

## Southeast Asia from the Corner of 18th &amp; K Streets

Volume III | Issue 21 | November 8, 2012

## Land Reform: A Critical Test for Myanmar's Government

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*November 8, 2012*

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One of the byproducts of the reforms launched in Myanmar over the past 18 months has been a sharp rise in protests against land acquisitions by previous governments and their businessman friends. Parliament's Reform and Development Monitoring Committee said in June that it had received complaints from thousands of farmers in the Magway region during a fact-finding trip in central Myanmar.

The most prominent ongoing case is that of villagers from Sarlingyi township in Myanmar's northwestern Sagaing division. They have been protesting the loss of their land to a local copper mining company since 2011. They are demanding the return of confiscated land and/or adequate compensation, as well as an end to forced relocation and the dumping of waste in surrounding areas. Tensions between the two sides recently escalated as 10,000 villagers staged protests September 5, prompting the government to dispatch 200 security personnel to keep peace between the protesters and company officials.

Land has long been a politically and economically contentious issue in Myanmar, at least in part because more than two-thirds of the population relies directly or indirectly on agriculture. As Myanmar undergoes economic liberalization, land issues have emerged at the center of the

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country's political debate and reform agenda. How these disputes are resolved matters a great deal to foreign investors, who need guarantees that they will have legally protected rights to use land over the long term even if foreigners are not allowed to own land in Myanmar.

Under the past 50 years of military rule, land was frequently taken from farmers with little or no compensation and given to cronies of

the former junta. It is estimated that approximately 1.9 million acres were illegally transferred to private companies in the past 20 years, even though 70 percent of that land has never been developed and is still used for farming by the original owners.

One-third of Myanmar's 47 million rural residents are landless laborers, while others struggle to hold onto their farms through funds borrowed from the informal market. In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, rural poverty peaked when many small-scale farmers could no longer afford to make payments on their loans and were forced to find non-agricultural employment.



*A village outside Mandalay city in central Myanmar. Villagers across Myanmar have grown increasingly alarmed by the prospect of land grabs as the country opens up to a new wave of foreign investment. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kate-mckenna/6707307719/>*

Given this history, farmers have understandably become alarmed about the possibility of further land confiscations, especially as the country is expecting a sharp increase in foreign investment and development projects in the wake of its recent opening to the outside world. The government has said it intends to put farmers at the forefront of its economic reforms. However, residents in most rural areas have yet to feel the impact of the political changes, and they fear that the new land policies will not protect them from having their land taken with limited compensation by tycoons or investors with political connections.

President Thein Sein earlier this year signed two new laws—the Farmland Law and the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Management Law—that will serve as the legal framework for the country's land reform. The new laws lay down several important guidelines.

## Land Reform: A Critical Test for Myanmar's Government *(continued)*

First, the state remains the ultimate owner of all land. Farmers are allowed to cultivate but only in accordance with the government's prescriptions

Second, farmers can now transfer or mortgage their land to repay their loans. This measure offers new avenues for farmers to raise credit and continue their agricultural activities.

Third, the new laws established a Central Farmland Management Body that is in charge of ensuring compliance with the new regulations and is largely independent of the judicial system. This body can transfer or revoke the right to work farmland, and provide land evaluation for various purposes. It operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and has subsidiaries extending from the region/state to village levels.

According to land activists and experts, the new land laws contain several fundamental weaknesses. Drafted largely behind closed doors, they were submitted to the parliament in mid-2011 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, and passed through the legislature in March 2012 after several rounds of amendments. The laws are not conducive to promoting commercial farming, which is a first step to addressing rural poverty and bringing Myanmar back into the ranks of major exporters of agricultural products along with neighboring India, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Under the new laws, farmers still lack land tenure security and are subject to the government's crop prescriptions and production quotas. In contrast, in Vietnam the granting of more clearly defined land use rights in the 1980s was critical to boosting farm productivity and transforming the country into one of the world's top exporters of rice, coffee, pepper, and cashews in less than two decades.

Influential government and parliamentary officials have recognized the need to conduct land reforms in a more inclusive and sustainable fashion. President Thein Sein said in a televised speech June 19 that



*A main road in downtown Yangon, the commercial hub of Myanmar. The government will have to find ways to balance new development projects with addressing the public's concerns over land use rights. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/axelrd/7802559516/>*

## Land Reform: A Critical Test for Myanmar's Government *(continued)*

Myanmar needs to have coherent land use and management policies in order to improve rural living conditions and ensure food security and job creation for the population outside of major cities. The president singled out uncertainty about land use rights and land speculation as two major hurdles that need to be addressed.

