will hand down his third budget on Tuesday with major spending expected across government services. The spending will sit alongside funding for major infrastructure projects, skills training and the coronavirus health response. "Tonight's budget will see record commitments on essential services, disability support, mental health, aged care and women's safety," Mr Frydenberg told reporters in Canberra. "And tonight's budget will lay out the Morrison government's economic plan to secure Australia's recovery." Mental health advocates have long implored the federal government to dramatically increase funding.

An extra $500 million is expected to be pumped into the mental health sector each year, most of which will be delivered through commonwealth-run primary health networks. The funding will be aimed at delivering services to regional and disadvantaged areas with acute mental health needs, as well as those most affected by fires, floods, coronavirus restrictions and high youth unemployment. The budget is also expected to contain up to $18 billion over four years in additional funding for aged care. Health Minister Greg Hunt said it would be a fundamental line in the sand after a damning royal commission report called for radical changes across the troubled system. Building a better-paid workforce and boosting training are set to be key targets of the package. More money will also be set aside to help train the unemployed. Mr Frydenberg is expected to announced a $1 billion extension to the JobTrainer program, which offers free or low-fee courses to young and unemployed people.

The budget could also dictate younger Australians take up the training programs or risk losing income support through programs such as Youth Allowance. The government is also preparing to dump a dud hiring credits scheme for young people, which supported just 1100 of the 450,000 jobs it was supposed to create. The treasurer will spend another $500 million to try to lure global businesses and talent from overseas. The task will be difficult, given international borders remain closed but the government is determined to attract the best and brightest to drive its economic recovery. The package includes plans to encourage the use of employee share schemes and simplify tax residency rules to attract workers and businesses to Australia. The government will also unveil a major women's health and financial security package, including domestic violence funding doubling to $680 million and $354 million over four years for health. Low income earners - many of them women - will receive compulsory superannuation for the first time in their lives. Labor leader Anthony Albanese criticised the government for lacking a plan to address record low wages growth, unemployment and underemployment. He said the coalition was pushing the nation's debt towards $1 trillion but lacked an economic vision.

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Minister Flags Profound Budget Improvement

Finance Minister Simon Birmingham has flagged a "profound improvement" in the nation's budget bottom line. A massive turnaround in the deficit will be unveiled in the federal budget on Tuesday night. Economists are expecting a figure around $155 billion, which would be a vast improvement on the $198 billion shortfall estimated in December's mid-year budget review. Senator Birmingham has done little to temper expectations. "We have seen a profound improvement in relation to this year's budget bottom line," he told the ABC. "That is as a result of the fact that the economy has been performing more strongly, particularly more Australians back into jobs. "We know that by getting more people back into jobs, we reduce the welfare wheel, we increase the taxation and the revenue coming in." Senator Birmingham said having 200,000 fewer people on JobSeeker unemployment benefits had alone delivered a $5 billion turnaround.

"You get other dividends that flow through across the economy," he said. "That's why at the heart of tonight's budget, our focus is on how do we keep jobs growth continuing, because that is how we can make sure we can pay for essential services Australians want us to pay on." Large commitments will be made in aged care, mental health and infrastructure, while skills training and women's safety and financial security will also receive budget boosts. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the budget was aimed at shifting the economy from an emergency to recovery phase. "The Australian economy, which we had nursed at some occasions, was in the ICU. It is now in the outpatient rehab phase but there's still a lot of work to do," he told a joint partyroom meeting on Tuesday.

"The hardest part of recovering from a traumatic injury is those months and months of physio and occupational therapy and the care and discipline to get through that bit. "That's where we are in our economic recovery. That's what this budget is doing." The deficit for 2021/22 is expected to have shrunk to $80 billion. "The massive improvement reflects the faster than expected recovery in the economy," St George economist Matthew Bunny said. "The labour market has bounced back faster than expected, meaning the government has spent less than predicted on income support payments. "Plus, commodity prices have surged much higher than expected back in December, boosting tax revenue." The iron ore price alone has rocketed to a record high of just over $US200 per tonne, when Treasury had forecast it falling to $US55 per tonne. Marked changes are also expected in Treasury's economic forecasts. The Reserve Bank expects growth to be a speedy five per cent in the 2021/22 financial year, far rosier than earlier forecasts. But all eyes will be on Treasury's unemployment predictions given the government has set a target of below five per cent before the process of budget repair begins.

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Little Budget Cheer, as Wages Edge Up

Last week's big spending budget failed to lift the mood of Australians, and the latest wage growth figures are likely to receive a similar stony response - a worry for both Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and retailers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics said the wage price index for the March quarter - a key gauge used by the Reserve Bank and Treasury to measure wages growth - rose 0.6 per cent. This was slightly higher than the 0.5 per cent rise expected by economists, but still left the annual rate at 1.5 per cent - at least half the rate the Reserve Bank wants to see to return inflation to some normality. The inflation rate sits at 1.1 per cent for the March quarter. Private sector wages grew 0.6 per cent in the quarter, while those in the public sector rose 0.4 per cent. However, ABS head of prices statistics Michelle Marquardt says improved business conditions has seen employers revisit wage reviews postponed during the height of the pandemic.

The minutes of the RBA's May 4 board meeting released on Tuesday reiterated the cash rate won't rise until inflation is sustainably between two and three per cent, which will need wage growth of above three per cent. "RBA commentary continues to emphasise the importance of wage growth in generating an enduring inflation recovery," JP Morgan economist Tom Kennedy says. He said the latest data "does not change the narrative that a sustained return of inflation to the target band is still a distant prospect". Meanwhile, the Westpac-Melbourne Institute consumer sentiment index showed confidence dropping 4.8 per cent in May, despite last week's budget spending almost $100 billion over the next four years. "With that scale of stimulus measures the government might have expected a lift in sentiment following the announcement of the budget," Westpac chief economist Bill Evans said.

Mr Evans said this may reflect the absence of major surprises with many initiatives leaked prior to budget night. "Perhaps the budget would have been even better received if the government had announced some surprise positive initiatives on the night that were targeted at households," he said. Just one in five consumers expects this year's budget will improve their finances over the next 12 months. However, there has only been one better response in the 11 years the survey has asked a specific budget question. That followed the equally big-spending budget in 2020, with the survey showing just over one in four consumers expected to be better off. The decline in confidence - a pointer to future retail spending - does follow a spike to the highest level since 2010 in April and an 11 per cent increase over the previous three months.

Still, there was positive news for the employment market with the National Skills Commission's final vacancy report for April confirming a 3.3 per cent increase in skilled job advertisements posted on the internet. This was the 12th consecutive monthly rise and a 44.8 per cent increase from pre-COVID-19 levels. Job ads rose across all eight occupational groups monitored by the commission in the month, although were concentrated in NSW and Victoria with all other states and territories apart from Tasmania recording a fall in recruitment activity. Employment figures for April are due on Thursday.

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Labor Delves into $77m in NBN Co Bonuses

Labor has requested NBN Co provide the details of a meeting where it was decided $77 million would be paid in bonuses. NBN Co chief executive officer Stephen Rue says he was appropriately asked to leave the meeting when the decision was made by the company's remuneration committee. The $77 million figure was revealed in February but it was recently discovered that was divvied up among more than 3800 staff depending on their salary. "Did the people on the remuneration committee ... consider the fact Australia was in a pandemic when they were considering paying out $77 million," Labor's Kimberley Kitching asked during a Senate estimates hearing. "I hate to say this, I'm sorry but that's actually a question for the chairman," Mr Rue said. Senator Kitching has asked for the minutes of the meeting, which Mr Rue agreed to provide on notice.

He said NBN Co hired people with specialist skills in cyber security, data and engineering. "NBN sources the vast majority of its talent from the corporate sector plus we have some very very important skills," Mr Rue said. "So we need to have a remuneration structure that reflects the ability to attract and retain staff. "And we do not pay, I can tell you, we do not pay at the top of the market. We pay very much in the median of the market." Mr Rue was paid more than $3 million last year. He referred senators to a letter in last year's annual report written by remuneration committee chair Ziggy Switkowski, where he outlined his consideration of the health crisis. "Taken in totality and noting the decision to provide additional bandwidth at no charge (hence no profiteering from COVID-19 related growth in demand), the impact upon our commercial outcomes is judged as not material - neither net favourable nor otherwise," Dr Switkowski wrote. "In the nine months to March 2020, before COVID-19, the performance of NBN Co was trending strongly positive and this continued to year end without measurable deviation. No revision has been made to any budget or target. "The board has concluded that no variation is called for in our annual remuneration approach." The issue also arose on Thursday in another Senate estimates hearing. Finance Minister Simon Birmingham refused to say funding used by NBN Co was in fact taxpayer money.

