

Weekly Media Updates **(18-24 December, 2017)**

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Africa

- **Constantino Chiwenga named ZANU-PF deputy¹**

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa has appointed a military commander who played a big part in the ousting of former leader, Robert Mugabe, as one of his deputies in the ruling party.

The appointment of retired general Constantino Chiwenga at the senior ZANU-PF position was announced in a statement by the presidential press secretary. Kembo Mohadi, a long-serving state minister, was also named ZANU-PF vice president.

Chiwenga, who resigned this week from his military role, was instrumental in a coup last month that eventually forced 93-year-old Mugabe to hand in his resignation letter, after ruling the country for 37 years. The appointments are seen as a first step towards their elevation to vice president of the country.

Ruling party deputies are traditionally named state vice presidents, although this is not legally required. The president can have two deputies. Chiwenga is one of several high-ranking military officials who have been given important roles in Zimbabwe after Mugabe's ousting.

- **Kagame and Bashir Join Hands Against ICC²**

Rwanda and Sudan have agreed to jointly confront the International Criminal Court (ICC), accusing it of targeting only African leaders. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and his Rwandan counterpart Paul Kagame struck the deal as they held talks in Khartoum on 21 December 2017, Wednesday.

President Kagame had arrived in the Sudanese capital for a two-day visit. Addressing a joint press conference, after a closed-door meeting with his host, President Kagame stressed that the African Union's position was against the ICC, stating that the continent's leaders were victims of its biased justice. President Bashir commended the Rwandan position that seeks to protect Sudan and other African nations from what he called the "international agenda". He also called for better coordination between the African governments to implement the AU stance on the ICC.

President Bashir has been indicted by the ICC since 2009 for alleged genocide and war crimes in Darfur region. The two presidents also agreed to push for reforms at AU for better coordination at all levels. They also discussed several regional concerns, including the crisis in South Sudan.

- **South Africa Jewish Board of Deputies Condemns ANC Resolution to Downgrade SA's Israel Embassy³**

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) and the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) have questioned the motives behind the ANC's "discriminatory" resolution to downgrade the South African embassy in Israel "immediately and unconditionally" to a liaison office.

The announcement to downgrade the embassy was made at the ANC's 54th elective conference on Wednesday.

¹ Aljazeera, 23 December 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/constantino-chiwenga-named-zanu-pf-deputy-171223151740442.html>

² The East African, 21 December 2017,

http://allafrica.com/stories/201712210524.html?utm_campaign=allafrica%3Ainternal&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_content=promote%3Aaans%3Aabafbt

³ News 24 Wire, 21 December 2017, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201712210657.html>

The board condemned the move, saying this was an attempt to demonise Israel, "while real human rights abuses, like those occurring in Libya, Myanmar and Syria, among others, are ignored. They are pushing their radical anti-Israel agenda to the detriment of fellow South Africans, and against the interests of the country as a whole." The SAJBD said the decision would have an impact on the economy, culture, social cohesion and national unity, adding that every decision made by the ANC had to fall within the ambit of the Constitution.

It said it felt betrayed and disappointed by the fact that the ANC was persuaded by "those with [an] obsession to vilify the Jewish state". The call for the downgrade of relations with Israel came from Palestinians and various churches, parties, civil organisations, and movements such as Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS).

- **South Sudan leaders sign ceasefire agreement⁴**

Warring parties in South Sudan have signed a ceasefire deal that will allow humanitarian access to civilians caught in the fighting.

Thursday's (22 December 2017) agreement, which is expected to go into force on December 24, calls for an unconditional end to the violence and unhindered access for aid workers to all areas throughout the country.

Signed in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, the ceasefire aims to revive a 2015 peace deal that collapsed last year after heavy fighting broke out in Juba, Reuters news agency reported.

Thousands of South Sudanese have fled the civil war in their homeland, only to become internally displaced or to seek shelter in refugee camps in northern Kenya. But despite facing difficult conditions in the camps and with little to call their own, the ceasefire announcement from Addis Ababa is small comfort to thousands of South Sudanese civilians

- **Tunisia Bans UAE Emirates Airline from Landing in Tunis⁵**

Tunisia has banned Emirates airline from landing in the capital Tunis after a number of Tunisian women were prevented from boarding its flights. The move comes amid widespread anger in Tunisia, with rights groups condemning "racist and discriminatory" measures. The transport ministry said the measure would stay in place until Emirates was able to "operate flights in accordance with law and international agreements".

- **African Refugees Reach France in Resettlement Initiative⁶**

The first group of African refugees benefiting from a new initiative bringing those deemed to be especially vulnerable directly to Europe arrived in France on Monday. The 19 Sudanese, including 11 children, were selected from a camp in Chad, where hundreds of thousands escaping war have taken refuge. They headed by bus to a convent in Alsace in eastern France after their arrival, where they will stay for four months before being moved to lodgings, according to an Interior Ministry official.

- **Days after Sunil Mittal Says Africa Foray Was a Mistake, Airtel Moves Further Ahead in Rwanda⁷**

⁴ Aljazeera, 23 December 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/south-sudan-leaders-sign-ceasefire-agreement-171222132514031.html>

⁵ BBC News, 24 December 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42474716>

⁶ Africa News, 18 December 2017, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/african-refugees-reach-france-in-resettlement-initiative-20171218>

Just days after its chairman Sunil Mittal regretted venturing into Africa terming the move “a bit rushed”, Bharti Airtel Limited (Airtel), a leading global telecommunications services provider with operations in 17 countries across Asia and Africa, announced that, through its subsidiaries, it has entered into a definitive agreement with Millicom International Cellular S.A. (Millicom) under which Airtel Rwanda Limited (Airtel Rwanda) will acquire 100 per cent equity interest in Tigo Rwanda Limited (Tigo Rwanda). The acquisition will consolidate the Rwandan telecom market and position Airtel as a strong number 2 operator in Rwanda.

- **Somali Refugees Who Fled Drought, Extremism Face Ration Cuts⁸**

Some walked for days to escape the threat of Africa's deadliest Islamic extremist group and the desperation of drought. But the problems for more than 200,000 Somali refugees are far from over. Now huddled in five sprawling camps in Ethiopia, the refugees face ration cuts in the coming months unless more international support arrives. Their plight is often overlooked in a region where hunger and conflict in Somalia and South Sudan put millions at risk.

- **Gaddafi's Son Saif al-Islam to Run For Libya President in 2018⁹**

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the former Libyan leader will contest in the upcoming presidential elections. He was released in June this year after six years of captivity by a militia group in the Libyan town of Zintan. He had been captured in November 2011 after the fall of his father's regime, and he was subsequently sentenced to death in absentia by a court in Tripoli. Following his release, the International Criminal Court ordered for his arrest and surrender. He is wanted by the ICC on charges of crimes against humanity during his father's unsuccessful attempts to put down the rebellion that eventually led to the fall of his regime.

- **Kenya and Uganda to collaborate on SGR¹⁰**

Kenya is banking on the reduced cost of clearing and moving goods from the Mombasa Port to Uganda and the progress of the standard gauge railway project to revive its bid to extend the line to its neighbour. During a bilateral meeting between President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Ugandan counterpart Yoweri Museveni at State House, Nairobi, on Tuesday, Kenya said the speed of clearing goods and the upcoming cargo trains are the answer to Uganda's transport needs. President Kenyatta said that the completion of the second container terminal increased the port's overall holding capacity to 1.65 million containers per year, with its capacity expected to hit 2.7 million containers per year once the three-stage project is complete. The modernisation programme has resulted in reduced average time to import and export goods through the port of Mombasa – from 11 days to under 3.5 days – and work for even greater efficiency continues.

- **China Jails 22 Taiwanese Deported from Kenya for Telecoms Fraud¹¹**

⁷ Financial Express, 19 December 2017, <http://www.financialexpress.com/industry/days-after-sunil-mittal-says-africa-foray-was-a-mistake-bharti-airtel-moves-further-ahead-in-rwanda/980780/>

⁸ Stars and Stripes, 23 December 2017, <https://www.stripes.com/news/africa/somali-refugees-who-fled-drought-extremism-face-ration-cuts-1.503830>

⁹ Africa News, 19 December 2017, <http://www.africanews.com/2017/12/19/gaddafi-s-son-saif-al-islam-to-run-for-libya-president-in-2018/>

¹⁰ Daily Nation, 19 December 2017, <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Kenya-and-Uganda-to-collaborate-on-SGR/1056-4235856-mqlax1/index.html>

A Beijing court handed down jail sentences of up to 15 years to 50 people deported from Kenya for telecoms fraud, including 22 from self-ruled Taiwan. Taiwan's government criticised the case, saying China had ignored vital evidence. Over the past two years countries including Kenya, Spain, Vietnam and Cambodia have deported hundreds of people from Taiwan to China for telecoms fraud, sparking accusations from Taipei that Beijing was effectively kidnapping its citizens. China has defended the deportations, saying the crimes were committed against people in China and that as Taiwan is a part of China it was natural foreign governments should send these people to China rather than Taiwan.

- **AfDB to Support Mozambique Rail Project with US\$300 million¹²**

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is taking the lead in facilitating the takeoff of one of Africa's largest infrastructure project – the US\$5 billion Nacala corridor rail and port project, supporting the project with US\$300-million from its private sector window. The project will provide a 912 km rail line from the Tete province in western Mozambique to the Nacala port on the eastern coast of the country, through Malawi. The project also includes the construction of a deep sea port and associated terminal infrastructure at Nacala.

China

- **3rd Symposium for Palestinian and Israeli peace in Beijing**

While replying to a question on 3rd Symposium for Palestinian and Israeli peace, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying on 22 December 2017 noted: From December 21 to 22, China hosted the 3rd symposium for Palestinian and Israeli peace advocates in Beijing. Peace advocates, eight from each side, held thorough and in-depth discussions on the basis of seeking common ground while shelving differences in the shared pursuit of peace surrounding three topics, namely measures to be taken by leaders of both sides, roles to be played by civil societies of both sides, and contributions to be made by the international community. A consensus document on promoting the settlement of the Palestine-Israel conflict based on the two-state solution was reached, reaffirming the two-state solution as the only viable way in resolving the Palestine-Israel issue. We believe that the consensus reached at this symposium, reflective of the sensible voices of the two nations, pooled together commitments to peace and this symposium was very timely and consequential in face of the new changes in the Middle East.¹³

- **20th Meeting of the Special Representatives of India and China**

The Special Representatives of India and China on the Boundary Question – Shri Ajit Doval, NSA of India and Mr. Yang Jiechi, China's State Councillor – met in New Delhi on 22 December 2017 for the 20th round of Special Representatives' talks. The talks were positive and focussed on bringing out the full potential of the Closer Developmental Partnership between the two countries.¹⁴

¹¹ The Star, 21 December 2017, https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017/12/21/china-jails-22-taiwanese-deported-from-kenya-for-telecoms-fraud_c1688370

¹² Engineering News, 20 December 2017, http://m.engineeringnews.co.za/article/afdb-to-support-mozambique-rail-project-with-300m-2017-12-20/rep_id:4433

¹³ http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1521677.shtml

¹⁴ <http://indianembassybeijing.in/meeting-special-representatives-22-dec-2017.php>

- **China aims to be global trade power**
 China has set a goal of building itself into a global powerhouse in international trade by 2035 through further reform and fine-tuning of trade structure, including upgrading the quality of goods and services consumed in the local market and improving the quality of two-way investment, the country's Commerce Minister said on 25 December 2017.
 To reach the long-term target, the Ministry of Commerce first has to further enhance China's role as a major global trading partner before 2020 and deploy more resources to maintain a steady growth in international trade, make efficient use of foreign investment and ensure Chinese companies invest overseas in an orderly way in 2018, according to Minister Zhong Shan.¹⁵
- **CASS Report on Employment**
 China's employment rate in the first three quarters of 2017 hit a record high, with more than 10 million new jobs added to the economy between January and September, according to a report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). The period saw about 300,000 more jobs created than in the same period last year, the report said.
 The total number of employed people hit 776 million in 2016, according to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. Employment growth was steady among both college graduates and migrant workers in the first three quarters of this year, the CASS report said.¹⁶
- **CPC unveils regulation to promote transparency in Party affairs**
 The Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee made public a regulation to promote transparency in Party affairs on 25 December, the first CPC regulation on disclosure of Party affairs....Party organizations are required to disclose affairs concerning the Party leadership and Party building among the CPC members or outside the Party in accordance with rules, according to the regulation.¹⁷
- **China Detains Kazakhs During 'Unity Week' in Troubled Xinjiang Region**
 Chinese authorities in the northwestern region of Xinjiang have detained dozens of people for retweeting electronic greetings cards celebrating independence day in neighboring Kazakhstan, which marks its independence from the former Soviet Union on Dec. 16, RFA has learned. At least 30 ethnic minority Kazakhs in Xinjiang have been detained in the regional capital Urumqi and in Xinyuan county after they forwarded the e-greetings, Kazakh sources in the region told RFA on Monday. The detainees included large numbers of young people, including detainees named only as Ayala, Sakhalie, Haiser, Nurgul, and Dina, they said. In Urumqi, the detainees included 27-year-old Kazakh woman Aygul Harhan, who was detained after she called her boyfriend, a citizen of Kazakhstan studying in Beijing, and wished him "Happy Independence Day." Urumqi police also detained 45-year-old ethnic Kazakh businessman Berik Tourdebey after he raised a glass

¹⁵ <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/1226/c90000-9308399.html>

¹⁶ http://casseng.cassn.cn/news_events/news_events_news_briefing/201712/t20171226_3793731.html

¹⁷ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/25/c_136851503.htm

with friends, calling out the toast: "Tomorrow is Kazakhstan independence day: the 26th year of independence for Kazakhstan!"¹⁸

- **Taiwan warns Chinese military drills pose huge threat to its security**

Frequent and increased military drills by mainland China pose an “enormous threat” to Taiwan’s security, Taipei warned on Tuesday in an annual defence review that starkly highlighted rising cross-strait tensions. Beijing views Taiwan as part of its territory to be reunified at some point – by military force, if necessary. The two sides split after a civil war in 1949. Although Taiwan is a self-ruling democracy, it has never formally declared independence. Beijing has stepped up drills around the island since Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen took office last year as she refuses to acknowledge both sides are part of “one China”.