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NEW ZEALAND: Budget 2021 Reprioritises Nearly $1 billion

The Government's strong pandemic response and the better than expected economic recovery means not all the money allocated in the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund has been spent, Grant Robertson said in his annual pre-Budget speech to the Wellington Chamber of Commerce this morning. "As part of Budget preparation I asked each Minister to look again at the areas of the COVID spending for which they were responsible to see if it was still required or still a priority, and whether underspends could be reprioritised. "This exercise has yielded around $926 million worth of savings," Grant Robertson said. "We have committed to only spending what we need to in terms of our response and recovery. I am pleased that we have found these savings, and that they can be returned to the fund to aid our recovery from COVID-19 and targeted to where it is needed the most.

"The Budget will outline the details of the reprioritisations and how the COVID Response and Recovery Fund is being managed. "Budget 2021 will be a recovery Budget. New Zealand's economy continues to perform better than forecast, but we know that the impacts of COVID 19 are still being felt around the world. We will strike a careful balance between continuing to invest in our recovery and beginning the task of reducing down the debt we took on to support New Zealanders through COVID-19. The Government has three priorities for this term. In addition to keeping New Zealanders safe from COVID-19, we are focused on accelerating the economic recovery and addressing big three long-term challenges, housing affordability, climate change and child wellbeing.

"The Prime Minister has also tasked me as Deputy Prime Minister to lead a new implementation unit based in her department to ensure we are tackling these core priorities. "The Unit will be funded through Budget 2021 and will monitor and support implementation of a small number of critical initiatives, particularly where multiple agencies are involved in the work. "At a time where the Government is playing a much greater role in supporting the economy and investing for the future, it is crucial that we ensure that we are getting value for money from every dollar of spending, and that across the public service initiatives are being delivered in a way that supports our economic recovery," Grant Robertson said.

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Economic Resilience Provides More Options in Budget 2021

Securing the recovery and investing in the wellbeing of New Zealanders is the focus of Budget 2021, Grant Robertson told his audience at a pre-budget speech in Auckland this morning. "The economy has proven resilient in response to COVID-19, due to people having confidence in the Government's health response to keep them safe. Unemployment has continued to trend down, an extra 32,000 jobs have been created in the six months to March and business and consumer confidence is increasing as our vaccine rollout is ramping up and we are carefully opening up our borders." "We can't take the recovery for granted. Further waves of COVID-19 around the world underline that we are still in a highly volatile and uncertain global environment. There are still sectors and regions in New Zealand struggling to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. We have also taken on considerable debt to support New Zealanders lives and livelihoods through COVID-19.

"In this environment a balanced approached is required. We need to continue to be careful with our management of the economy, while also providing stimulus to accelerate the recovery and to make investments where they are needed the most to tackle our long term challenges in priority areas such as climate change, child wellbeing and housing. "Our better than expected economic recovery does provide us with more options. There is a bit more space in our operating and capital allowances to support the economy in line with our wellbeing approach while also providing further scope to keep a lid on our higher debt levels and then lower it once the recovery is secure. "An investment-focused recovery that supports all New Zealanders is the way to ensure that our finances remain sustainable. It is also the way in which the Government will continue to tackle the long-standing issues that we were elected to address. "It is important to recognise that it can't all be done in one budget. I view this budget as one of a package of three this term to advance our priorities and return our books to a sustainable fiscal position," Grant Robertson said.

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6、Private Sector

Asia-Pacific

2020 Private Sector Participation in Developing-Country Infrastructure Saw Huge Drop, Stabilizing as Year Ended

2021—New data from the World Bank shows that private participation in infrastructure (PPI) in developing countries, while taking an historic plunge in the first half of 2020 due to COVID-19, saw a very modest uptick in the second half of the year. The 56 percent drop in PPI in H1 from the previous year moderated to 52 percent for the full year. Infrastructure investment commitments in 2020 stood at $45.7 billion across 252 projects in developing countries. "Hopefully, this data signals that the worst effects of COVID-19 on private sector infrastructure finance are now behind most developing countries," said Imad Fakhoury, the World Bank's Global

Director for Infrastructure Finance, PPPs & Guarantees. “While this situation remains in flux as the pandemic’s trajectory changes, we’re keen on scaling up private investment in sustainable and quality infrastructure in these countries going forward—but need more resilient frameworks and enabling environments.

Fakhoury emphasized, “This is critical for building back better post-pandemic, restoring progress towards the 2030 Sustainabe Development Goals, and delivering on climate commitments to ensure green, resilient and inclusive development.” COVID-19’s global impact on infrastructure was widespread and swift. Since the start of 2020, existing infrastructure projects were delayed or cancelled due to supply-chain disruptions, travel and shipping restrictions, and other obstacles. Decreased demand or required renegotiations also prevented or delayed many projects already in pipelines from achieving financial closure. Moreover, as public debt globally has risen to record levels and sovereign credit ratings have been downgraded across the developing world, the private sector reacted with caution.

Private investment commitments fell in all regions except Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa, where development finance institutions played a strong role. The pandemic’s impact was most severe in East Asia and Pacific, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Central Asia, and South Asia. Sectorally, transport investment commitments were the lowest in the past decade—due to lockdowns, mass transit services and toll roads were hugely affected. Ports and railways were affected as well, with decreased volumes of cargo. A bright spot is that the disruption caused by the pandemic has not affected the longer-term shift towards renewable energy: of the 129 electricity-generation projects tracked in PPI’s data,117 were in renewables.

Brazil, China, India, and Mexico retained their positions among countries with the top five investment commitments, with Brazil moving to first place, at $7.7 billion. Bangladesh is a new entrant to the top five, with financial closure of seven projects, including one megaproject. Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Togo had the first PPI transactions recorded in the past five years. Twenty-one percent of all PPI projects received support from development finance institutions through loans, equity, guarantees, insurance, interest rate swaps, and transaction advisory services. This underlines the importance of these actors in providing resources, instruments, and de-risking comfort to investors in developing countries, especially in the most difficult contexts.

From https://www.worldbank.org/ 05/13/2021

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ADB's Private Sector Operations Deliver Crucial Support for Region’s COVID-19 Response in 2020

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) committed nearly $2.9 billion in 2020 for private sector operations to help companies, employees and poor communities across the region manage the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, according to ADB's Private Sector Operations in 2020 – Report on Development Effectiveness. ADB committed $442 million for 15 projects with responses to COVID-19. A further $2.4 billion of revolving program commitments provided through ADB's trade, supply chain, and microfinance programs helped developing member countries manage the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. "Our private sector support has helped enterprises including many agribusiness and energy companies to maintain operations, preserved the livelihoods of thousands of workers and poor smallholder farmers, and promoted the flow of lifesaving medical supplies," said ADB Vice-President for Private Sector Operations and Public–Private Partnerships Ashok Lavasa. "ADB has worked closely with its partners to deliver swift and effective support in the face of an immense challenge, and to lay a foundation for recovery and a more resilient region."

Alongside its COVID-19 response work, ADB's Private Sector Operations Department focused on priorities of its operational plan, which was endorsed by ADB's Board of Directors in January 2020. Landmark projects included the first blue loan to boost plastics recycling in Asia; an investment in a large electric vehicle charging network in Thailand; a major private sector renewable energy project in Uzbekistan; and assistance to women-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Armenia. A venture capital financing platform—ADB Ventures—was launched; an innovative free online supply chain mapping tool was developed; and an ADB office was opened in Singapore to mobilize investments and bring new technologies and management skills to development projects.

There were 38 new projects committed last year, totaling $1.4 billion. Nearly all of them contained elements promoting gender equality, and over half of them were in new sectors or frontier markets. Long-term cofinancing of $2 billion helped ADB achieve $2.1 in long-term cofinancing for every $1 of its own resources in 2020. Project commitments are expected to benefit more than 46,300 MSMEs and assist almost 185,000 women, while agribusiness projects will support the livelihoods of nearly 50,000 farmers. Meanwhile, the active portfolio of projects has created over half a million jobs; benefited 27.3 million MSMEs, and reduced CO2 emissions by 36.3 million tons of CO2 equivalent. Over 825,000 households gained access to potable water and 10.8 million farmers now have more sustainable livelihoods.

From https://www.adb.org/ 05/04/2021

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East Asia

CHINA: Global Investors Flock to China amid Improved Business

Environment

Global investors' enthusiasm for the Chinese market seems unstoppable despite the COVID-19 pandemic, as the latest data showed that China successfully navigated the economic fallout in the turbulent year and became the top investment destination worldwide. In 2020, global foreign direct investment (FDI) flows plummeted by 38 percent from a year before to 846 billion U.S. dollars, the lowest level since 2005, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) said. The global FDI flows represented only 1 percent of world GDP, their lowest level since 1999, the OECD said. OECD's FDI figures echoed a report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development earlier this year, which also found China became the largest FDI recipient in 2020. China's appeal to foreign investment has extended into 2021, as the Chinese economy sustained positive performance in the first quarter, and foreign companies expected a promising future in the country.

A recent survey by the Ministry of Commerce (MOC) shows that 96.4 percent of foreign-invested enterprises are optimistic about their business prospects in China. The figure represents a 2.1 percentage-point increase compared with the beginning of the year, the survey of over 3,200 foreign-funded firms said. MOC data also showed FDI into the Chinese mainland surged by 39.9 percent year on year in actual use to 302.47 billion yuan (about 46.74 billion U.S. dollars) in the first quarter. Liu Xiangdong, a researcher with the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, attributed the robust first-quarter FDI growth to a low base last year, sound economic fundamentals, and increasing attractiveness to foreign capital. Considering the short-term low base and uncertainties ahead, the high growth rate of China's FDI may not sustain, said Liu. "Yet China will remain attractive to foreign investors as the country continues to push forward reform and opening-up."

Looking ahead, China has made great efforts to lure more global investors to its massive domestic market by widening market access and improving the business environment. In January, a revised industry catalog that opens up more sectors for foreign investors came into effect, encouraging more foreign capital to pump into high-end manufacturing. Other measures included further implementing the pre-establishment national treatment plus negative list management system, accelerating the implementation of salient foreign-funded projects, and strengthening protection for foreign investment.

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China's Electronic Information Manufacturing Sector Sees Steady Growth

China's electronic information manufacturing sector registered robust growth in the first quarter of the year, according to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT). The added value of electronic information manufacturers with an annual operating revenue of at least 20 million yuan (about 3.09 million U.S. dollars) rose 30 percent year on year in the period, MIIT data shows. Major enterprises in the industry saw their total export delivery value increase 31.1 percent year on year in the first three months, while fixed-asset investment into the sector soared 40.4 percent over a year earlier. In March alone, China's smartphone output climbed 14.2 percent year on year to 110 million units. The outputs of microcomputers and integrated circuits respectively surged 39.8 percent and 37.4 percent.

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China's SMEs See Stable Recovery

The vitality of China's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) improved in the first quarter of the year as the economy further recovered from the impact of COVID-19, per the latest industry data. The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Index, based on a survey of 3,000 SMEs, increased 0.5 points to 87.5 in the first quarter and hit its highest level since the same period of last year, according to the China Association of Small and Medium Enterprises. The index contains multiple sub-indexes to gauge the performances and expectations of SMEs. A reading above 100 reflects an upward trend in business while a reading below 100 indicates dented vitality. The macroeconomy, financing, cost and labor force sub-indexes were all above 100 in the January-March period. During the period, business confidence among SMEs was further restored, market expectations continued to improve, and cash strains were eased, said the association, citing China's pro-SME measures such as targeted monetary policies from the central bank that lowered financing pressures.

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China's Outstanding Loans to Private Businesses Up 29 Pct

China's outstanding loans to individual businesses stood at 5.4 trillion yuan (about 834.9 billion U.S. dollars) at the end of March, according to China's top banking and insurance regulator. This marked a 29 percent increase compared with the same period last year, said the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission (CBIRC). Authorities' move to encourage loans to individual businesses has provided solid financial support for the recovery and development of individual businesses, it said. The average rate of interest charged on loans to individual companies was 6.2

percent by the end of March, down 1.3 percentage points from 2019, data from the CBIRC shows. Authorities will extend the policy of deferring principal and interest payments on loans to small and micro businesses to cover truck drivers, taxi drivers, online shop owners and other self-employed individuals.

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China's Commerce Minister Pledges Better Service for Foreign Enterprises

China's Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao has pledged to enhance communication with foreign enterprises and chambers of commerce and provide better service. Wang made the remarks Thursday at a symposium with foreign pharmaceutical companies as well as the American Chamber of Commerce in China and the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China. Foreign investment has contributed actively to China's economic development since its reform and opening-up more than 40 years ago, while foreign enterprises have also fully benefited from China's development, he said. In the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025), China will accelerate the building of the new development paradigm featuring "dual circulation," in which domestic and overseas markets reinforce each other, with the domestic market as the mainstay, according to Wang. The new development paradigm, which is by no means a closed domestic loop but more open domestic and overseas circulations, is expected to provide more opportunities for foreign companies, said the minister.

For the next stage, the commerce ministry will work with relevant departments and local authorities to enhance communication with foreign companies and chambers of commerce to deal with their problems in a timely manner and provide better service for foreign enterprises. Foreign companies participating in the symposium hailed China's efforts in continuously improving the business environment in recent years, saying that they are willing to take part in China's building of the new development paradigm and increase investment in China. China recorded a 4-percent growth in foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows last year, making it the largest recipient of FDI in the world, according to a report from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. In the first four months of 2021, FDI into the Chinese mainland, in actual use, surged 38.6 percent year on year, data from the commerce ministry showed.

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China to Bolster Support for Small Firms, Self-employed

Individuals

China will extend more support to micro and small enterprises (MSEs) and self-employed individuals to help them overcome difficulties and grow their businesses, the State Council's executive meeting chaired by Premier Li Keqiang decided on Wednesday. The many MSEs and self-employed individuals across economic sectors are a key force underpinning China's resilient economic and job growth. By the end of April, the country has over 44 million MSEs and more than 95 million self-employed individuals. They have become the country's primary job providers. Under the complex and challenging circumstances at home and abroad, MSEs and self-employed individuals still face difficulties in their production and operation, and stronger and targeted support is very much called for. "Overall, the economy is going in a positive direction this year, yet uncertainties are on the rise. We need to make further efforts to maintain stability on the six priority fronts and provide protections in the six key areas. Support should be kept up as needed," Li said. Inclusive finance in the support of MSEs and self-employed individuals will be enhanced.

Financial institutions will be encouraged to expand credit loans, first-time loans, medium- and long-term loans and loan renewals without principal repayment, and to promote the pay-as-you-go lending model. The shortening of the maturity of commercial acceptance bills from one year to six months will be contemplated in order to ease enterprises' pressure of outstanding payments. Multi-pronged measures will be taken to help MSEs and self-employed individuals cope with the price rally of raw materials in upstream industries. Large enterprises will be supported to set up platforms to match supply with demand across the industrial chains in key sectors. Market-oriented approaches will be applied to guide upstream and downstream links of supply chains to keep raw material supply stable and coordinate production and sales, thus ensuring supply and price stability. Irregularities such as hoarding and price gouging will be combated. Sub-national governments will be supported in proving MSEs and self-employed individuals with job retention subsidies. Internet platforms will be encouraged to lower excessive charges and commissions, as well as the ratio of commissions and promotion fees for new businesses.

"Recent years have seen unprecedented expansion of MSEs and self-employed individuals. The policy measures aiming to provide protections in the six priority areas need to be further implemented for these market actors. As many people, including college graduates, change their mindsets and choose flexible employment nowadays, the government needs to set up platforms and provide them with support," Li said. Impartial oversight will be strengthened. The mechanism of fair competition review will be strictly implemented to see that all market entities are treated as equals. Discriminatory policies and regulations that hinder market entities' participation in economic activities will be overhauled and repealed. The meeting urged stronger law enforcement against monopoly and unfair competition. Malicious subsidies and below-cost dumping by advantageously-positioned companies to seize more market share will be investigated and tackled under the law.