Taiwanese media estimate mainland warplanes have conducted at least 20 drills around Taiwan this year, compared to just eight in 2016. The latest known drill took place last week when several Chinese planes, including jet fighters, passed through the Bashi Channel south of Taiwan to the Pacific and back. The frequent drills “have created [an] enormous threat to security in the Taiwan Strait”, Taiwanese Defence Minister Feng Shih-kuan said in the 14th national defence report released on Tuesday.¹⁹

- **China unveils green development index ranking**

China Tuesday unveiled the first regional green development index ranking, which takes into account of economic performance as well as various environmental indicators. The system measures 56 indicators including energy consumption efficiency, carbon emissions, air quality, per-capita disposable income, as well as research and development spending, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. In the 2016 ranking, Beijing and the provinces of Fujian and Zhejiang stood at the top three.²⁰

European Union

- **Elections in Catalonia**

Pro-independence party, Together for Catalonia (Junts per Catalonia) has won 34 seats in the election held on December 21, 2017. With the support of the two other pro-independence parties, which have 36 seats, Together for Catalonia party would have an absolute majority in the 135-seat regional parliament. Carles Puigdemont said, “I think we have earned the right to be listened to.”²¹

¹⁸ <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/unity-12182017115834.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2125681/taiwan-warns-chinese-military-drills-pose-huge-threat>

²⁰ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/26/c_136852539.htm

²¹ Cristina Burack, Elizabeth Schumacher, Catalonia separatist groups win absolute majority, DW, December 22, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/catalonia-separatist-groups-win-absolute-majority/a-41896228>

East Asia /South-East Asia

Korean Peninsula and Japan

- **U.N. Security Council unanimously adopts new sanctions against N. Korea**
On December 22, 2017, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed a set of sanctions against North Korea in response to its ICBM launch on November 29, 2017. The U.S.-drafted resolution seeks to slash refined petroleum product exports to North Korea by 89 percent. The council imposed an annual cap of 2 million barrels in September, and the new resolution calls for a further reduction to 500,000 barrels. The resolution also requires U.N. member states to expel North Korean overseas workers within 24 months. The workers' income is believed to be extorted by the Pyongyang regime to fund its weapons development.²²
- **Korea, Japan remain apart over 'Comfort Women' deal**
On December 19, 2017 Foreign Minister of South Korea Kang Kyung-wha and Foreign Minister of Japan Taro Kono failed to bridge the difference between the two countries regarding the controversial agreement reached between the two sides in 2015 over "comfort women." Minister Kang sought Japan's understanding about an ongoing investigation by a Korean fact-finding team into the 2015 deal over Japan's imperial-era mobilization of Korean women as sex slaves. She also expressed hope for improved relations between the two countries irrespective of the outcome of the probe. However Minister Kono emphasized that the 2015 agreement was "final and irreversible" and that it should be carried out in a faithful manner. Kono said the agreement will not necessarily cause problems, although it complicated the row over the former Korean sex slaves.²³
- **South Korean guards fire at North Korean soldiers in DMZ**
On December 21, 2017 South Korean guards fired warning shots in the central-western part of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in an attempt to chase away a group of North Korean soldiers. The North Korean soldiers were likely searching for a soldier who defected to the South few hours earlier. The ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said a northern soldier defected and was in custody. The incident came a month after a North Korean soldier's dramatic defection at the truce village of Panmunjeom.²⁴
- **Japan approves missile defense system amid North Korea threat**
On December 19, 2017 Japan's Cabinet approved a plan that will allow the Defense Ministry to buy two Aegis Ashore systems to increase country's defense capabilities amid escalating threats from North Korea. Aegis, land-based U.S. missile combat systems will add to Japan's current two-step missile defense consisting of Patriot batteries and Aegis-equipped destroyers. In a statement the

²² "U.N. Security Council unanimously adopts new sanctions against N. Korea", The Yonhap News, December 23, 2017,

<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2017/12/23/0401000000AEN20171223000300315.html>

²³ "Korea, Japan remain apart over sex slavery deal", The Korea Times, December 19, 2017,

http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/12/120_241169.html

²⁴ "South Korean guards fire at North Koreans chasing defecting soldier", The Korea Times, December 21, 2017, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/12/205_241261.html

Cabinet said "North Korea's nuclear and missile development has become a greater and more imminent threat for Japan's national security, and we need to drastically improve our ballistic missile defense capability to protect Japan continuously and sustainably." The deployment will add to growing defense costs in Japan as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government pushes to allow the military a greater international role and boost its missile combat capability.²⁵

(ASEAN, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Phillipines)

- **Thailand Military to lift ban of Political Parties**

Thailand's PM Prayut stated that he would use special order known as Article 44 to solve political deadlock. This would provide a special order that gives the military sweeping powers to allow political parties to prepare for next year's general election. Thailand's major parties had urged the government for months to lift a ban on political activity in order for them to prepare for the elections. The ban on the political parties has been in place since the 2014 military coup. PM Prayut earlier this year had announced that the general election would be held next November, with the exact date to be announced only in June of 2018, after the . Earlier this month, the European Union said it would resume political contact "at all levels" with Thailand after putting relations on hold.²⁶

- **China Outlines Cooperation Strategy with Lower Mekong Countries**

The Chinese government has outlined a cooperation strategy under the Lancang-Mekong cooperation mechanism with five lower Mekong countries namely: Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, for a win-win situation, peace and stability in the region. The policy aims to promote socio-economic development, improve living conditions of people in the member states thus driving the region toward prosperity. The policy aims to turn Lancang-Mekong region into healthy community with member countries having equal right to use water resources and tap economic potential.²⁷

- **Vietnam's Fishing Industry given a 'yellow card' by the EU**

The EU which currently accounts for 16-17 percent of Vietnam's seafood exports in October 2017, had given Vietnam's seafood industry a 'yellow card', which is a warning given to countries involved and non-cooperative in its fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing worldwide. A six month period has been given to Vietnam's industry to alter its malpractices in order to avoid a more serious 'red card', meaning that Vietnam will be banned from exporting its seafood to the European Union markets. According to Vietnam the problems begin with the lack of an effective sanctioning system to deter IUU fishing activities, and the

²⁵ "Japan approves missile defense system amid N. Korea threat", Asahi Shimbun, December 20, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201712200015.html>

²⁶ "Thai junta to allow parties to get ready for 2018 polls", *The Straits Times*, December 20, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-junta-to-allow-parties-to-get-ready-for-2018-polls>, accessed on December 20, 2017.

²⁷ Khamla Phanouvong, "China Outlines Cooperation Strategy with Lower Mekong Countries", *Lao News Agency*, December 18, 2017, <http://kpl.gov.la/En/Detail.aspx?id=30455>, accessed on December 20, 2017.

country's failure to take adequate action in addressing ongoing illegal fishing activities.²⁸

- **Laos-Thailand Agree on Security Cooperation**

At the 24th meeting of the Thai-Lao General Border Committee (GBC) an agreement was reached between Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Prawit Wonsuwon and Lao's Defence Minister Chansamone Chanyalath, to increase bilateral cooperation against people threatening security in the region. Both leaders discussed ways to improve cooperation on overall security issues and agreed to seriously increase cooperation against illicit drugs. The GBC also agreed to promote security along their joint border, organise meetings to promote cooperation at various levels, and increase joint border patrols to tackle human trafficking and goods smuggling.²⁹

Myanmar

- **China urges others to avoid 'complicating' Myanmar dispute**

China urged other governments to "constructively help" Myanmar and Bangladesh resolve the fate of Rohingya Muslims "instead of complicating the issue" after Myanmar blocked a visit by UN human rights official. Events in Rakhine State, where more than 630,000 Rakhine Muslim fled a military crackdown, are an internal affair for Myanmar that "contains complicated historical, national and religious factors," said a foreign ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying³⁰.

- **China, Russia oppose UN criticism of Myanmar**

The UN General Assembly urged Myanmar to end a military campaign against Muslim Rohingya and called for the appointment of a UN special envoy, despite opposition from China, Russia and some regional countries. A resolution put forward by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was adopted by a vote of 122 to 10 with 24 abstentions³¹.

- **US hits Myanmar general in new global rights sanctions**

The United States blacklisted a number of alleged rights abusers and corrupt officials on 21st December, as a new global sanctions law went into effect. US diplomats and Treasury officials spent a year compiling evidence of the most brutal and cynical crimes by 14 senior figures and dozens of companies. President Donald Trump signed an executive order blocking any assets that those exposed on the list might have in banks or property on US soil. Prominent on the list,

²⁸"Vietnam's seafood industry reacts to 'yellow card' from EU", *Tuoi Tre News*, December 21, 2017, <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/business/20171221/vietnams-seafood-industry-reacts-to-yellow-card-from-eu/43253.html>, accessed on December 21, 2017.

²⁹Wassana Nanuam, "Laos agrees to tackle threats to Thai govt", *The Bangkok Post*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asean/1383234/laos-agrees-to-tackle-threats-to-thai-govt>, accessed on December 21, 2017.

³⁰ China urges others to avoid 'complicating' Myanmar dispute, 22 December 2017, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/china-urges-others-avoid-complicating-myanmar-dispute.html>

³¹ China, Russia oppose UN criticism of Myanmar, 25th December 2017, <http://www.mizzima.com/news-international/china-russia-oppose-un-criticism-myanmar>

Myanmar's General Maung Maung Soe is accused of leading a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" against his country's persecuted Rohingya minority.³²

- **Government removes welcome mat for UN Special Rapporteur**

Myanmar has blocked UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee access to the country, ahead of her visit next month, the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner said in a statement on 20th December. The government has also withdrawn cooperation with the special rapporteur for the duration of her tenure, it added. Lee was due to visit Myanmar in January to assess the state of human rights situation nationwide, including accusations of human rights abuses against the Muslim residents in troubled Rakhine State, according to the statement³³.

- **China gives \$1 million for peace process**

China has donated US\$1 million (K1.36 billion) to Myanmar's peace process and national reconciliation programme, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on 19th December. The donation was received by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi during a courtesy call by Chinese Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Sun Guoxiang in the capital Nay Pyi Taw on Sunday, the ministry said in a statement. The donation would go to the peace fund, which is managed by Joint Coordination Body (JCB) led by National League for Democracy. The JCB allocates funds to the peace negotiations and the implementation of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, as well as other activities and development projects to promote peace³⁴.

- **UN experts urge greater press freedom after detention of Reuters journalists**

Myanmar must ensure that journalists can operate freely and safely, UN human rights specialists have urged, after two Reuters journalists were detained in what has been described as a widening crackdown in the country³⁵.