Arbitrary charges and unwarranted fines will be overhauled. Backstop measures will be taken to meet basic living needs. Efforts will be made toward covering self-employed individuals and flexibly employed people with social insurance schemes, and household registration restrictions will be lifted to allow workers to enroll in these schemes where they work. Trials will be made to include flexibly employed people in the workplace safety insurance scheme. "We must recognize that most MSEs and self-employed individuals are still at a disadvantage in market competition. Hence, the policy support must not stop, but should be kept up as needed. Policies for tax and fee cuts shall be earnestly implemented," Li said, "We need to promote fair competition through impartial regulation. Unfair competition, once spotted, must be resolutely dealt with. This is to foster a more enabling environment for market entities to grow. Meanwhile, the government should also provide protection that helps to meet their essential needs."

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China Increases Inclusive Loans to Micro, Small Firms

China's inclusive loans to micro and small enterprises rose by 32.5 percent year on year at the end of April amid the country's targeted support for enterprises hard hit by COVID-19. Outstanding inclusive loans to micro and small businesses totaled 16.8 trillion yuan (about 2.63 trillion U.S. dollars) at the end of April, up by 32.5 percent year on year. These loans supported 36.27 million firms, up by 28.9 percent year on year, Zhu Zhaowen, an official with the People's Bank of China, told a press conference Friday. Since the beginning of 2021, the bank has worked with relevant departments to strengthen financial support for sectors including foreign trade, culture and tourism, offline sales, accommodation and catering, and transport, which were hit hard by the pandemic, Zhu said. At the end of April, the year-on-year growth of inclusive loans to the sectors of culture, sports, entertainment, transport, warehousing, and postal services all exceeded 10 percent, he added. Zhu also noted that the bank would offer targeted support to market entities in different industries, regions, and sizes. It will keep undiminished financial support for small and micro firms in the short term and further strengthen support for self-employed businesses.

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SOUTH KOREA: Samsung Electronics to Transfer Some 500 Technologies to Local SMEs

Samsung Electronics will share its 505 patented technologies with local small and medium enterprises, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy said Friday. The list comprises 213 mobile technologies, 68 semiconductor technologies, 68 display technologies, 45 telecommunications technologies and 31 medical equipment technologies, and others. The SMEs that wish to benefit from the governments technology transfer program are required to submit their application via the ministry or the Korea Institute for Advancement of Technology, by June 10. The given program, initiated in 2013, contributed to transferring 444 technologies to 226 SMEs last year from the country's largest businesses. Recently joining the program was SK Group, which completed the transfer of 75 technologies to 53 SMEs in March this year. In the second half this year, South Korea plans to work with other industry leaders, including Posco, LS Electric, Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power and Korea Water Resources. "We hope that this technology transfer program may help local businesses overcome the market challenges triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic fallout," said an official of the ministry.

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South-East Asia

INDONESIA: Two Tech Unicorns Announce Merger

Indonesia's giant ride-hailing company Gojek and e-commerce marketplace Tokopedia announced on Monday their decision to officially merge to create a big technology group in Southeast Asia's largest economy. Named GoTo, the group could be worth about 18 billion U.S. dollars. Combining e-commerce, on-demand and financial services, GoTo is the first platform in Southeast Asia to host these three essential use cases in one ecosystem. "Today is a truly historic day as we mark the beginning of GoTo and the next phase of growth for Gojek, Tokopedia and GoTo Financial. Gojek drivers will deliver even more Tokopedia packages and serve as merchant partners of all sizes to benefit from strengthened business solutions, and we will use our combined scale to increase financial inclusion in an emerging region with untapped growth potential," Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of GoTo Group Andre Soelistyo said in a statement issued on Monday. "For the consumer, GoTo Group will continue to reduce frictions and provide the best in class delivery of goods and services. This is the next step of an exciting journey and I am humbled and proud to lead the GoTo movement," he added.

Meanwhile, President of GoTo Group Patrick Cao said, "GoTo Group will account for more than 2 percent of the GDP in Indonesia and we're going to create a lot more employment and income earning opportunities as our company and the economy expand. We are excited for the next chapter and look forward to our shared pursuit of innovation as a catalyst for inclusive growth." According to the media release, in 2020, the group had a Gross Transaction Value (GTV) of more than 22 billion U.S dollars and more than 1.8 billion transactions. As of December 2020, more than 2 million driver partners and more than 11 million business partners or merchants have been registered in the group. GoTo has more than 100 million monthly active users and has created an ecosystem that contributes about two percent of the total Indonesian economy, according to the company's statement.

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Indonesia's Largest Mobile Operator to Launch Commercial 5G Services This Week

Indonesia's largest cellular operator, Telkomsel, will launch its commercial 5G mobile services on Thursday, Minister of communications and information technology Johnny G. Plate said on Monday. "The 5G services will be launched on May 27, 2021, and be available for use by limited and gradual steps in six residential locations in Greater Jakarta and other cities: Solo, Medan, Balikpapan, Denpasar, Batam, Surabaya, Makassar and Bandung. Other cities will follow," the minister said. Telkomsel, the first telecom company which has successfully demonstrated live 5G services in the country, will hold 5G relying on a spectrum within the 2.3 GHz to 3.0 GHz frequency band. "The deployment of 5G also marks that from now on Indonesia is entering the simultaneous stage of 4G and 5G operations," the minister added.

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PHILIPPINES: Telecom Operator DITO Renews 25-Year Franchise

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte signed into law on Tuesday the bill granting DITO Telecommunity Corp., the country's third major telecommunication service provider, a new 25-year franchise. The new law shall take effect 15 days after publication in the Official Gazette or a newspaper of general circulation. In April 1998, the government granted the telecommunication firm a 25-year franchise due to expire in April 2023. The 1998 franchise allowed the firm to extend or renew its license three years before its expiration. Under the new law, DITO is allowed to provide service in and between provinces, cities, and municipalities in the Philippines and between the Philippines and other countries, as well as to establish, operate, manage, lease, maintain and purchase telecommunication systems for commercial purposes and in the public interest. DITO won a government-led bidding exercise in 2018 to introduce new competition and challenge industry major players PLDT Inc.

and Globe Telecom.

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VIETNAM: HCM City Mulls Ways to Help Small Firms Achieve Digital Transformation

HCM City leads the country in digital transformation, but its small, medium and micro enterprises, which account for a majority of businesses, face challenges in achieving it. Nguyễn Viết Toàn, deputy chairman of the city Automation Association, said the fourth industrial revolution and COVID-19 pandemic meant SMEs had to transform or perish. But since it required a lot of resources, knowledge of digital transformation and technological infrastructure, small firms had encountered challenges, he said. Vũ Tuấn Anh, deputy director of consulting agency Dr SME, said digital transformation was inevitable for enterprises, especially amid the pandemic and the rapid global integration. Đỗ Phước Tống, chairman of Duy Khanh Engineering Company, said his company transformed five years ago and the efficiency was evident from cost saving, increased production and general business efficiency. Operation, connecting with other businesses and interaction with partners and customers had been very convenient, he explained. Director of the city Department of Industry and Trade, Bùi Tá Hoàng Vũ, said the city was set to create a legal framework that would enable businesses to innovate and mitigate legal risks. Policies that encourage enterprises and foster their use of new technologies and digital transformation would be needed, especially those which allow the testing of new Vietnamese products and technologies that still face legal obstacles, he said. The city would also promote the development of large technology enterprises, raise awareness of the benefits of digital transformation and digital technologies and set basic standards for digital transformation to help businesses mitigate the risks involved, he added.

From https://vietnamnews.vn/ 05/12/2021

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Businesses Work with Gov’t to Speed Up Vaccination Drive

The business community is willing to work with the Government to speed up the mass vaccination programme providing there is a policy to support them, speakers said at an online meeting on Friday in HCM City. During the conference held by the Việt Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI), Đỗ Hồng Hạnh, member of the Việt Nam Textile and Apparel Association, said that some businesses were willing to connect with suppliers of COVID-19 vaccines to ensure optimal conditions for supply. “A policy, however, is needed for the private sector to participate in the drive in order to speed up the process in general,” she noted. For example, a company could negotiate with suppliers to bring vaccines to the airport for quality testing before payment, or could even negotiate for the transfer of vaccine production technology, she said. Đỗ Thị Thúy Hương, vice president of the Supporting Industry Association, said: "The principle of the policy is that the State and the Ministry of Health would approve and manage vaccine quality and provide vaccinations for workers."

The electronics and supporting industries face a risk of disruption in the supply chain as the fourth wave of COVID has hit the "industrial capital" of the northern provinces of Bắc Giang and Bắc Ninh. She urged the government to allow companies to pay for vaccinations for their own staff. "The business community should be able to inoculate their workforce in order to reduce the burden on the state budget as part of the effort to accelerate the government's vaccination drive," she said. Most business leaders (in the electronics, textiles, footwear, wood and dairy sectors) said they were willing to join hands with the Government to find vaccine sources and pay for vaccination costs for workers. Vũ Đức Giang, chairman of the Vietnam Textile and Apparel Association, said that businesses in the industry, which has more than 3 million workers, were "impatiently waiting for vaccinations for workers." The garment industry has a number of FDI enterprises that have good connections with the governments of the EU and the US, which could facilitate the import of vaccines, according to Giang. Vũ Tú Thành, regional deputy executive director of the US-ASEAN Business Council, said the FDI business community in Việt Nam, especially pharmaceutical companies that make COVID-19 vaccines from the US and Europe, could help speed up negotiations on purchases of the vaccine.

Private sector plays a role

Referring to Indonesia's model, Cao Hoàng Nam, director of foreign affairs and communications at PepsiCo VN, said Indonesia has a policy for businesses to contribute costs to vaccinate workers and their families. The Indonesian health ministry has appointed certain agencies to import vaccines. Local chambers of commerce and associations send them a list of vaccination data based on which businesses register to buy vaccines for workers, according to Nam. The vaccines must meet WTO regulations or be approved by the Indonesian health ministry, he said. Ngô Sỹ Hoài, vice president and general secretary of the Vietnam Timber and Forest Products Association, said the private sector, especially FDI businesses, played a major role in not only funding for vaccinations but speeding up the vaccination drive. Huỳnh Thị Mỹ, general secretary of the Việt Nam Plastics Association, said that VCCI and business associations should work together to advise the Government and the Ministry of Health on the policy.

Trần Quang Trung, chairman of the Vietnam Dairy Association, recommended that VCCI meet with the Ministry of Health and the Government to discuss the issue more closely. The government has set a goal to vaccinate 75 per cent of the population in order to maintain international trade and investment which is critical to economic growth. Alain Cany, chairman of EuroCham, said: "Việt Nam has been one of the world leaders in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Swift border closures, strict quarantine measures, and targeted local lockdowns have kept infections low and enabled domestic business activities to resume." "However, this is not a permanent solution, and it cannot continue for much longer without damaging economic growth. While Việt Nam's borders are closed, other countries are rolling out vaccinations and re-opening their doors to the world." He warned there would be now a real risk that the country could fall behind unless it implements its own mass vaccination programme at scale and pace.

"The private sector, including foreign enterprises, can help speed up the country's vaccination efforts. Our companies can provide both world-leading equipment and international expertise essential to a successful mass vaccination programme." Việt Nam expects to receive 31 million COVID-19 vaccine doses developed by US firm Pfizer in the second half of the year, according to the Ministry of Health. Việt Nam began its vaccination drive on March 8, using the AstraZeneca vaccine from the UK. More than one million shots as of May 18 had been given to frontline medical workers and members of community-based anti-COVID-19 groups. Four Vietnamese-made vaccines are under development.

Mass testing

Health authorities in HCM City collected samples from 50,000 residents in Gò Vấp District for COVID-19 testing from Friday night until early Saturday morning, after five pooled samples associated with the Revival Ekklesia Mission, a Christian congregation based in Gò Vấp District, from the same ward tested positive. Pool testing combines samples from several individuals and conducts one single test to save time. If the result is positive, then each individual sample is tested. The cluster at the Revival Ekklesia Mission includes 34 of its members and 24 others who came into contact with them. "Mass testing is now the most important tool to control the outbreak," according to city authorities. Nguyễn Thành Phong, chairman of the city People's Committee, warned that several patients at the religious mission worked in industrial zones, so the risk of spreading to industrial zones was high. According to the ministry, genetic sequencing of some of the cases in the new cluster showed they had the highly transmissible Indian B.1.617.2 variant.

The city government has ordered the temporary closure of hair salons and suspension of all religious events and ceremonies. Religious establishments must not gather more than 10 people. In a related issue, Việt Nam has just recorded a completely new strain of the coronavirus in the country. The new virus strain, a hybrid between the Indian and British strains, has a fast spreading rate and strong airborne spread, according to Minister of Health Nguyễn Thanh Long. "The Ministry of Health will announce this strain on the world gene map," Long said. A total of 63 infections that can be traced back to the religious group had been found as of Saturday morning, according to the HCM City Centre for Disease Control. Thirty-two of the patients are the mission's followers, while the remaining were their direct contacts.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 05/29/2021

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E-Commerce Changing the Domestic Retail Property Market

The shift toward e-commerce due to the COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges to Việt Nam's retail property market, according to Savills Việt Nam. "COVID-19 has posed serious challenges within the real estate market, in particular for retailers. The market has witnessed many businesses having to foreclose or reduce operations to remain afloat," Từ Thị Hồng An, director, Commercial Leasing HCM City, Savills Vietnam, said. According to The Korean Times, the Korean E-Mart supermarket brand was acquired in May by Trường Hải Thaco Auto Corporation. Facing unprecedented challenges during its six years of operation in Viet Nam, the brand struggled to expand and limited itself to just one location. It was believed that E-Mart struggled to find an ideal location that would match its requirements, Savills Vietnam said. This is not the first time a foreign brand has struggled and eventually lost in Viet Nam's harsh retail market. Before this, several foreign retailers like Metro and Casino Group had to back away, as well as the French supermarket chain Auchan was forced to be acquired by Coop, a local retailer.

Through the deal to secure a 5.5 per cent stake with a price tag of $400 million in Việt Nam's Masan Group and VinCommerce (ownership of VinMart and VinMart+) by joint consumer-retail platform Crown X by Alibaba and Baring Private Equity Asia (BPEA), just a day before the E-Mart acquisition announcement, the untapped potential of Việt Nam's retail sector is shown vividly through its attraction to foreign companies. Once this deal is completed, VinCommerce (a subsidiary acquired by Masan) will be one of the largest suppliers of the Lazada e-commerce platform (owned by Alibaba). Through these transactions it is clear the retail landscape in Việt Nam is changing, as the line between online and offline shopping continues to fade. A report from the Việt Nam E-Commerce and Digital Economy Agency (iDEA) said that 53 per cent of purchases were done online in 2020 and the retail sector was given a bright forecast. According to Fitch Solutions, Việt Nam currently holds the fourth place in Southeast Asia's fast growing e-commerce sector, and the average household spending is predicted to rise up to 9.5 per cent per year, an increase of 0.5 per cent from an earlier forecast. Consumer spending categories are also expected to regain momentum in 2021.

According to the National Development Plan for E-Commerce 2021-2025, up to 55 per cent of the Vietnamese population will make purchases online. An also said: "This simply reflects how business is a competition for survival of the fittest in our evaluation. As the retail sector in HCM City is still seeing the arrival of many foreign brands within the food and beverage (F&B), fashion and accessory industry, it shows that many foreign businesses still see huge upside potential of the Vietnamese market." “Despite the ongoing challenges of COVID 19, retail performance indicators are contrary to the current state of the market. Total revenue of the retail sector continues to rise as e-commerce becomes more popular and foreign brands enter the market,” she added. Total revenue from mobile e-commerce transactions is estimated to reach US$7 billion in 2021 and up to $10.2 billion in 2023, according to Savills. Meanwhile, Hoàng Nguyệt Minh, director of commercial leasing, Savills Hà Nội, said: “International retail brands see Hà Nội as an expansion market. A premium shopping mall or a high-end hotel retail area has more appeal to these tenants than regular shop-houses or standalone projects.”