North America

Canada

- **Canadian government retaliates by expelling Venezuelan diplomat**

Canada will expel a Venezuelan diplomat and bar that country's ambassador from returning, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland said after the South American nation booted envoys from Brazil and Canada for criticizing its rights record. In a statement, Freeland said the ambassador was no longer welcome in Canada and that Venezuelan chargé d'affaires is persona non grata. Freeland said Venezuela's expulsion of the Canadian diplomat over the weekend was "typical of

³² US hits Myanmar general in new global rights sanctions, 22 December 2017,

<http://www.mizzima.com/news-domestic/us-hits-myanmar-general-new-global-rights-sanctions>

³³ Government removes welcome mat for UN Special Rapporteur, 21st December 2017,

<https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/government-removes-welcome-mat-un-special-rapporteur.html>

³⁴ China gives \$1 million for peace process, 20th December 2017, <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/china-gives-1-million-peace-process.html>

³⁵ UN experts urge greater press freedom after detention of Reuters journalists, 22 December 2017,

<http://www.mizzima.com/news-domestic/un-experts-urge-greater-press-freedom-after-detention-reuters-journalists>

the Maduro regime, which has consistently undermined all efforts to restore democracy and to help the Venezuelan people.³⁶

- **Renewable energy growing in Canada but solar installations lagging behind**
The National Energy Board today released its annual look at the state of renewable energy in Canada and it says solar energy accounts for just 0.5 per cent of all Canada's generated electricity. And almost all of that exists entirely in Ontario, the report notes. NEB chief economist Shelley Milutinovic said the trend in Canada is that renewable energy sources like wind and solar are replacing coal as Canada moves to eliminate that as a source of electricity by 2030. Between 2005 and 2016, non-hydroelectric renewables — wind, solar and biomass — grew from 1.5 per cent of total electricity generation in Canada to 7.2 per cent. Only about 20 per cent of Canada's electricity comes from fossil fuels now — divided almost equally between coal and natural gas. Nuclear energy accounts for 15 per cent of Canada's electricity supply. The rest comes from renewables. Hydro is the big beast in that, responsible for almost 60 per cent of Canada's power in 2016. While actual hydro power generation has grown about seven per cent in the last decade, other renewables are exploding.³⁷
- **Canada and UAE sign defence cooperation agreement**
Canada and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have signed a defence cooperation arrangement that will make it easier for the Canadian defence industry to access one of the world's most lucrative arms markets and bolster military ties between the two countries. Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan signed the agreement on Friday during his five-day tour of the Middle East that included stops in Jordan, the UAE and Kuwait. The Canada-UAE Defence Cooperation Arrangement will help advance shared interests, including increased personnel training opportunities, defence engagement, and the promotion of regional stability, Sajjan said in a statement. But closer defence cooperation with the UAE is also likely to raise more concerns about Canadian-made weapons and equipment being used in the commission of human rights abuses. The UAE is an active participant of the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen.³⁸
- **Amid North Korea crisis, Canada not talking to U.S. about joining missile defence program**
While the Canadian military is preparing to work with the U.S. on upgrading North America's aging defences, Canada's top general says there have been no talks about joining its ballistic-missile shield program. Chief of the Defence Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance's comments come amid swirling questions over Canada's potential involvement in ballistic-missile defence, particularly given rampant concerns about North Korea. Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan appeared to leave the

³⁶ Reuters, "Canadian government retaliates by expelling Venezuelan diplomat," <http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/politics/canada-venezuela-diplomat-expelled-1.4464507>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

³⁷ Mia Rabson, "Renewable energy growing in Canada but solar installations lagging behind," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/neb-solar-renewable-energy-1.4457835>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

³⁸ Levon Sevunts, "Canada and UAE sign defence cooperation agreement," <http://www.rcinet.ca/en/2017/12/18/canada-and-uae-sign-defence-cooperation-agreement/>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

door open to participating in the controversial program in October, but the government has otherwise remained largely ambiguous when asked about missile defence. The opposition parties, meanwhile, are sharply divided, with the Conservatives saying Canada should start immediate talks with the U.S. while the NDP has strongly opposed any Canadian participation.³⁹

The United States

- **Senate passes landmark US tax bill**

The Senate passed a landmark plan for the most radical tax overhaul in a generation. The bill now needs to be approved again by the House of Representatives, which resumed debate on Wednesday after a procedural hitch required a rerun of Tuesday's vote in favour of the measure. It must then be signed into law by Mr Trump, an achievement that would help banish Republican memories of their failure to repeal Obamacare five months earlier. Republicans say their package of \$1.5tn in tax cuts is vital to energising the US economy and they view it as crucial to their chances of keeping control of Congress in midterm elections in 2018. Investors sold US Treasuries, however, in a sign that they expect inflation to climb. Equities, which have rallied on the expectation of a boost to corporate earnings, were little changed in morning trading. The Senate passed the bill in the early hours of Wednesday morning by 51 votes to 48 with every Republican voting for it, except John McCain, who was absent due to ill health, and Democrats united in opposition against it.⁴⁰

- **US Defense Secretary says 'storm clouds are gathering' over Korean Peninsula**

Defence Secretary Jim Mattis has urged American soldiers to be ready for anything, saying that "storm clouds are gathering" over the Korean Peninsula. Mr Mattis stopped short of forecasting any real armed conflict between the United States and North Korea, but emphasised that diplomacy with the rogue regime in Pyongyang is best backed up with the clear threat that American military might is at the ready. The comments came as the United Nations Security Council voted to impose strict new sanctions on Pyongyang that target one of the main financial sources of North Korea. The new sanctions would compel to sharply reduce the sale of oil reserves to North Korea, and would send back all North Korean expatriates within the next two years, a key source of income for Pyongyang.⁴¹

- **Despite Trump's hopes, US-Russia relations are getting chilly**

In the space of a week, the Trump administration has named Russia a "rival power," sanctioned a close Putin ally, and decided to give Ukraine anti-tank weapons to help in its fight against Moscow-backed militias. It's a series of steps

³⁹ The Canadian Press, "Amid North Korea crisis, Canada not talking to U.S. about joining missile defence program," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-us-missile-defence-1.4427874>, Accessed on 26 December 2017 002E

⁴⁰ Barney Jopson, "Senate passes landmark US tax bill," <https://www.ft.com/content/129a7330-e4f5-11e7-8b99-0191e45377ec>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

⁴¹ Clark Mindock, "US Defense Secretary says 'storm clouds are gathering' over Korean Peninsula," <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/north-korea-donald-trump-latest-jim-mattis-warns-storm-clouds-over-peninsula-a8126486.html>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

that has been paired with tougher rhetoric from the State Department about Moscow's destabilizing activities in eastern Ukraine, and serious charges from the Pentagon that Russia is intentionally violating de-confliction agreements in Syria. The slew of action highlights a decided turn away from the warmer, more cooperative relationship with Russia that President Donald Trump called for during his campaign and early in his presidency. As Trump nears the one-year mark in office, a number of factors have intruded on those plans. He has been hemmed in by the domestic political constraint of an ongoing investigation into Russia's interference with the 2016 election, as well as a widespread distrust of Russia and its continuing cyber activities that persists among the intelligence community, diplomats, the Pentagon and lawmakers.⁴²

- **Trump Delivers a Mixed Message on His National Security Approach**

President Trump presented a blueprint for the country's national security on December 18, 2017 that warns of a treacherous world in which the United States faces rising threats from an emboldened Russia and China, as well as from what it calls rogue governments, like North Korea and Iran. To fend off these multiple challenges, the report says with Cold War urgency, the government must put "America First," fortifying its borders, ripping up unfair trade agreements and rebuilding its military might. But in his speech announcing the strategy, Mr. Trump struck a much different tone. Instead of explaining the nature of these threats, he delivered a campaign like address. The strategy — which administration officials said was drawn from speeches that Mr. Trump had delivered during the 2016 campaign and as president while at the United Nations and on trips in Europe and Asia — ranges widely and includes jihadi extremism, space exploration, nuclear proliferation and pandemics. While Mr. Obama's two national security strategies emphasized cooperation with allies and economic partners, Mr. Trump's strategy attempts to walk the line between his campaign slogan of "America First" and an insistence that he is not rejecting working with American partners — as long as they do so on terms advantageous to the United States.⁴³

Mexico

- **Mexico's leftist presidential front-runner puts country first, resists Trump comparison**

Mexico's leftist presidential front-runner is combative and unbending, and his personality-based campaign proclaiming honesty and fiery nationalism could set up a unique and combustible relationship with his northern counterpart should he win. Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has long preached a Mexico-first stance, accusing its government of servility to Washington and lambasting the free trade that he says has devastated his country's farms and workers. President Donald

⁴² Nicole Gaouette, "Despite Trump's hopes, US-Russia relations are getting chilly," <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/24/politics/trump-us-russia-chill/index.html>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

⁴³ Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "Trump Delivers a Mixed Message on His National Security Approach," <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/us/politics/trump-security-strategy-china-russia.html>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

Trump's call to reduce U.S. economic ties with Mexico meshes with his demand to make Mexico less reliant on America. Some have speculated that if Trump threatens to scrap the North American Free Trade Agreement, Lopez Obrador as president would simply say "go ahead" with a smile. While the candidate has toned down his criticism of the trade pact ahead of Mexico's July 1 presidential election, and even expressed some support for it, how he would handle the renegotiation of NAFTA by the U.S., Mexico and Canada is a great unknown.⁴⁴

- **Mexico president says Supreme Court should rule on security law**
Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto said on Thursday (December 21) that he would send a contentious new security law to the Supreme Court for review after signing it, and would not make use of it until the tribunal has ruled on its constitutionality. The law, which the government says sets out the rules under which the armed forces can operate with the battle with organized crime, has sparked fierce criticism by opponents who fear it could open the door to more abuses. Acknowledging the concerns that have been stirred by the legislation, known as the Law of Internal Security, Peña Nieto stressed that the Supreme Court will have the final say. Multiple human rights groups and international organizations, including the United Nations, have attacked the bill, mindful of cases of abuses by members of the military in Mexico over the past 11 years. In an address to security forces, Peña Nieto framed the law as a critical tool to combat Mexico's drug-related violence. 2017 is set to be the country's deadliest year on record, as disputes between rival cartels fueled murders.⁴⁵

Latin America and Caribbean Countries

Argentina

- **Argentina passes controversial pension reform despite violent protests**
Argentina's government on December 19, 2017 passed a controversial reform of the South American country's pension system amid violent protests in the capital Buenos Aires. Clashes between protesters and police broke out on December 18 ahead of the vote, amid fears that the changes would have a heavy impact on the poor. But the governing coalition managed to push through the changes on December 19, winning the vote 128-116. President Mauricio Macri's government said the move was needed to lower the deficit. One of the controversial changes in the new law is moving the retirement age from 65 to 70 for men and from 60 to 63 for women. At the same time, changes are to be made to the formula used to calculate payments, which is expected to lower the amounts paid. The Senate had already approved the bill. But the vote in the lower house, originally scheduled for last December 14, had been delayed because of civil unrest. Since taking office in 2015, Macri has vowed to rein in government spending and revive Argentina's

⁴⁴ Christopher Sherman and Mark Stevenson, "Mexico's leftist presidential front-runner puts country first, resists Trump comparison," <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-mexico-leftist-presidential-front-runner-20171223-story.html>, Accessed on 26 December 2017.

⁴⁵ Reuters, "Mexico president says Supreme Court should rule on security law," <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-security/mexico-president-says-supreme-court-should-rule-on-security-law-idUSKBN1EF2YP>," Accessed on 26 December 2017.

lagging economy. But his ordering of job cuts and the cutting of utility subsidies has fueled labor unrest. In October 2017, the conservative leader announced that he would seek more sweeping changes in tax, education, and labor after his governing coalition scored a resounding victory in congressional elections.⁴⁶

Brazil

- **My Accusers Will be Ridiculed, Says Former President Lula**

Former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva invited a group of journalists to meet with him on Wednesday (December 20, 2017) at the Lula Institute to record an interview. Lula said that he wasn't afraid of being condemned or imprisoned. He said that even if the pending court decision turns out unfavorable, he will be a candidate "whenever the PT (Worker's Party) wants" and that he could appeal to higher courts. For the former president, his accusers "will be ridiculed". "I just want you to read the procedural notes. I saw there that [Judge Leandro Paulsen] the reviewer reads 2,500 pages per hour. This is humanly impossible", the PT leader declared. Lula said that he has no fear of being imprisoned. "Because only someone who committed a crime can be imprisoned. This [Deltan] Dallagnol [Prosecutor] isn't big enough to do what he is doing. He should be fired for the good of public service. It isn't possible that the State pays so much to someone to tell the kind of lies that he told [referring to the PowerPoint presentation he made at the Prosecutor General's Office]."⁴⁷

- **Marcelo Odebrecht Leaves Prison, but Keeps Distance from Company Management**

Marcelo Odebrecht, the heir to construction firm Odebrecht, was released from his cell at the Federal Police Superintendency in Curitiba on December 19, 2017. He will be placed on a strict form of house arrest, where he will serve a two-and-a-half-year sentence – an upgrade that had been anticipated in his plea-bargain agreement with federal prosecutors. During the period in question, Mr. Odebrecht will be allowed to leave his home on two separate occasions, and will be allowed to maintain contact with 15 people. The list of people he chooses will remain confidential, although he will have to present it to the courts and the names of the people will be screened by federal prosecutors. Despite having been released from prison, it will still be quite hard for Marcelo Odebrecht to exert influence over the company again. Not only does his sentence prohibit him from assuming an executive position (or even from giving management advice), but the company has also undergone several internal modifications. Mr. Odebrecht is still admired by most at the firm.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ "Argentina Passes Controversial Pension Reform Despite Violent Protests," December 19, 2017, <http://santiagotimes.cl/2017/12/19/argentina-passes-controversial-pension-reform-despite-violent-protests/>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁴⁷ Monica Bergamo, "My Accusers Will be Ridiculed, Says Former President Lula," December 21, 2017, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2017/12/1945082-my-accusers-will-be-ridiculed-says-former-president-lula.shtml>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁴⁸ "Marcelo Odebrecht Leaves Prison, but Keeps Distance from Company Management," December 20, 2017, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2017/12/1944776-marcelo-odebrecht-leaves-prison-but-keeps-distance-from-company-management.shtml>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

Venezuela

- **Venezuela to Give Russia Rosneft Gas Field Rights**

Caracas has awarded licenses to Russian oil giant Rosneft for the development of two offshore gas fields. The deal was signed between Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin, in Caracas. Sechin also discussed Rosneft infrastructure, collaboration with Venezuelan state energy company PDVSA, according to the statement. The terms of the agreement, guarantee that the wholly-owned Rosneft branch of Grupo Rosneft will operate the southern Caribbean Patao and Mejillones offshore gas fields for 30 years. Rosneft will be able to sell all oil and gas extracted from the fields, including liquefied natural gas. Total reserve estimates for the two fields are said to be about 180 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas. Venezuela's rapid dissolving socialist government has turned to longtime ally Russia for the cash and credit necessary to survive.⁴⁹

- **Venezuela's economy contracted a massive 16.5% in 2016**

Venezuela's economy shrank a massive 16.5% in 2016, according to an official government filing to the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The oil-rich but impoverished country attributed the collapse to a contraction of 9.9% in the oil sector and 16.1% in the non-oil economy. The 150-page report, received on December 21, 2017 by the SEC, also reported inflation at 274.4%, and an unemployment rate of 7.5% in the calendar year ending on December 31, 2016. It also revealed a sharp drop in Venezuelan imports in 2016, when purchases totaled US\$16.4 billion, half of the US\$33.3 billion of the previous year. "Since 2015, there has been increasing political and social unrest due to shortages of basic consumer goods as a result of a drop in domestic food production; limited access to imports as a result of currency restrictions; smuggling; hoarding and other distribution problems," the report noted. It also classed 11.3% of the population as "extremely poor" in 2014, the last year the figures were available, up from 7.1% in 2012. The SEC requires detailed economic filings from foreign governments that issue their debt in the US.⁵⁰

- **Venezuela expels top Brazil and Canada envoys for meddling in internal affairs**

Venezuela has expelled the Brazilian Ambassador to Caracas, Ruy Pereira, and Canadian charge d'affaires Craib Kowalik, accusing them of meddling in the country's politics. National Constituent Assembly president Delcy Rodriguez declared both Brazil's ambassador and Canada's chargé d'affaires as persona non grata on December 23, 2017. Ms. Rodriguez accused Canada of interfering in Venezuela's internal affairs and Brazil of violating the rule of law. The move comes days after the government sparred with new U.S. envoy Todd Robinson, who has

⁴⁹ "Venezuela to Give Russia Rosneft Gas Field Rights," December 18, 2017, <http://todayvenezuela.com/2017/12/18/venezuela-to-give-russia-rosneft-gas-field-rights/>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁵⁰ "Venezuela's Economy Contracted a Massive 16.5%, Admits Government," December 23, 2017, <http://en.mercopress.com/2017/12/23/venezuela-s-economy-contracted-a-massive-16.5-in-2016-admits-government>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

criticized a measure that effectively blocks three opposition parties from next year's presidential elections. Canada and Brazil are among the many countries critical of Mr. Maduro's decision to convene a Constituent Assembly, which effectively replaced the opposition-controlled National Assembly.⁵¹

MERCOSUR

- **Mercosur divided on Jerusalem vote: Argentina and Paraguay abstained; Chile and Brazil supported**

A resolution backed overwhelmingly by the United Nations has effectively called on the U.S. to withdraw its recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The vote in support of the resolution was 128, nine against and 35 abstentions. The South American Mercosur block, currently holding a summit in Brasilia, voted divided, while Chile, Brazil and Uruguay supported the resolution, Argentina and Paraguay abstained. Part of the document reads: "...any decisions and actions which purport to have altered, the character, status or demographic composition of the Holy City of Jerusalem have no legal effect, are null and void and must be rescinded in compliance with relevant resolutions of the [UN] Security Council". The resolution "calls upon all States to refrain from the establishment of diplomatic missions in the Holy City of Jerusalem". Trump had earlier threatened to cut aid to U.N. members who would vote against his decision. The nine countries that voted against the resolution were: the United States, Israel, Guatemala, Honduras, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau and Togo.⁵²

Russia

- **Russia and India**

Seeking to strengthen bilateral trade and investment, foreign minister Sushma Swaraj and visiting Russian deputy PM Dmitry Rogozin took stock of economic ties between the two countries. The two leaders, co-chaired a meeting on 23 December of the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation (IRIGC-TEC). Defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman also met Rogozin and held wide-ranging talks with the focus on further boosting the bilateral defence and security ties through joint manufacture and co-development of key military platforms and weapon systems. On his third visit to India this year, Rogozin later called on PM Narendra Modi. The PM noted with satisfaction the marked increase in

⁵¹ "Venezuela Expels Top Brazil and Canada Envoys Over Political Meddling," December 23, 2017, <http://santiagotimes.cl/2017/12/23/venezuela-expels-top-brazil-and-canada-envoys-over-political-meddling/>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁵² "MERCOSUR Divided on Jerusalem Vote: Argentina and Paraguay Abstained; Chile and Brazil Supported," December 22, 2017, <http://santiagotimes.cl/2017/12/22/mercosur-divided-on-jerusalem-vote-argentina-and-paraguay-abstained-chile-and-brazil-supported/>, Accessed on December 26, 2017.

highlevel exchanges this year and warmly recalled his own visit to St Petersburg in June for the Annual Bilateral Summit, said the government in a statement.⁵³

- **Russia and Its Upcoming Presidential Election**

President Vladimir Putin said on 25 December that the Russian authorities should monitor the activity of “some companies” on social media during next year’s presidential election and assess the extent of their involvement in domestic politics. He did not name the companies or say if he was concerned about the activities of foreign or local firms, but Russia has been accused by the United States and other Western nations of meddling in their elections. “We need to look carefully at how some companies work in internet, in social media, and how widely they are involved in our domestic political life,” Putin said, speaking at a meeting with leaders in Russia’s parliament about a new “foreign agents” law.⁵⁴

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was barred in the same day from running in next year’s presidential election after officials ruled he was ineligible to take part due to a suspended prison sentence he says was trumped up.⁵⁵ In an interview on 19 December with The Associated Press, he said the biggest thing keeping him from becoming Russia’s next president is a political system that punishes him for rallying support and conspires to keep his face off the airwaves. Navalny, in his first interview since the start of the presidential campaign, said he would win it “if I am allowed to run and if I’m allowed to use major media.” And he said the Kremlin knows it. “It’s the main reason they don’t want me to run,” he said. “They understand perfectly how ephemeral the support for them is.” In one of the Levada poll, conducted in April, found that 51% of people are tired of waiting for Putin to bring “positive change” — 10 percentage points higher than a year ago.⁵⁶

President Putin presented his vision for modernising the country, while some of his challengers in next March’s presidential vote were formally nominated for the race. He pledged to offer broader incentives for business, fight corruption and pour extra resources into the underfunded health care and education system. With his approval ratings topping 80 percent, the 65-year-old Mr Putin is set to easily win another six-year term in the March 18 vote. The involvement of Ksenia Sobchak, a sharp-tongued 36-year-old star TV host, could raise public interest in the race. While Sobchak has denied colluding with the Kremlin, her participation could weaken Mr Navalny and attract younger voters to the polls. Sobchak, who

⁵³“India, Russia focus on ramping up economic & defence ties”, *Times of India*, December 24, 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-russia-focus-on-ramping-up-economic-defence-ties/articleshow/62226830.cms> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁵⁴“Russia's Putin calls for Web activities of some firms to be monitored”, *Reuters*, December 26, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-election-internet/russias-putin-calls-for-web-activities-of-some-firms-to-be-monitored-idUSKBN1EJoTZ?il=0> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Nataliya Vasilyeva, “Vladimir Putin's Challenger Says He Would Win if Russia's Elections Were Fair”, *Times*, December 19, 2017. <http://time.com/5070664/vladimir-putin-russia-alexei-navalny/> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

was formally nominated for the race overnight by a liberal party, the Civic Initiative, argued that the opposition shouldn't try to defy the authorities with unsanctioned demonstrations. Sobchak has criticised the Kremlin's policies and called for democratic changes, but she has steered clear of any personal criticism of Mr Putin. Sobchak's criticism of Russia's annexation of Crimea and her calls for more liberal economic policies and broader freedoms, including gay marriage, have helped her gain traction with reform-minded voters. The Communists have decided to field a fresh candidate instead of their chief Gennady Zyuganov, a fixture of past campaigns. Other veterans of past elections — liberal Grigory Yavlinsky and ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy — are also running.⁵⁷

- **Russia and Its Military Expansion**

In an interview with the state-run Rossiya Segodnya news agency on 25 December, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has ruled out the deployment of additional military bases abroad, including in Latin America, despite an increase in military campaigns in recent years. Russia maintains a military presence in Syria and several post-Soviet countries and conflict zones. On 13 December, it signed a 50-year agreement (till 2092) to expand Russia's naval presence in Syria despite a recent order to withdraw troops from the war-torn country. Russia renewed the lease on its Western Syrian airbase in Khmeimim for an additional 50 years. Mr. Lavrov said that "Setting up overseas military bases, including in Latin America, for the sole purpose of projecting power, is not a goal in itself."⁵⁸

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg warned in an interview published on 23 December that a Russian naval build-up threatens transport and communications links between alliance members. "Russia has invested massively in its navy, especially submarines," Stoltenberg *told the Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, adding that Moscow has deployed 13 additional submarines since 2014. "Russia's submarine activity is now at its highest level since the Cold War," he said, adding that submarines were active in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and also "near our coastlines."⁵⁹

- **Russia and Syria**

A Russian-sponsored reconciliation conference on Syria in January 2018 was cast into doubt on Sunday after Syrian opposition activists rejected Moscow's conditions for their attendance. The Congress for National Dialogue, planned on Jan. 29-30, 2018 in Sochi is supposed to involve all the parties in the Syrian conflict in charting a course for the country's future. However, Russia has ruled out the participation of any group that insists on the removal of President Bashar Assad,

⁵⁷"Vladimir Putin puts his case for re-election as president of Russia", *News.com*, December 24, 2017. <http://www.news.com.au/world/europe/vladimir-putin-puts-his-case-for-reelection-as-president-of-russia/news-story/cefc6dda5192ca258e14e6234900ac9a> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁵⁸"Russia Rules Out Further Military Expansion", *The Moscow Times*, December 25, 2017.

<https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-rules-out-further-military-expansion-60040> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁵⁹Chase Winter, "NATO chief warns of Russian submarine capability", *DW*, December 24, 2017.

<http://www.dw.com/en/nato-chief-warns-of-russian-submarine-capability/a-41919647> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

whose regime it supports. The opposition refuses to accept that condition. Hisham Marwa, a representative of Syria's opposition High Negotiations Committee, said that the Russians want to implement their vision of resolving the Syrian crisis according to what serves their and the Syrian regime's interests. Opposition spokesman Yahya Al-Aridi said that Russia may also demand that those who attended the Sochi talks could not discuss the Russian military presence in Syria. Bahia Mardini, an opposition figure based in London, said Russia was preparing to control the political situation in Syria through Sochi. He said that this conference is seen by them as the gate to legitimize the Russian occupation of Syria and to float or reproduce the Assad regime as an agent of Russia in Syria.⁶⁰

On 23 December, the Russian president's envoy on the Syrian settlement Alexander Lavrentyev said that Russia hopes for joint work with the U/S/ in fighting Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria. He said that Russian military observers may return to the Idlib de-escalation zone in Syria, if the situation develops favorably.⁶¹

Aleksandr Lavrentiev, Russian President Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy on Syria, on 22 December said there would be Kurdish representation at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress to be held in Sochi next month. In deference to Turkish objections, Lavrentiev explained, the Sochi conference would not include the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political arm of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the main US-backed force fighting the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. He was vague about the Kurdish contingent at Sochi, only affirming that the meeting would include "quite a few" Kurdish representatives.⁶²

- **Russia and Myanmar**

On 25 December, Russia and the United Nations have reached a contribution agreement to seek feasibility for renovation and capacity improvement of a historical hospital in Taunggyi, the capital of Shan state of Myanmar. The contribution agreement for the Sao San Htun Hospital was signed between Myanmar's foreign ministry, the Russian embassy and the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) in Yangon. Under the agreement, the Russian side will contribute over 187,000 U.S. dollars to conduct a feasibility study for the hospital, while UNOPS will also monitor the feasibility carried out by the hired firm and present the finding to the donor, Ministry of Health and Sports and the hospital authorities.⁶³

- **Russia and US**

Government officials in Russia and China are criticizing President Donald Trump's new national security strategy as "imperialist" and a return to "Cold War" mentality. But Moscow's reaction also signaled that it saw some common ground.