Foreign investors are helping accelerate growth of modern retail. The Ministry of Industry and Trade reported their already significant positions with 17 per cent of shopping centres and supermarkets; 70 per cent of convenience stores; 15 per cent of minimarts; and 50 per cent of online shopping and TV shopping channels. The rapidly growing middle class is approaching an inflection point for domestic consumer spending growth, with GDP per capita approaching $3,000. That shows significant retail potential, according to Savills Vietnam. According to JLL, Socar Mall – the first mall in Thủ Thiêm is set to open in the third quarter of 2021 and expected to bring 38,000 sq.m to the retail property market. Meanwhile, the retail podium of some completed mixed-use developments are still looking for tenants and have yet to define opening dates. In HCM City, vacancies continue to be constraint given limited new supply, meanwhile rents are flat as the impacts of pandemic are still lingering. In Hà Nội, Vincom Mega Mall Smart City with a total area of about 40,800 sq.m plans to enter this market in the second quarter of 2021. This will be the largest shopping centre in Nam Từ Liêm District and is expected to become a new destination for residents in the area. Given new supply and expected high occupancy rates due to developers' good track record, while other malls recorded tight vacancy, coupled with the expected control of COVID-19, Hà Nội's retail property market expects to push down the vacancy rate to a single-digit level.

From https://vietnamnews.vn 05/29/2021

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South Asia

INDIA: Yinda Infocomm Invests in TECH5 to Strengthen Global Strategic Partnership

Yinda Infocomm Limited is pleased to announce that the Company, on May 14, has entered into an investment agreement with TECH5 to invest US $8.0 million by way of subscription of new shares in the capital of TECH5. The proposed investment remains subject to the satisfaction of various conditions, including obtaining the approval of the shareholders of the company at an extraordinary general meeting to be held ("EGM"). Additionally, the company intends to exercise its rights to convert the US $2.5 million term loan amount extended to TECH5 on April 1, 2021, bringing its total investment to US $10.5 million to secure a minority equity interest in TECH5. TECH5 is an international technology company that focuses on developing disruptive biometric and digital ID solutions through the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning technologies. Its continuous dedication and efforts in research and development (R&D) of AI in all biometric modalities have resulted in TECH5's biometric algorithms ranking top tier in the National Institute of Standards and Technology for its face, fingerprint and iris recognition technologies. TECH5's Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS) database and biometric matching platforms also support some of the National ID programs in the world. TECH5 has also led the development of a mobile identity solution (Mobile ID) where TECH5's unique portfolio of Intellectual Property, a secure and private digital ID can be issued and stored on the authorised holder's phone, or kept in printed format, that can be verified against the holder in a completely offline manner. Notably, TECH5 has made considerable progress and achieved significant milestones since the start of 2021 to date. These include the implementation of TECH5's Mobile ID platform in the Philippines, successful roll-out of know-your-client processes in a purely Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) set up in India, and the application of TECH5's real-time face recognition system from video feeds solution, T5-EagleEye, in malls and railways in India and Indonesia. TECH5 has also landed its maiden National ID project on the African continent in Guinea, where TECH5's ABIS is deployed integrated with Modular Open Source Identity Platform (MOSIP), a foundational ID solution financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Sir Ratan Tata Trust and Omidyar Network. In addition, TECH5 has signed new digital onboarding contracts for its liveness detection solution in Brazil and Iraq as well as signing on more than 10 new commercial trade partners in Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas.

On the R&D front, TECH5 has gained further fingerprint recognition technology results, where the matching hardware requirements will be five to six times smaller without compromising the accuracy. Furthermore, TECH5 has made improvements in cell phone-based finger capture technology, using the advances in AI, and is currently working with third-party reputed institutions to benchmark the efficacy while delivering it to some end-customers. This technology will allow end-customer usage without having to procure finger scanners and so disrupting the device market segment. Pierre Prunier, Executive Director and CEO, Yinda Infocomm, said, "Our vision is to become a leading expert in Identity Management, especially in the space of Digital Onboarding and Digital ID. Our mission is to keep building and offering state-of-the-art platforms to our customers in the public and private sectors to leverage the global digital transformation movement. This will be achieved by building relevant technology stack in-house or via relevant acquisitions in the future. Thus, the further strengthening of our partnership with TECH5 is a right move as it gives us access to continued research and development in the latest identity management biometric technologies and allows us to expand our footprint globally." Machiel van der Harst, Co-Founder and CEO, TECH5, said, "We are delighted to announce the expansion of our partnership with Yinda. This investment will help us boost our global reach, increase TECH5 brand awareness, as well as further enforce our research and development to fuel our innovation and ensure that our partners and customers get access to true leading-edge identity management solutions."

From https://egov.eletsonline.com/ 05/17/2021

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SRI LANKA: Hirdaramani Takes New Steps in Transparency and Accountability for Renewable Energy Use

The Hirdaramani Group has yet again taken bold strides towards energy accountability by being the first in Sri Lanka to receive International Renewable Energy Certificates (I-RECs) for its energy usage. With this robust tracking standard, the group hopes to add new layers of accountability and credibility to its operations, living up to the commitments outlined in the company's own sustainability vision. As Energy Attribute Certificates (EACs), I-RECs serve to increase transparency in the energy sector and provide clarity about the use of renewable electricity among end-consumers. The I-REC Standard (www.irecstandard.org) ensures that issued certificates comply with major international sustainability and carbon accountability standards and adhere to stakeholder expectations of industry best practice for the avoidance of double counting, double certificate issuance and double attribute claiming. The system also helps individual companies seeking to improve their environmental credentials, while raising awareness among consumers and industry players. With I-RECs Hirdaramani hopes to both, back the country's clean energy programmes, as well as offset its own electricity consumption-related emissions, and support its internal sustainability strategy. As a result, they are now able to accurately claim the energy they use from renewable sources. More specifically, the new standard will register the rooftop solar power produced from the on-site PV plants across Hirdaramani's manufacturing facilities. With I-RECs, these will then be available for use within the Group, providing a clear and accurate view of renewable energy usage by each facility. This direct generation and allocation also limits the company's grid impact, in turn contributing towards a reduction in its Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions.

"At Hirdaramani we are dedicated to constantly holding ourselves accountable for meeting our commitments, and for the validation of our sustainability goals," said Nikhil Hirdaramani, Director, Hirdaramani Group. "The decision to invest in the I-REC Standard and framework stems from this dedication, allowing us to not only quantify our achievements, but also more importantly, to collect reliable data which will help us to keep moving forward towards our energy and GHG reduction goals." The I-REC Standard is developed in accordance with major international standards including GHGP, CDP, RE100, ISO, and others, providing significant credibility to data reported by users. The certification project for Hirdaramani was carried out by The Carbon Consulting Company together with the UK-based Green Certification Company. Based on current figures, Hirdaramani projects that I-RECs will be covering approximately 40% of the electricity demand of their Sri Lankan facilities. By using I-RECs, individual factories will be able to quantify their renewable energy usage at a facility level, with expected ranges between 40% and 100% depending on the facility. Overall, the company is projecting that they will be able to achieve approximately 25% decrease in its Scope 1 and 2 related carbon footprint in 2021, primarily as a result of the reduction in GHG emissions via the implementation of the I-REC programme. Over the years Hirdaramani has made many investments into renewable energy, ranging from direct investments into wind and hydro-power plants, to implementing on-site renewable energy generation projects at their manufacturing facilities (including solar power and biomass). The continued investment in third-party validation and certification by globally recognized standards is another of the company's core commitments in its move towards becoming a more sustainable organization, with a future first approach to how they conduct their operations.

From https://www.lankabusinessonline.com/ 05/02/2021

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Dialog Powers 'Diriya' to Place Knowledge at the Fingertips of Entrepreneurs

Dialog Axiata PLC launched Diriya .lk, a free, trilingual online knowledge portal. This homegrown website features a comprehensive knowledge base sourced from reputable contributors including the International Finance Corporation (a member of the World Bank Group) and local collaborations with renowned government and private sector organisations. Powered by Sri Lanka's premier connectivity partner, Diriya .lk is a one-stop hub for Sri Lankan entrepreneurs to learn and grow by receiving knowledge and expertise from industry specialists, downloadable educational content and access to networking opportunities. The website mentors, motivates and empowers entrepreneurs to tackle the challenges in today's dynamic business world by equipping them with the required management acumen and insights to efficiently start and manage their business ventures. Diriya .lk was launched by Dialog as a social innovation initiative aligned with two UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. Under this community investment initiative, Dialog aims to empower and support Sri Lankan entrepreneurs and other stakeholders of micro, small and medium scale businesses with the required expertise to strengthen their current businesses, to encourage the creation of new business ventures in the country and to foster an entrepreneurial mindset in more Sri Lankans.