⁶⁰Hani Hazameh and Vipulananda, "Russia's new Syrian peace congress thrown into doubt", *Arab News*, December 25, 2017. <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1214151/middle-east> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶¹"Russia hopes for joint work with US in fighting Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria", *TASS*, December 23, 2017. <http://tass.com/politics/982703> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶²Laurie Mylroie, "Russia: Kurds to participate in Sochi talks on Syria", *Kurdistan24*, December 23, 2017. <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/oab30f4f-05cd-48e9-8cbf-9059a356815d> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶³"Russia, UN seek for renovating historical Myanmar hospital in Shan state", *Xinhua*, December 26, 2017. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/26/c_136852522.htm Accessed on December 26, 2017.

The strategy document, announced by Trump on 19 December, depicted a world where “great power competition” has returned and can only be faced down by a relentless “America First” approach. He said unrivalled U.S. strength must hold back challenges from countries like Russia and China. “Whether we like it or not, we are engaged in a new era of competition,” Trump said in his speech. “We recognize that weakness is the surest path to conflict and unrivaled power is the most certain means of defense.” A spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin told reporters on the same day that the document had a “clearly imperial nature” and demonstrated a reluctance to abandon the idea of a “unipolar world.” The Kremlin’s reaction, however, was mixed. The spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said he saw “positive things” in the document, noting it expressed a view of U.S.-Russia relations shared by Putin: that the two countries should cooperate in areas where it suits their interests.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, the Treasury Department announced on 20 December that it was adding five people to the list of those sanctioned under the Sergei Magnitsky Act, the 2012 bill that has earned the ire of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The new additions bring the total number of those sanctioned by the law to 49. The five people added to the sanctions list include Alexei Sheshenya, Yulia Mayorova, Andrei Pavlov, Ramzan Kadyrov and Ayub Kataev. Sheshenya, Mayorova, and Pavlov were involved in the large-scale tax fraud scheme uncovered by Magnitsky, according to the Treasury Department. Kadyrov and Kataev are responsible for “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights,” the department said.⁶⁵

Russian officials on 23 December said that a US decision to supply weapons to Ukraine is dangerous and will encourage Kiev to use force in eastern Ukraine. The US state department said on 22 December the United States will provide Ukraine with “enhanced defensive capabilities” as the country battles Russian-backed separatists in the east.⁶⁶

- **Russia and UK**

UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov acknowledged significant problems in their countries’ relationship after meeting on 22 December in Moscow, but said they would seek to expand cooperation on international issues. Key points of contention include Russia’s annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and its activities in cyberspace. However, the two nations have a shared objective of avoiding conflict on the Korean Peninsula and ensuring that North Korea does not have nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles. They also both want to see peace in Syria. Lavrov rejected claims of Russian meddling in US and European election campaigns and in Britain’s referendum on

⁶⁴Patrik Reveel, “Russia calls Trump’s national security strategy ‘imperialist’”, *ABC News*, December 19, 2017. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-calls-trumps-national-security-strategy-imperialist/story?id=51882015> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶⁵Tucker Higgins, “Treasury adds five to Russian sanctions list that has infuriated the Kremlin”, *CNBC News*, December 20, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/20/treasury-adds-five-to-russian-sanctions-list-that-has-infuriated-the-kremlin.html> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶⁶“Russia condemns US move to sell weapons to Ukraine”, *Al Jazeera*, December 23, 2017. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/russia-condemns-move-sell-weapons-ukraine-171223105437273.html> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

whether to leave the European Union, saying that no "hard facts" had been produced to back them up. Johnson countered this argument, saying there was "alas, abundant evidence of Russian interference in elections in Germany, Denmark, France, America but as I've said, no evidence of any successful interference in the UK." Lavrov said it was "not a secret" that the Russia-UK relationship was at a "very low point."⁶⁷

- **Russia and Sri Lanka**

The official delegation from the Sri Lanka Tea Board met with the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance on 25 December to discuss the temporary restriction imposed by Russia on imports of plant-origin products from Sri Lanka. Russia imposed temporary restriction on such imports after an insect called the Khapra beetle was found in a consignment of tea from Sri Lanka earlier this month. Tea accounts for nearly 80 percent of Sri Lanka's exports to Russia. Sri Lanka has exported 114.18 million U.S. dollars worth of Ceylon Tea to Russia from January to August this year.⁶⁸

South Asia

Afghanistan

- **528,000 Afghan Refugees Return So Far this Year: Balkhi**

Refugee and Repatriation Minister Said Hussain Alemi Balkhi said on 19 December 2017 that more than 528,000 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran so far this year. Out of 500,000 internally displaced last year, over 100,000 have returned back to their places of origin within the country, Balkhi told an event marking the International Migrants Day in Kabul. The event was jointly hosted by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Undocumented Afghans, who are not formally registered as refugees in their host countries, face unique challenges both abroad and when they return home. Since the beginning of the year, over 500,000 undocumented Afghans have returned from Pakistan and Iran until December 9. Returns of undocumented Afghans have decreased by more than 60 percent compared to last year, from 248,000 in 2016 to 95,000 until December 9, 2017. Returns of undocumented Afghans from Iran have decreased by eight percent compared to last year, from 443,000 in 2016 to 407,000 until Dec 9, 2017. Since the beginning of the year, IOM has provided more than 104,000 undocumented Afghans with post-arrival emergency assistance at its Transit Centres in the four border crossing points with Iran and Pakistan.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Laura Smith-Spark and Mary Ilyushina, "Russia-UK relations at 'a very low point' – Lavrov", *CNN*, December 22, 2017. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/22/europe/russia-uk-relations-lavrov-johnson-intl/index.html> Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶⁸"Russia agrees to lift ban on tea imports from Sri Lanka", *Xinhua*, December 25, 2017.

http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/25/c_136851492.htm Accessed on December 26, 2017.

⁶⁹"528,000 Afghan Refugees Return So Far this Year: Balkhi", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, 19 December 2017. http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=19704 accessed on 21 December 2017.

- **Afghanistan Opens First Ever Embassy In Greece**

Acting Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani inaugurated Afghanistan's first ever embassy in Greece on 18 December 2017 and held talks with Greek officials during his trip to Athens. This was the first visit of a senior Afghan delegation to Greece. Rabbani said his meetings with Greek officials were aimed at strengthening political, economic and trade ties between Afghanistan and Greece. The Greek foreign minister said his country is ready to train Afghan police and provide scholarships to students from Afghanistan. Afghanistan's embassy in Greece opens after thousands of Afghans have migrated to Europe through Greece in recent years.⁷⁰

- **Construction of TAPI's Afghan Section to be Launched in February**

The foundation laying ceremony of the Afghan section of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline is planned to be held in the second half of February 2018, the Turkmen Dovlet Khabarlary state news agency said. The ceremony will be held on the Turkmen-Afghan border. This topic was touched upon during a telephone conversation between Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Indian President Ram Nath Kovind. The Turkmen president invited the Indian counterpart to take part in the events scheduled for the second half of February 2018. The TAPI pipeline will run from Galkynysh – the largest gas field in Turkmenistan – through the Afghan cities of Herat and Kandahar, and finally reach the Fazilka settlement located near the India-Pakistan border. Annual capacity of the gas pipeline will be 33 billion cubic meters.⁷¹

- **Russia deploys heavy military equipment on Afghanistan-Tajikistan border**

The Russian military has deployed heavy military equipment along the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan apparently to prevent the threats posed by the terror groups to the Central Asian countries, it has been reported. Chief of the Main Directorate of the International Military Cooperation at the Russian Defense Ministry, Maj. Gen. Aleksandr Kshimovsky on 19 December 2017 informed regarding the deployment of the military equipment in support of the Tajikistan border forces.

He told the RT TV that the armaments will make it possible to expand the capabilities of Tajikistan's armed forces "to repel the terrorist threat and create an effective barrier along the Tajik-Afghan border." He said Russia delivered T-72B1 tanks, BTR-80 and BTR-70 armored personnel carriers, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters, D-30 howitzers, anti-aircraft mounts, surveying equipment, communications equipment and logistics property. This comes as Russia has long been expressing concerns regarding the deteriorating security situation in northern parts of Afghanistan.⁷²

⁷⁰ "Afghanistan Opens First Ever Embassy In Greece", *Tolonews*, 19 December 2017. <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghanistan-opens-first-ever-embassy-greece> accessed on 21 December 2017.

⁷¹ "Construction of TAPI's Afghan Section to be Launched in February", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, 25 December 2017. http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=19749 accessed on 26 December 2017.

⁷² "Russia deploys heavy military equipment on Afghanistan-Tajikistan border", *Khaama Press*, 20 December 2017. <https://www.khaama.com/russia-deploys-heavy-military-equipment-on-afghanistan-tajikistan-border-04084> accessed on 21 December 2017.

- Jamiat-e-Islami sets conditions to accept Noor’s removal as Balkh governor**
 The Jamiat-e-Islami party has set conditions to accept the recent decision by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani regarding the removal of Ata Mohammad Noor as the provincial governor of northern Balkh province, it has been reported. The deputy spokesman of Jamiat-e-Islami Zabi Fitrat has told RFE/RL’s Afghanistan service that the party will only accept the removal of Mr. Noor if the government reconsiders its recent decision and accepts the conditions of the party.⁷³
- Pence Warns Pakistan Against Harboring Terrorists**
 The United States Vice President Mike Pence who arrived in Afghanistan on a surprise visit on Thursday night (December 21), warned Pakistan against offering safe havens to terrorist groups on its soil. He reiterated word for word US President Donald Trump's warning that Pakistan must stop offering cross-border safe havens to Taliban factions and armed militant groups fighting US troops and their Afghan allies, AFP reported.⁷⁴
- Moscow Warns Daesh Fighters Fleeing Syria, Iraq for Afghanistan**
 Daesh has over 10,000 fighters in Afghanistan - many of whom fled Syria and Iraq this year - Russia's head of the Middle East department at the Russian Foreign Ministry said on 23rd December. In an interview with Russia's news agency RIA Novosti, RT reported the Russian envoy as saying that Moscow believes the US may be underestimating their threat to Afghanistan and that more could be coming in.⁷⁵
- MoD Accuses Pakistan of 'Leading Daesh' Fighters Locally**
 Minister of Interior Wais Ahmad Barmak on 24th December said there is no solid evidence to prove that helicopters dropped off supplies to Daesh militants and other insurgent groups, but added that concerns are growing about the expansion of Daesh in the country. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) has said that the number of Daesh fighters in the north is insignificant. According to MoD, Daesh in Afghanistan is led by Pakistan and the majority of the fighters are from the Afridi and Orakzai tribes which are based in Pakistan as well as fighters from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Chechnya.⁷⁶

Bangladesh

- Delhi gives Myanmar \$25m to bring back refugees**

⁷³ “Jamiat-e-Islami sets conditions to accept Noor’s removal as Balkh governor”, *Khaama Press*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.khaama.com/jamiat-e-islami-sets-conditions-to-accept-noors-removal-as-balk-governor-04094> (Accessed on December 26)

⁷⁴ “Pence Warns Pakistan Against Harboring Terrorists”, *Tolo News*, December 22, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/pence-warns-pakistan-against-harboring-terrorists> (accessed on December 26)

⁷⁵ “Moscow Warns Daesh Fighters Fleeing Syria, Iraq for Afghanistan”, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, December 24, 2017, http://outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=19743 (accessed on December 26)

⁷⁶ Massoud Ansar, “MoD Accuses Pakistan Of 'Leading Daesh' Fighters Locally” *Tolo News*, December 24, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/mod-accuses-pakistan-leading-daesh-fighters-locally> (accessed on December 26)

India will provide Myanmar with \$25 million for development projects including prefabricated houses in troubled Rakhine state to enable the return of Rohingya Muslims who have fled the area, the foreign ministry said on Thursday (December 21).⁷⁷

- **JaPa's Mostafizar wins landslide**

General HM Ershad-led Jatiya Party (JaPa) mayor candidate Mostafizar Rahman has won Rangpur City Corporation elections beating both Awami League and BNP candidates with a huge margin. He defeated ruling AL nominated candidate Sarfuddin Ahmed Jhantu by around 100,000 votes. Mostafizar running with plough symbol bagged 1,60,489 votes while Sarfuddin polled 62,400 votes and BNP candidate Kawsar Jahan Babla got 35,136 votes.⁷⁸

- **Prepare for movement, election: Khaleda**

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday (December 24) urged the party leaders and activists to prepare for movement and elections simultaneously. She reiterated that it will not be possible to hold a free and fair election if Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina remains in power. "We want elections; we do not want any chaos. Elections should be free, fair and inclusive, and for that to happen, parliament needs to be dissolved. Elections should be held under a neutral government. People cannot go to the polling stations if Awami League stays in office," she said.⁷⁹

- **China, Russia oppose UN criticism of Myanmar over Rohingya**

The UN General Assembly on Sunday (December 24) urged Myanmar to end a military campaign against Muslim Rohingya and called for the appointment of a UN special envoy, despite opposition from China, Russia and some regional countries. A resolution put forward by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was adopted by a vote of 122 to 10 with 24 abstentions. China, Russia, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam joined Myanmar in voting against the measure as did Belarus, Syria and Zimbabwe. The resolution calls on the government to allow access for aid workers, ensure the return of all refugees and grant full citizenship rights to the Rohingya. It requests that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appoint a special envoy to Myanmar.⁸⁰

- **73pc Rohingyas now living in settlements: IOM**

Some 73 percent of Rohingya refugees are now living in new spontaneous settlements, said International Organization for Migration (IOM) yesterday (December 24). Meanwhile, some 13 percent of Rohingyas are now living in

⁷⁷ "Delhi gives Myanmar \$25m to bring back refugees," *Prothom Alo*, December 21, 2017, <http://en.prothom-alo.com/international/news/168316/Delhi-gives-Myanmar-25m-to-bring-back-refugees> (accessed on December 21, 2017)

⁷⁸ "JaPa's Mostafizar wins landslide," *Prothom Alo*, December 22, 2017, <http://en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/168329/JaPa's-Mostafizar-wins-landslide-in-RpCC-polls> (accessed on December 22, 2017)

⁷⁹ "Prepare for movement, election," *Daily Star*, December 25, 2017, <http://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/prepare-both-polls-movement-1509871> (accessed on December 25, 2017)

⁸⁰ "China, Russia oppose UN criticism of Myanmar over Rohingya," *Prothom Alo*, December 25, 2017, <http://en.prothom-alo.com/international/news/168492/China-Russia-oppose-UN-criticism-of-Myanmar-over> (accesses on December 25, 2017)

makeshift settlements, nine percent in host community locations and five percent in formal refugee camps.⁸¹

नेपाल

- नई सरकार के गठन से पहले दलों का विलय:

अभी एमाले और माओवादी दलों के गठबंधन ने चुनावों में भरी जीत हासिल की इसके बाद नई . लेकिन माओवादी दल ने अभी एक बैठक की और यह निर्णय .सरकार बनने की कवायद शुरू हो गयी है लिया कि नई सरकार के गठन से पहले दोनों दलों एमाले और माओवादी केंद्र का विलय हो जाना , .चाहिए⁸²

- भारतीय प्रधानमंत्री मोदी ने बधाईयाँ दी:

वाम गठबंधन की जीत के सप्ताह के बाद भारतीय प्रधानमंत्री नरेंद्र मोदी ने गुरुवार को नेपाल के तीनों बड़े दलों के नेताओं से फोन पर बातचीत की मोदी . ने वाम दलों की जीत पर ओली को बधाईयाँ दी और सूत्रों के मुताबिक प्रधानमंत्री मोदी ने कहा कि वाम गठबंधन की जीत से नेपाल का लोकतंत्र मजबूत होगा और हम यह आशा करते हैं कि यह जीत नेपाल में राजनीतिक स्थिरता और आर्थिक विकास लाएगी.⁸³

- एमाले और माओवादियों में केबिनेट सीट की हिस्सेदारी में 60::का अनुपात रहेगा 40

यदि नई सरकार के गठन से पूर्व दोनों दलों का विलय नहीं हो पाता है तो आगामी सरकार में दोनों दलों के मध्य अभी इस बंटवारे .के अनुपात से केबिनेट की सीटों का बंटवारा हो सकता है 40 और 60 .पर आगे स्थिति साफ़ होगी⁸⁴

Indian Ocean Region

- **India- Oman Naval Exercise**

On 20 December 2017, the navies of India and Oman conducted the main phase of joint naval exercise off the coast of Oman.⁸⁵ The four days exercise began on 17 December 2017. The Indian Navy had deployed a submarine and the P8I long range maritime aircraft for the first time for India- Oman joint naval exercise.⁸⁶

⁸¹ "73pc Rohingyas now living in settlements: IOM, *Daily Star*, December 25, 2017, <http://www.thedailystar.net/city/73pc-rohingyas-now-living-settlements-iom-1509949> (accessed on December 25, 2017)

⁸² Tika R Pradhan, "Party merger before new govt", *The Kathmandu Post*, 19 December 2017, <http://epaper.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2017-12-19/1>

⁸³ "Modi lauds Oli on left victory", *The Kathmandu Post*, 22 December 2017, <http://epaper.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2017-12-22/1>

⁸⁴ "UML, Maoists mull 60:40 cabinet share", *The Kathmandu Post*, 26 December 2017, <http://epaper.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2017-12-26/1>

⁸⁵ Oman, India conduct joint naval drills in Arabian Sea, 20 December 2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/oman-india-conduct-joint-naval-drills-in-arabian-sea/1010554> (accessed on 26 December 2017)

⁸⁶ Indian Navy deploys submarine, P8I aircraft for naval exercise with Oman,

"This exercise is the 11th edition and has been a biennial feature since 1993."⁸⁷ The bilateral relations between the two countries were formally established with signing of Indo- Oman Treaty of Friendship in 1953.⁸⁸

- **India, Lanka completes 2nd phase of joint oceanographic survey**

On 19 December 2017, Indian and Sri Lankan navies successfully completed the second phase of the joint oceanographic survey.⁸⁹ The survey was conducted off the Southern West Coast of Sri Lanka.⁹⁰ The joint Survey, "with the aim to update all the navigational charts covering the southern Sri Lanka waters with the latest hydrographical data"⁹¹ was commenced on 26 October with the arrival of INS Sutlej in Sri Lanka.⁹² The first phase of the joint survey was conducted from 29 March to 11 May 2017 in the southern sea.⁹³ And, the next third phase of the joint survey is scheduled to be conducted in 2018.⁹⁴

- **INS Trishul Returns Home after Anti Piracy Patrol of 120 Days**

After completion of four months long anti- piracy mission in Gulf of Aden, INS Trishul returned to Mumbai coast on 23 December 2017. The deployment of INS Trishul for anti piracy mission in Gulf of Aden reflects "continued commitment"⁹⁵ of the Indian Navy to ensure safety and security of Sea Lane of Communications (SLoCS) in the Indian Ocean.⁹⁶ According to official website of Indian Navy, during the deployment in Gulf of Aden INS Trishul covered a distance of more than 26,000 nautical miles, conducted bilateral exercise with the the Italian Navy and exchange visits with Italian, Russian, American, Japanese Bangladesh Navy/ Coast Guard ships.⁹⁷ On 06 October 2017, the ship also thwarted piracy attempt on a merchant ship MV Jag Amar.⁹⁸ INS Trishul also escorted more than 50 merchant ships through the troubled waters of Gulf of Aden and Somalia.⁹⁹

Sri Lanka

- **Foreign Ministry responds media queries on the Resolution on the ‘Status of Jerusalem’**

⁸⁷ Indian Navy Conducts Exercise Naseem-Al-Bahr with Oman Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-conducts-exercise-naseem-al-bahr-oman-navy> (accessed on 26 December 2017)

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ India, Lanka completes 2nd phase of joint oceanographic survey, <http://ddinews.gov.in/national/india-lanka-completes-2nd-phase-joint-oceanographic-survey> <http://ddinews.gov.in/national/india-lanka-completes-2nd-phase-joint-oceanographic-survey>

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ INS Trishul Returns Home after Anti Piracy Patrol of 120 Days, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-trishul-returns-home-after-anti-piracy-patrol-120-days> (accessed on 26 December 2017)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Sri Lanka voted in favour of the resolution titled 'Status of Jerusalem' submitted by Yemen and Turkey in their capacity as Chair of the Arab Group and Chair of the Summit of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation, respectively, at the tenth emergency special session of the UN General Assembly, on 21 December 2017.

This vote in favour of the resolution was on the basis of Sri Lanka's long held traditional and principled position, which is in keeping with the international understanding that Jerusalem is a final-status issue that must be resolved through negotiations between the two parties on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions, taking into account the legitimate concerns of both parties – Palestinians and Israelis, and that Jerusalem should be the shared capital of the Israeli and Palestinian States. The resolution adopted at the tenth emergency special session of the UN General Assembly on 21 December 2017 reaffirms this position, and Sri Lanka's vote in favour of the resolution was not a vote against any member State of the United Nations¹⁰⁰.

- **US Millennium Corporation continues grants to Sri Lanka**

For the promotion of the economic growth and reduce poverty, creating more stable, secure country with new business opportunities abroad, , the U.S. Government's Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Board of Directors decided to reselects Sri Lanka for Its grant program. The Sri Lankan embassy describe this re-selection bears testament to the country's continued progress on policy performance and reforms, including on democratic rights and control of corruption, and the strength of the government's partnership with MCC since 2015. MCC's recognition of Sri Lanka's progress provides further impetus to the government's political and economic reforms aimed at achieving sustainable peace and economic prosperity¹⁰¹.

- **Chinese experts claim India threatened by projects in Sri Lanka**

India has launched fierce attacks against Chinese commercial activities in Sri Lanka in recent weeks, and moved to secure more projects in Sri Lanka with Japan, in what appears to be desperate moves to maintain its declining influence in Sri Lanka, the Global Times in China quoted Chinese experts as saying. Chinese experts pointed out that India, which has considered Sri Lanka its backyard rather than a sovereign nation, has adopted a very dangerous zero-sum mindset on China's cooperation with other countries, which is not conducive to regional economic cooperation¹⁰².

- **Nasheed cancels meeting in Colombo following threats**

Former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed has cancelled a meeting with Maldivians residing in Sri Lanka on December 26 following threats to his life, the Maldivian media outlet Raajje reported¹⁰³.

- **SLPP to form a new alliance**

¹⁰⁰ Foreign Ministry responds media queries on the Resolution on the 'Status of Jerusalem', 24th December 2017, <https://news.lk/news/sri-lanka/item/19062-foreign-ministry-responds-media-queries-on-the-resolution-on-the-status-of-jerusalem>

¹⁰¹ US Millennium Corporation continues grants to Sri Lanka, 22 December 2017, <https://news.lk/news/world/item/19046-us-millennium-corporation-continues-grants-to-sri-lanka>

¹⁰² Chinese experts claim India threatened by projects in Sri Lanka, 25th December 2017, <http://colombogazette.com/2017/12/25/chinese-experts-claim-india-threatened-by-projects-in-sri-lanka/>

¹⁰³ Nasheed cancels meeting in Colombo following threats, 24th December 2017, <http://colombogazette.com/2017/12/24/nasheed-cancels-meeting-in-colombo-following-threats/>

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) would form a new alliance with twenty political and civil organisations, including all the parties of the Joint Opposition (JO), SLPP Spokesman Sanjeewa Edirimanna said. He said that the new alliance would be named as 'Joint Podujana Peramuna' and would contest under the Lotus Bud symbol.¹⁰⁴

- **UN condemns Australia's forced return of SL refugee**

The United Nations' refugee agency has condemned Australia's forced return of an asylum seeker to Sri Lanka without any assessment of his claim for protection, the Guardian reported. The UN refugee agency has said the man, who was forced to return, is at serious risk of persecution in his homeland. The UNHCR had sought assurances from the Australian government that the man would not be removed from the country and would be allowed to apply for protection¹⁰⁵.