From https://www.lankabusinessonline.com/ 05/30/2021

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Central-West Asia

UZBEKISTAN: The Number of State-Owned Enterprises in the Republic in 4 Years to Be Reduced by 75%

The number of state-owned enterprises in Uzbekistan is planned to be reduced by 75% by 2025. Today their number exceeds two and a half thousand. Such data were announced during the high-level international forum "Transformation and privatization of state-owned enterprises in the Republic of Uzbekistan: a new stage of economic reforms" held in Tashkent on 27 May 2021. It was organized by the Agency for State Assets Management (AUGA) of the Republic of Uzbekistan jointly with the World Bank. The forum was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan - Minister of Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Jamshid Kuchkarov and Vice President of the World Bank for Europe and Central Asia Anna Bjerde. It was attended by the Minister of Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan Timur Ishmetov, Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Adham Ikramov, and other responsible persons.

Also, the international forum was attended by more than 400 online and offline participants from different countries of the world, including representatives of international financial institutions, investment and consulting companies, commercial banks, domestic and international business community. Currently, in Uzbekistan, almost every state agency and local authorities are founders of enterprises. Of the 2 thousand 541 state-owned enterprises operating today, half (1 thousand 210 units) are created in the form of a unitary enterprise. The confirmed high level of state participation in the economy of Uzbekistan impedes the development of a healthy competitive environment. Without a transparent privatization process, we will not be able to gain the confidence of domestic and foreign investors. This was noted during the forum by the director of AUGA Akmalkhon Ortikov. Accelerating the transformation of state-owned companies, privatization, and reducing the participation of the state in the economy were identified as one of the priority areas of structural transformations in the country in the Address of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to parliament on December 29, 2020.

As domestic and international practice proves, the high level of state participation in the economy impedes the development of a healthy competitive environment. The level of confidence of domestic and foreign investors largely depends on the transparency of the privatization process. At the same time, measures to transform state-owned enterprises are necessary to increase their attractiveness. “In Uzbekistan today, the presence of the state in the economy remains high and amounts to about 55%. This indicator in South Korea is 22%, Germany - 18%, USA -

11%, Japan - 5%, ”A. Ortikov noted. In this regard, the "Strategy for the management and reform of enterprises with state participation for 2021-2025" was developed, which was approved by the Government on March 29 of this year. According to the document, by the end of the first half of this year alone, more than 550 state assets are expected to be sold, including such large property complexes as the Poytakht business center, Malika shopping center, Ichan Kala hotel, and an administrative building in the center of Tashkent.

From http://www.uzdaily.com 05/28/2021

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Foreign Management to Be Attracted to Manage State-Owned Enterprises

Tashkent, Uzbekistan (UzDaily.com) – About 100 foreign managers will be involved in the management bodies of state-owned enterprises in Uzbekistan. This is one of the tasks set following the implementation of the Strategy for the Management and Reform of Enterprises with State Participation for 2021-2025. Also among the tasks is to ensure the public offering of shares of 20 state-owned enterprises through an initial (IPO) and secondary (SPO) offer. Among the objects: JSC "Uzmetkombinat", JSC "AGMK", JSC "Uznatsbank", JSC "Uzbekneftegaz", JSC "Narodny Bank", JSC "Uzagrosugurta", JSC "NMMC", JSC "Uzavtosanoat" and others. This was discussed during the International Privatization Forum, held in Tashkent on 27 May. According to Akmalkhon Ortikov, Director of the Agency for State Assets Management (AUGA) of the Republic of Uzbekistan, within the framework of this Strategy, adopted by the Government on March 29, 2021, state participation in areas where competition is already developed and the private sector is successfully functioning will be limited. At the same time, in the absence of justification for the preservation of the state-owned enterprise, it is subject to liquidation, transformation or implementation (according to the principle of "sell or explain").

New state-owned enterprises will not be created by the state without proper justification. At the same time, all existing unitary enterprises will be gradually transformed or liquidated. Thus, the final stage of the implementation of the state share in the Coca-Cola Ichimligi company is underway; by the end of the year, it is planned to sell the state share in the Uzagroexportbank JSCB and Poytakht Bank JSC, the Fergana Oil Refinery, Quartz, Trest-12 enterprises, insurance company "Kafolat", in wine-vodka and fat-and-oil enterprises. “I can note that in the shortest possible time you will see the first results of the implementation of the Strategy in terms of the phased reorganization and liquidation of about 600 state-owned enterprises,” said the head of AUGA. The special right of the state to participate in state-owned enterprises, the so-called "Golden Share", has been canceled. The practice of providing exclusive benefits and preferences, as well as state guarantees for financing investment and other projects of state-owned enterprises, will also be abolished. Of course, such changes also require updating the legal and regulatory framework. In this regard, a draft law “On state property management” and a new version of the law “On privatization” have been developed.

The development took into account the best international experience, the work was carried out with the assistance of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The international forum "Transformation and privatization of state-owned enterprises in the Republic of Uzbekistan: a new stage of economic reforms" also presented the experience of different countries. The timeliness of its holding was noted at the opening by the Head of the World Bank Office in Uzbekistan, Marko Mantovanneli. “We are at a critical stage in the reform process in Uzbekistan and this discussion on the transformation and privatization of state-owned enterprises in Uzbekistan is taking place in a very timely manner. We would like to share the experience of other countries that have already gone through this process, talk about the positive aspects, challenges and hope that this will be useful for Uzbekistan. I hope that this event is just the beginning of our discussion, which will be productive and will bear fruit in the future, ”he said at the forum. We add that the organizer of the High-Level International Forum was the Agency for State Assets Management (AUGA) of the Republic of Uzbekistan together with the World Bank. The Forum was attended by over 400 online and offline participants from different countries of the world, including representatives of international financial institutions, investment and consulting companies, commercial banks, domestic and international business community.

From http://www.uzdaily.com 05/29/2021

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Oceania

AUSTRALIA: Companies in Lurch over Disability Changes

The eight companies chosen to do independent assessments for Australia's disability support scheme have been told there is no start date for their work, as questions linger about the program. The Morrison government has halted introducing draft laws that would lock in independent assessments for people wanting to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The independent assessments, which are done instead of a participant's regular doctor, would also be used to review the plans of everyone already on the scheme. Eight companies have already been awarded contracts to conduct them, and would share in $339 million depending on how many assessments they do. National Disability Insurance Agency boss Martin Hoffman says the companies are on a standing panel and have been told there is no start date.

"We will advise them when there is, or if there is, when we get to that point," he told a parliamentary inquiry on Tuesday. "Until we issue a work order there is no work to be provided. "We will not issue a work order for any services until the process, including the legislation, is complete." Australians with disability and their carers have also been concerned they will not be able to appeal decisions made by the independent assessors. Decisions made by the NDIA can be appealed through the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. The independent assessments cannot be directly appealed, but participants could include them in their case against the NDIA's decisions. "An independent assessment itself is not a decision," Mr Hoffman said. "It is information, it is an assessment, it is data that goes into making a decision. "That decision is reviewable, is appealable, always was and remains so."

Mr Hoffman acknowledged the independent assessments plan had caused fear and concern in the community. Community consultation had evidently not been sufficient or appropriate, he said. Mr Hoffman said participants were getting more money as part of their packages than before, with that posing sustainability problems as the scheme continues to grow. He wants the scheme to fairly assess how much participants get for support, and for them to be able to use the money flexibly. Tuesday's inquiry is one of many being held by a parliamentary committee keeping tabs on the NDIS. It is looking specifically at independent assessments in its latest round of hearings across the country. NDIS Minister Linda Reynolds on Monday told a separate inquiry independent assessments would continue in "some form", with the pause in place to determine how they would operate.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/04/2021

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Tourism Sector Pleads for Border Certainty

Australia's tourism sector is urging the government to set a time frame for the nation's reopening as question marks remain over when international travel will resume. While Tuesday's federal budget assumes Australia's international border will open next year, senior government ministers say there will be no rush to do so. Tourism and Transport Forum chief Margy Osmond is calling for a clear calendar for when Australia will open, based on the vaccination rollout. "It is just too hard for the industry at this point in time when we've got no certainty about dates," she said on Monday. "When we do finally open the door to international tourists again, what on earth are they going to see and do? Hardly any of those attractions will still be there. "As countries all over the world put in place calendars and targets for opening, that is all we are asking for."