Maldives

- **Maldives president appeals for restraint towards India**

India is the Maldives closest ally and friend, President Abdulla Yameen said appealing for restraint towards its regional neighbour. The president, who is in island hopping around the north inaugurating projects, made the remarks days after a hostile editorial was removed from a pro-government website. The Vaguthu article had blasted India, saying it was not a best friend but an enemy and that it viewed the Maldives with "envy, self-interest and hostility."¹⁰⁶

- **No "foreign big brother" needed for guidance, says Maldives president**

The Maldives does not require a "foreign big brother" for guidance and the country is not devoid of democracy, declared President Abdulla Yameen. Addressing the people of Henbadhoo in Noonu atoll after inaugurating the island's sewerage system, Yameen stated that illegal foreign influences would not benefit the future of the country or the solidarity of the citizens¹⁰⁷.

- **Maafaru airport will be a gift from UAE'**

The new international airport to be developed in Maafaru in Noonu atoll is a gift from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and will signify the Maldives' friendship with the UAE, President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom revealed on 24th December. According to Yameen, the UAE had generously gifted USD 60 million to develop the airport in Maafaru, which will officially open in July 2018. A "city hotel" will also be built alongside the airport, the president revealed¹⁰⁸.

- **India downplays Maldives diplo drama**

¹⁰⁴ SLPP to form a new alliance, 24 December 2017, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/SLPP-to-form-a-new-alliance-142792.html>

¹⁰⁵ UN condemns Australia's forced return of SL refugee, 22 December 2017, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/UN-condemns-Australia-s-forced-return-of-SL-refugee-142715.html>

¹⁰⁶ Maldives president appeals for restraint towards India, 24th December 2017, <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-president-restraint-india-134719>

¹⁰⁷ No "foreign big brother" needed for guidance, says Maldives pres, 25th December 2017, <http://en.mihaaru.com/no-foreign-big-brother-needed-for-guidance-says-maldives-pres/>

¹⁰⁸ Maafaru airport will be a gift from UAE', 25th December 2017, <http://en.mihaaru.com/maafaru-airport-will-be-a-gift-from-uae/>

India has scotched rumours of a rift with the Maldives, saying the two countries enjoyed a close relationship with shared development and security interests. External Affairs spokesman Raveesh Kumar made the remarks on 21st December after a scathing anti-India editorial appeared on a Maldivian pro-government website. The editorial, which has since been removed, called Prime Minister Narendra Modi an extremist and accused India of being Islamophobic towards its Muslim population¹⁰⁹.

- **Gasim hopes for ‘national unity government’**

The Maldivian people want to restore democracy with a national unity government at the helm, Jumhooree Party leader Gasim Ibrahim tweeted from exile on 20th December. After meeting with former MDP chairman Ali Waheed, former vice president Dr Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, and JP deputy leader Ameen Ibrahim in Germany, the business tycoon and disqualified lawmaker tweeted: “The public’s hope is to have everyone’s help in bringing the Maldives to the democratic path and establishing a national unity government as the people want.”¹¹⁰

- **US\$200 million bridge to be completed in July**

The US\$200 million China-Maldives Friendship bridge will be completed in the first week of July, a government minister has said. The bridge will span from the capital Malé’s eastern edge to the western corner of the island of Hulhulé. Housing Minister Dr Mohamed Muiz said the project was on schedule¹¹¹.

West Asia

GCC & Saudi Arabia

- **Russia close to supply S-400 Missile Defence System to Saudi Arabia**

Russia is likely to deliver the game changing S-400 missile defence system to Saudi Arabia soon.¹¹² The deal was signed during the visit of King Salman to Moscow in the month of October 2017. Although the cost and the number of missiles to be supplied by Russia is not revealed yet, the confusion of missile supply to Riyadh is now almost over. During the visit of the Saudi King to Moscow, the two sides had signed an MoU of US\$ 3.1 billion, which included the supply of S-400, the Kornet-Em system (anti-tank missiles), the TOS-1A (rocket launcher/flamethrowers), the AGS-30 (automatic grenade launchers) and the new Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifle.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ India downplays Maldives diplo drama, 22 December 2017,

<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/india-downplays-maldives-diplo-drama-134692>

¹¹⁰ Gasim hopes for ‘national unity government’, 21st December 2017,

<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/gasim-hopes-for-national-unity-government-134687>

¹¹¹ US\$200 million bridge to be completed in July, 21st December 2017,

<http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/us200-million-bridge-to-be-completed-in-july-134682>

¹¹² Russia Close to Sale of Lethal S-400 Air Defense System to Saudi Arabia”, *The Nation*, 21 December 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-close-sale-lethal-s-400-air-defense-system-saudi-23755>

¹¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-saudi-terror/russia-saudi-arabia-cement-new-friendship-with-kings-visit-idUSKBN1CA1QU>

Saudi Arabia has been a traditional arms market of the US and the Western countries, especially Britain, France, Germany, etc. But in recent years, the Kingdom has diversified its arsenal. It has signed a number of joint defence manufacturing agreements with a number of countries including India, China, Japan, Australia, etc. This is primarily because of two possible reasons, first, to diversify its economy through these agreements; second, to hedge its energy market by approaching the countries which could supply arms to Riyadh. Besides, it is also believed that Saudi Arabia is using its arms market to develop political and economic leverage with Russia and other countries, which could play a role in regional security. This is more important in the face of declining US security commitment to its Gulf allies. This has forced Riyadh to adopt a multi-engagement policy and fill the void left by the US by any non-hostile and do not entirely support its enemy powers in the region.

However, it is also important to underline that Russia has supplied the same S-400 missile defence system to Iran, Turkey and now Qatar is also negotiating. The reason cited is Russia's short term policy approach is to reap the economic benefit of the rich arms market Arab Gulf States.

- **Saudi Authorities demand a quarter of Wealth of Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal**
News broke out that the anti-corruption committee, which held 320 on corruption charges, and still retaining 159, including Prince Al Waleed bin Talal, the billionaire, which has invested in Fox, Time Warner, Citigroup, Twitter, Apple, Motorola and many other well-known companies and has a market value of almost \$9 billion, is said to force Talal to deposit approximately US\$ 6 billion in Saudi Kingdom Holding Co.¹¹⁴ His total assets is estimated around US\$ 19.8 billion. However, the Prince has shown no inclination of doing the same. His argument is that once he deposits the amount, it proves he was guilty of those charged imposed on him. Prince Talal was among others, who were arrested on the ground of embezzlements, frauds and extortion. Under the corruption purge, the former head of Royal Palace Guard, Prince Miteb was also arrested. He was charged of giving unnecessary arms contracts worth US\$ 10 billion and took bribe from the company.

The corruption purge was carried out by the 32-year old young prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) to curb corruption in the kingdom. He views corruption as a big hole in his reform plans. Besides, he also tried to convey a message that now onwards, everybody is equal and nobody is above the law of the country. However, opposition accuses MBS of consolidating power by weeding out the dissenting voices.

Cyber Security

- **Boris Johnson tells Russia: we will retaliate against cyber-attacks¹¹⁵**
On 22 December 2017, Boris Johnson, the 1st U.K's foreign secretary visited Moscow after a period of five years and told his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov that UK had enough cyber capabilities to retaliate against Russian cyber warriors. UK and

¹¹⁴ <https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2017/12/23/saudi-authorities-demand-one-third-of-alwaleed-bin-talals-fortune-to-free-him>

¹¹⁵ The Guardian, 22 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/22/boris-johnson-tells-russia-we-will-retaliate-against-cyber-attacks>

Russia have had strained bilateral relation owing to various reasons such as the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and KGB in 2006, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, alleged Russian interference in the election process of western countries. In November 2017, UK's Prime Minister Theresa May accused Russian President Putin for cyber espionage and warned Russia that UK would not tolerate any such behaviour. However, denying all such allegations, Lavrov said, "We haven't seen any evidence except that for four kopecks someone put an advert on social media". The main agenda of the visit was the issue of cooperation between both nations on matters like Syria, Iran and North Korea.

- **North Korea rejects US claim, says it is not linked to any cyber attacks¹¹⁶**
- US president Donald Trump publicly blamed North Korea for wannacry cyber attacks around the world. On 21 December 2017, spokesperson of North Korea's foreign ministry said, "As we have clearly stated on several occasions, we have nothing to do with cyber attack and we do not feel a need to respond, on a case-by-case basis, to such absurd allegations of the US", citing that North Korea would not tolerate such political provocation by the US. It has been reported that WannaCry attacked nearly 300,000 computers paralysing hospitals, banks in 150 countries. On 19 December 2017, crypto currency exchange in South Korea was closed down as it faced cyber attacks, losing 17 percents of its assets. The Wall Street Journal and Bloomberg News reported the involvement of North Korea's behind this hacking.
- **Microsoft India President Anant Maheshwari: Cloud tech is critical enabler that will fuel India's digital transformation¹¹⁷**

Anant Maheshwari, the president of Microsoft India in an interview said that cloud based technologies like Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, advanced data analytics would act as a critical enabler stimulating India's digital transformations. He was of the view that India as a priority for Microsoft India as the country has focussed on projects such as Digital India and Smart cities. Since the government has welcomed private sector in the implementation of Digital India programme, Microsoft India would join hands with the government and look into the core sectors of the economy like health, education, agriculture and so forth. According to Maheshwari, by using specific application and capabilities, cloud technology would bring transparency and efficiency in the governance and citizens could achieve benefits of e-governance within a short span of time. Microsoft invested hugely to create the Cyber security Engagement Centres in the country and hoping to play a bigger role in transforming the country through digital means.

¹¹⁶ The Strait Times, 21 December 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/north-korea-rejects-us-claim-says-it-is-not-linked-to-any-cyber-attacks>

¹¹⁷ Financial Express, 25 December 2017, <http://www.financialexpress.com/industry/microsoft-india-president-anant-maheshwari-cloud-tech-is-critical-enabler-that-will-fuel-indias-digital-transformation/988614/>

Terrorism and Counter Terrorism

Pakistan

| S. No. | Date | Place | Incident | Killed | Injured |
|--------|-------------|--------------------|---|-------------------|---------|
| 1 | December 19 | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa | Three security officials were injured in a remote-controlled bomb blast near a security forces vehicle in Kolachi <i>tehsil</i> (revenue unit) of Dera Ismail Khan District. ¹¹⁸ | 0 | 3 |
| 2 | December 20 | Balochistan | Security Forces foiled a terror bid targeting Balochistan Governor Muhammad Khan Achakzai in the Gulistan area of Qilla Abdullah District. The attackers were identified as Hamid Bashir from Punjab, and Munawwar from Gulistan. Balochistan Home Minister Sarfaraz Bugti said that the militants belonged to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Lej) that was linked to the killing of Punjab home minister Shuja Khanzada in August 2015. ¹¹⁹ | Terror bid foiled | |
| 3 | December 21 | Balochistan | At least six people were killed and three others were injured in an incident of firing and a landmine explosion in Dera Bugti District. According to details, six people were killed and four others injured when unidentified armed assailants stormed in the house of a man, identified as Gujjar, in Toba Nokani area and opened indiscriminate fire, killing his two wives and three children. Meanwhile, as the injured were being transferred to a hospital, their vehicle hit a landmine, killing another person in the explosion. ¹²⁰ | 6 | 4 |
| 4 | December 22 | Balochistan | The Frontier Corps (FC) conducted a sanitisation operation in Gandimgozi Kaur | 4 | 0 |

¹¹⁸ Ali Akbar, 3 security personnel injured in DI Khan blast, *Dawn*, December 19, 2017,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1377565/3-security-personnel-injured-in-di-khan-blast>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹¹⁹ Syed Ali Shah, Terror bid targeting Balochistan governor foiled, *Dawn*, December 20, 2017,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1377767/terror-bid-targeting-balochistan-governor-foiled>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²⁰ Syed Ali Shah, 7 killed in firing, landmine explosion in Dera Bugti, *Dawn*, December 21, 2017,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1377986/7-killed-in-firing-landmine-explosion-in-dera-bugti>, accessed on December 26, 2017

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|---|-------------|--------|---|---|---|
| | | | area of Sibi District, killing four terrorists. ¹²¹ | | |
| 5 | December 22 | Quetta | At least two Hazara Shias were killed and two others were injured after they were targeted in Nakhailabad area of Quetta near Western Bypass. According to Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Abdul Razzaq Cheema, at least 12 people were travelling from Quetta to Karachi. ¹²² | 2 | 2 |
| 6 | December 25 | Punjab | Despite the opposition by the Ministry of Interior to entry of offshoots of proscribed entities into the national political arena, Jama'at-ud-Dawa (JuD) chief Hafiz Muhammad Saeed opened an office of Milli Muslim League (MML), a subsidiary of the JuD, in Lahore. The JuD chief visited different areas of National Assembly constituency NA-120, the Lahore seat of the Sharifs. ¹²³ | JuD chief opens the office of MML in Lahore | |