Health Minister Greg Hunt says the government is creating a roadmap based on three principles for opening Australia. "It's about progressive opening, and that is very important for hope and understanding in Australia." The first principle is what Mr Hunt referred to as "green lanes", or travel bubbles. The second is the vaccination program and the third is possible changes to quarantine requirements for vaccinated people leaving and arriving in Australia. "The circumstances of that will be determined by the global medical evidence," Mr Hunt said. Some 2.66 million vaccinations have now been administered. Another 351,000 Pfizer doses have also arrived in Australia to be tested by medical regulators. Senior coalition minister Simon Birmingham said Australia's border closure was the most important factor in keeping the virus out of the country.

"Australians want us to maintain that ability to keep them safe and to keep their jobs safe, and the border controls are a key part of that," he told ABC radio. "We will absolutely maintain them because in doing so we're saving lives and we're protecting their jobs." Despite the budget's 2022 assumption, Scott Morrison said the international border would only open when safe to do so. "We still have a long way to go and there are still many uncertainties ahead," the prime minister said. The Federal Court is being asked to overturn the government's ban on Australians returning from India. The temporary ban is due to end on May 15 and involves anyone attempting to defy the rules being threatened with fines of up to $66,600 or five years in prison, or both. Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese says the government should not threaten citizens with jail time for returning. "The Australian passport has to mean something," he told reporters in Canberra. Liberal senator James Paterson, who is the head of parliament's national security committee, said he hoped such a ban never happened again. "An enormous threshold has been crossed that I really would have preferred was not crossed," he told Sky News. "I think criminalising Australian citizens returning to their own country is a step too far."

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/10/2021

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No 'Empathy Bias' in NDIS Support Plans

People with disabilities have warned independent assessments are making it harder to access publicly funded support. Jeffrey Smart, who has Parkinson's disease, told a parliamentary committee investigating the National Disability Insurance Scheme his independent assessment was inaccurate, incomplete and irrelevant. He said the report would not be useful to determine eligibility or levels of support. It was done by a clinical psychologist who had little detailed knowledge of the condition, had not met him before and, crucially, did not have access to his degenerative disease history. Mr Smart said he was asked to make a cup of tea and peel a potato, and was questioned about intellectual disability and communication skills as if he had a brain injury. He said his application was rejected because of ignorance about the importance of early intervention. "I was offended and felt belittled," he said.

"It is a complex disease that presents differently in each person." More than 20 per cent of people diagnosed are still of working age. More than a tremor or loss of movement, many report loss of smell, anxiety, depression and fatigue, facial masking, joint stiffness, a soft voice, and the loss of fine motor skills. Committee chair Kevin Andrews, a former social services minister, said Mr Smart's evidence was important in understanding how independent assessments were being experienced during trials, ahead of a broader rollout. Quadriplegic and disability advocate Dougie Herd was shocked NDIS Minister Linda Reynolds said the scheme relied too much on "natural empathy" and individual judgments. "There was not a scintilla of empathy bias on the part of the doctor that gave me my form and that's not just me being a smartypants," he said.

"I read and listened to what the minister said about empathy the other day. If I was still a public servant I would be shocked to hear a minister say what she said." At a previous hearing, Senator Reynolds warned the committee the NDIS was on an "unsustainable growth trajectory". Despite community concern, she still wants to introduce independent assessments of the level of support needed, perhaps every three or five years. Annual plans are currently drawn up by the scheme's planners with input from a person's own medical team. "We're relying, I think, too much on individual public servants' judgement and also their natural empathy," Senator Reynolds said. The federal budget showed the cost of NDIS participant plans growing to $31.9 billion by 2024/25.

From https://au.news.yahoo.com 05/20/2021

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NEW ZEALAND: Fee Waiver Extended for Conservation Tourism Businesses

Tourism businesses operating on public conservation land will have another six months of fees waived to help them adjust to the downturn in international visitors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Acting Minister of Conservation Dr Ayesha Verrall has announced. “We acknowledge it has been a difficult year for tourism businesses, many of whom continue to face major challenges due to fewer international visitors,” Dr Ayesha Verrall says. “The fee waiver extension is about providing financial relief and support to around 1000 concessionaires and permit holders as the sector adapts to the extraordinary circumstances created by COVID-19. “It is part of a wider recovery plan, and alongside our Jobs for Nature programme it represents a substantial investment in our tourism industry and the people employed in it. “Concession fees support DOC’s vital work protecting Aotearoa’s special places and species. “The waiver will be reviewed again later this year to either confirm the reinstatement of fees on January 1 2022, or provide a further waiver if extraordinary circumstances warrant it. “For now, this decision provides certainty for operators as they plan for the year ahead,” Dr Ayesha Verrall said.

From https://livenews.co.nz 05/06/2021

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Government Support Boosts Arts and Culture Sector

Government support for the cultural sector to help it recover from the impact of COVID-19 has resulted in more cultural sector jobs predicted through to 2026, and the sector performing better than forecast. The latest forecast by economic consultancy 'Infometrics' reflects the impact of Government investment in keeping people in work and highlights how resilient the cultural sector and its workers are, Arts Minister Carmel Sepuloni said. "The cultural sector has benefited from the Government's health and economic management of the pandemic, which included a $374 million recovery programme specifically designed to support arts and culture. "The updated forecast is for a decrease in the number of available jobs in the sector of just one percent in the year to March 2021. Infometrics also predicts an increase in cultural sector jobs through to 2026. This is despite forecasts in March 2020 of an estimated decline in cultural sector employment of 11.7 percent (around 11,000 jobs) as a result of COVID-19.

"The updated forecast shows that our Government's continued focus on growing our economy through the COVID-19 economic interventions we've put in place has boosted the recovery for important sectors such as the arts and culture. A separate report aimed at understanding audience participation in the cultural sector in late 2020, show how keen New Zealand audiences are to get back to cultural activities, Carmel Sepuloni said. Commissioned by Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, it found New Zealanders are eager to return to shows, museums, art galleries, and other cultural sector events. "The findings provide encouragement for groups and organisations within the cultural sector. COVID-19 alert levels and restrictions have prevented people from attending events, but the new research suggests people were very keen to re-engage at COVID alert level one. "For example, while only 12 percent of people attended a New Zealand music event in late 2020, 41 percent said they would attend at least occasionally in the next 12 months. "What we can take from this is that COVID-19 has not dampened New Zealanders' appetite for cultural pursuits and activities," Carmel Sepuloni said.

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New Public-Private Effort on Digital Uptake

A new public-private partnership has been launched to improve access to digital technology and training for small businesses, to take advantage of new opportunities through e-commerce. Small Business Minister Stuart Nash has joined business, corporate and industry leaders to launch the 20-member Digital Boost Alliance at The

Mind Lab in Auckland. “Last week’s Budget committed $44 million for digital training and advice. Today the private sector is coming on board to support small businesses to take advantage of the economic recovery,” Mr Nash said. “There is no going back from the digital revolution that has occurred across the globe due to COVID19. Millions of companies and business owners have adopted digital tools and technologies to meet new expectations of customers and suppliers, and drive productivity.

“Our aspiration is for New Zealand to have the most digitally enabled small business sector in the world. Agencies like Xero and NZIER estimate real GDP could increase between $3.5b and $6.2b if there was just a 20 percent increase in the uptake of cloud computing alone. “Other economic benefits from government efforts to drive innovations like e-invoicing, faster payment terms, and IR’s Business Transformation are based on digital enablement. “The Digital Boost Alliance involves twenty influential organisations who share the same goals and purpose – to support small business resilience and productivity, and enhance wellbeing and social inclusion via greater digital adoption. “It includes multinationals like Google, Facebook, Microsoft, HP and Amazon, five trading banks, Xero, MYOB, Zeald and Datacom, the Mindlab, CertNZ, Spark, Chorus and 2Degrees, the Warehouse Group and MBIE.

“The organisations who join the Alliance make a public commitment to support small businesses, workers or communities with free or discounted goods, services, advice or training in order to improve standards of living and wellbeing. “The continued digitalisation of NZ businesses will help secure the economic recovery in the face of ongoing uncertainty and volatility as COVID19 evolves around the world. The global pandemic is still our biggest threat but we are well placed to deal with its challenges through initiatives like increased digitalisation,” Mr Nash said.

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