Afghanistan

| S.No. | Date | Place | Incident | Killed | Injured |
|-------|-------------|--------|---|--------------------------|---------|
| 1 | December 19 | Ghazni | The Taliban have been collecting money what they call 'tax' from media outlets, businessmen and common people in the province. Farid Umari, in charge of Ghaznavyano Private Television, said that he recently handed over 200,000 Pakistani rupees to the Taliban in tax. ¹²⁴ | Taliban collecting 'tax' | |
| 2 | December 19 | Khost | Afghan intelligence forces discovered a major weapons depot in the forest area of Musakhel district. General Barakatullah Samkani, provincial National Directorate of Security chief, said that the depot contained 1,000 bullets of SCAR-20 gun, missiles, 18 | weapons depot discovered | |

¹²¹ Four 'terrorists' killed in Balochistan sanitisation operations, *Dawn*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1378185/four-terrorists-killed-in-balochistan-sanitisation-operations>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²² Hafeezullah Sherani, 2 Hazaras killed in Quetta gun attack, *Dawn*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1378204/2-hazaras-killed-in-quetta-gun-attack>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²³ Hafiz Saeed opens MML office in NA-120, *Dawn*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1378682/hafiz-saeed-opens-mml-office-in-na-120>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²⁴ Taliban Collecting Taxes from All in Ghazni, Daily Outlook Afghanistan, December 19, 2017, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/December%2019,%202017/Main%20Page.pdf>, p.2, accessed on December 26, 2017

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|---|----------------|-------------------|--|----------------------------------|---|
| | | | boxes of machinegun bullets, warheads roadside bombs. ¹²⁵ | | |
| 3 | December 22-23 | Several provinces | At least 50 militants, including six ISIS terrorists, were killed and 19 others injured in Security Forces operations, according to Ministry of Defence (MoD). The operations were supported by airstrikes and artillery shelling conducted in Nangarhar, Ghazni, Paktia, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Maidan Wardak, Faryab, Herat and Helmand provinces. ¹²⁶ | 50 | 6 |
| 4 | December 22 | Wardak | At least 10 Taliban militants, including key 'commanders', were killed in a clash with security forces. General Ahmad Fahim Qaim, Wardak police chief, said that the clash occurred when Taliban insurgents attacked security forces that were protecting engineers working on the Arghandi Ghazni 220 kV power line that comes from Turkmenistan. ¹²⁷ | 10 | 0 |
| 5 | December 25 | Washington | Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Maleeha Lodhi claimed that "terrorist safe havens exist in ungoverned areas of Afghanistan, not Pakistan." Lodhi said that peace in Afghanistan cannot be restored through continued military force. "The promotion of a political settlement and the pursuit of a military solution are mutually incompatible. You cannot kill and talk at the same time," she said. ¹²⁸ | Terror safe haven in Afghanistan | |

Iraq

| S.No. | Date | Place | Incident | Killed | Injured |
|-------|-------------|-------|--|--------|---------|
| 1 | December 20 | Mosul | Iraqi troops killed six Islamic State (IS) militants in a security campaign launched in southeast of Mosul. "The | 6 | 0 |

¹²⁵ Huge Weapons Depot Discovered in Khost, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, December 22, 2017, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/December%2021,%202017/Main%20Page.pdf>, p.2, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²⁶ 50 Rebels Killed, 19 Injured in Past 24 Hours: MoD, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, December 23, 2017, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/December%2023,%202017/Main%20Page.pdf>, p.2, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²⁷ 10 Taliban Insurgents Killed in Wardak, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, December 24, 2017, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/December%2024,%202017/Main%20Page.pdf>, p.2, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹²⁸ 'Terrorist Safe Havens' in areas of Afghanistan: Pakistan, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, December 25, 2017, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/assets/epaper/December%2025,%202017/Main%20Page.pdf>, p.2, accessed on December 26, 2017

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| | | | federal investigations and intelligence agency submitted information to the National Security Agency over presence of six out of 20 militants, who previously infiltrated into Mosul, are there at a residential house in al-Shaimaa region,” said Captain Mohamed Atwan al-Ghanimi. ¹²⁹ | | |
| 2 | December 21 | Kurdistan | At least 350 prisoners have disappeared from prisons of the northern Iraq’s autonomous Kurdistan Region, reported Human Rights Watch (HRW), fearing that their disappearance was perpetrated by security authorities. Those missing are mostly Sunni Arabs who were displaced by war at their home regions and moved to Kirkuk, as well as residents of the city. They were “detained by the regional government’s security forces, the Asayish, on suspicion of affiliation with ISIS after the regional forces took control of Kirkuk in June 2014.” ¹³⁰ | 350 prisoners disappeared, reports HRW | |
| 3 | December 24 | Salahuddin | An IS leader was killed in an operation by the pro-government paramilitary troops. “Troops of the 88th brigade of al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) carried out an operation at Makhoul mountains, during which an Islamic State leader, who was hiding at one of the havens, was killed,” the source from PMF said. ¹³¹ | 1 | 0 |
| 4 | December 25 | Baghdad | Iraqi troops will crush the recently-emerged White Flags group very soon, said spokesperson for the Joint Operations Command Brigadier General Yahya Rasool. “The terrorist White Flags group does not pose a major threat to the security situation in Iraq since its members are estimated at dozens,” he said. ¹³² | White Flags to be eliminated | |

¹²⁹ Nehal Mostafa, Six Islamic State militants killed in campaign, southeastern Mosul: Officer, *Iraqi News*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/six-islamic-state-militants-killed-campaign-southeastern-mosul-officer/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹³⁰ Mohamed Mostafa, HRW: 350 prisoners ‘disappeared’ from Iraqi Kurdistan prisons, *Iraqi News*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/hrw-350-prisoners-disappeared-iraqi-kurdistan-prisons/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹³¹ Nehal Mostafa, Islamic State leader killed in operation by paramilitary troops in Salahuddin, *Iraqi News*, December 24, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/islamic-state-leader-killed-operation-paramilitary-troops-salahuddin/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹³² Mohammed Ebraheem, Iraq vows to eliminate White Flags group very soon, *Iraqi News*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/iraqi-troops-capable/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

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| 5 | December 25 | Kirkuk | Six IS militants, involved in killing a policeman and his son, were killed in Kirkuk. "Military units managed to kill three Islamic State militants, who are involved in killing Colonel Fadel Saeed al-Sabaawi, his son and four paramilitary personnel on the road linking between Hawija and Riyadh," Major General Ali Fadel Umran, Commander of Kirkuk Operations, said. ¹³³ | 6 | 0 |
|---|-------------|--------|--|---|---|

Syria

| S.No. | Date | Place | Incident | Killed | Injured |
|-------|-------------|--------|---|--|---------|
| 1 | December 25 | Idlib | Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham militants attacked the besieged towns of Al-Fou'aa and Kafraya, violating the de-escalation zone agreement that was put in place months ago. According to a Syrian military report, the jihadist rebels attempted to enter the towns after launching their attack from the Binnish axis. However, the assault was repelled after several hours of fighting and a large number of militants killed. ¹³⁴ | NS | NS |
| 2 | December 25 | Hama | Over the last 72 hours, the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA's) elite Tiger Forces have fired more than 300 missiles into the northern Hama towns of Al-Lataminah and Kafr Zita. The Tiger Forces flooded the northern Hama countryside with a barrage of missiles, inflicting heavy damage on the defenses of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. ¹³⁵ | Syrian Tiger Forces unleash assault | |
| 3 | December 25 | Ghouta | The SAA has advanced towards the enclave of Beit Jinn near a strategic area at the Israeli-Lebanese border. The enclave is the last rebel-held bastion in Western Ghouta. | SAA advances towards rebel-held bastion | |

¹³³ Nehal Mostafa, Six Islamic State, involved in killing policeman, killed in Kirkuk, *Iraqi News*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/six-islamic-state-involved-killing-policeman-killed-kirkuk/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹³⁴ Leith Fadel, Jihadist attempt to enter besieged Shiite towns in Idlib fails miserably, *Al Masdar News*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/jihadist-rebels-attempt-enter-besieged-shiite-towns-idlib-fails-miserably/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹³⁵ Leith Fadel, Syrian Tiger Forces unleash assault like never before on northern Hama – video, *Al Masdar News*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-tiger-forces-unleash-assault-like-never-northern-hama-video/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

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| | | | The Syrian military has encircled the village of Mughr al Meer at the foothills of Mount Hermon as troops moved towards the bastion of Beit Jin amid intense clashes, in a major operation against militants. ¹³⁶ | |
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International Economic Issues

- **India signs Financing Agreement with the World Bank for US\$ 125 Million for STRIVE Project**

On December 20, 2017, a Financing Agreement for IDA Credit of USD 125 million (equivalent) for the “Skills Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement Operation (STRIVE) Project” was signed by the Government of India with the World Bank. **The Objective** of the operation is to improve access to quality and market-driven vocational training provided in it is and apprenticeships. The result areas for the project include Improved Performance of Industrial Training Institutes; Increased Capacities of State Governments to Support Industrial Training Institutes and Apprenticeship Training; Improved Teaching and Learning; and Improved and Broadened Apprenticeship Training. The closing date for the project is November 30, 2022.¹³⁷

- **IMF Executive Board Approves India’s 2017 Financial System Stability Assessment**

On December 21, 2017, Executive Directors of International Monetary Fund (IMF) broadly agreed with the findings and recommendations of the Financial System Stability Assessment (FSSA). They welcomed the important progress made by the authorities in strengthening financial sector oversight, deepening markets, and fostering financial inclusion. Directors commended the authorities for the major reforms undertaken since the 2011 Financial Sector Assessment Program (FSAP), notably in introducing Basel III standards and risk-based supervision of banks and securities firms, improving interagency cooperation under the auspices of the Financial Stability and Development Council, and introducing a modern insolvency framework for companies. Directors encouraged the authorities to implement the recommendations of the FSSA to accelerate the resolution of nonperforming assets and the repair of corporate balance sheets. The recently announced measures to recapitalize the public-sector banks (PSBs), including through government contributions, will foster consolidation in the sector and support effective resolution of nonperforming assets. They encouraged a broad-based restructuring of PSBs, including improvements in governance, to avoid a resurgence of asset quality problems. Going forward, greater participation of the private sector in bank capital, a smaller footprint of the public sector in the

¹³⁶ Syrian Army advances on rebel-held bastion near Israel-Lebanon border, *Al Masdar News*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-advances-rebel-held-bastion-near-israel-lebanon-border/>, accessed on December 26, 2017

¹³⁷ Press Bureau of Information, “India signs Financing Agreement with the World Bank for US\$ 125 Million for Skills Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement Operation (Strive) Project”, December 20, 2017, <http://pib.nic.in/PressReleseDetail.aspx?PRID=1513275> (accessed on December 26, 2017)

financial system, a cautious reduction in statutory liquidity requirements, and assessing the effectiveness of directed lending, would boost the system's capacity to support credit to the economy, while reducing moral hazard and contingent fiscal liabilities. They further underscored the importance of adequate resources, de jure independence, and a full set of supervisory powers—including over PSBs—in underpinning the Reserve Bank of India's effective supervision and regulation of financial institutions; the need to introduce risk-based solvency and supervision of insurers, and to continue moving toward a market-based environment for the sector; and introduction of a special resolution regime for financial institutions, which will improve incentives and reduce the potential risks to public resources that could arise from the failure of financial institutions.¹³⁸

- **Japan pushes for March signing of TPP 11**¹³⁹

The Japanese government is working to have a retooled version of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the multilateral trade and investment agreement abandoned by the US, signed by early March. In this regards, Japanese Minister of Economic Revitalization, Toshiimitsu Motegi, met on December 25, 2017 with Tran Tuan Anh, the Vietnamese trade and industry minister, in Hanoi. The two men apparently discussed the TPP's provisions concerning labor disputes, a part of the pact that Vietnam wishes to postpone. Mexico, on the other hand, prefers an early implementation of the labor dispute provisions. Chief TPP negotiators from the 11 remaining member nations will meet in Japan in late January 2018 to confirm details of the pact. As it stands, the TPP 11 deal would go into effect if six members ratify it. But Canada, with its vague insistence on language allowing it to better protect Canadian culture, remains a major question mark.

¹³⁸ IMF, "IMF Executive Board Approves India's 2017 Financial System Stability Assessment", Press Release No 17/518, December 21, 2017, <http://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/12/21/pr17518-india-imf-executive-board-approves-2017-financial-system-stability-assessment> accessed on December 26, 2017)

¹³⁹ "Japan pushes for March signing of TPP 11", Nikkei Asian Review, December 26, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Economy/Japan-pushes-for-March-signing-of-TPP-11> (accessed on December 26, 2017)