Significant land reform has major implications for Myanmar. It will determine the role of farmers in the country's reform process and lay the foundation for new relations between the government and the rural poor. The current government has a window of opportunity to tap the country's rich agricultural resources and work with farmers to deliver the much-needed dividends of democracy in vast areas of the country. The sprouting of new democratic institutions has allowed farmers to voice their concerns through local representatives and public protests within limits.

A coherent legal framework for land use is necessary to attract and build confidence among foreign investors. While a number of local businesses have agreed to return land concessions to farmers along with financial compensation, resolving land disputes through protests and large-scale demonstrations is not a viable solution in the long run. The government should instead put in place transparent guidelines regarding land compensation and gradually transfer authority to resolve land disputes to the judicial system.

Foreign governments and aid agencies can play a useful role in helping Myanmar figure out how to address land disputes. Fellow ASEAN countries in which the state owns the land, such as Vietnam, can provide examples of dos and don'ts for how they resolved differences over land rights. Foreign donors like the United States and the international financial institutions can also offer models for how land disputes were resolved and legal systems were developed in other parts of the world.

The current government's handling of land disputes will set a precedent for how future Myanmar administrations are likely to address the legacies of cronyism, abuse, and lawlessness dating back to the former military regime. Besides devising a working legal framework for the future, the government needs to address issues of land claims predating the Thein Sein government in a manner deemed fair by the public. The extent to which legislators and officials are able to address land reforms and tackle land disputes will be one of the most important tests for the reformist government and President Thein Sein. ■



*A photo of rural Myanmar, which could undergo tremendous changes in coming years as a result of new land policies, the government's efforts to attract foreign investment, and the people's new right to hold protests. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bessieandkyle/5796657982/>*

## MYANMAR

- **Myanmar president signs new foreign investment law.** Myanmar president Thein Sein November 2 signed into law a much-delayed foreign investment law that incorporated all but one of his earlier proposals to the parliament. Thein Sein had returned a prior draft of the law with a number of suggested changes. Among the most important changes, the law allows foreign investors and their local partners to determine mutually agreed-upon ownership ratios for joint ventures in nonrestricted sectors. It also gives the Myanmar Investment Commission discretionary powers to determine foreign investment levels in restricted sectors. Specific rules and regulations to implement the law will follow in about 90 days.
- **Visa signs credit card deals with Myanmar banks.** U.S.-based Visa November 3 signed licensing agreements with three local banks in Myanmar that will allow Visa-issued credit cards to be accepted in the country. Visa announced in August that it would help Myanmar banks become ready to process electronic payments by early 2013 through training and other investments, but said delays could occur due to serious infrastructure concerns. For Myanmar, financial integration is a critical component in boosting tourism and attracting more foreign investors.

**U.S. Treasury official visits Myanmar, meets with Thein Sein.** U.S. deputy treasury secretary Neal Wolin met with President Thein Sein October 25 in Naypyitaw to discuss Myanmar's financial reforms and the removal of remaining U.S. economic sanctions. Wolin also met with senior government leaders and the business community to explore how the United States could assist Myanmar in combatting financial crimes and increasing revenue transparency. Wolin's trip followed an announcement by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that U.S. representatives at international financial institutions would be allowed to vote in support of financial assistance for Myanmar.

- **Land protests spread in Myanmar.** At least 1,000 protesters in northwestern Myanmar's Sagaing division staged a march led by Buddhist monks October 26 to protest a copper mining project in the area. The frequency of land disputes and demonstrations has increased across Myanmar since the government introduced a peaceful assembly law in 2011 that allows people to hold protests within certain limits. The parliament's newly established rule of law committee has said that land disputes account for the majority of complaints it has received from citizens.

- **UN says opium production on the rise in Myanmar.** Opium production in Myanmar has increased for the sixth consecutive year, despite government efforts to eradicate the drug completely by 2014, according to an October 31 UN Office on Drugs and Crime report. The report attributed the rising trend to increased demand in China and the rest of Asia and to persisting rural poverty in parts of Myanmar. Opium production is found mainly in Kachin state in Myanmar's northeast and Shan state in the east.
- **New round of sectarian violence in Rakhine state.** Another round of sectarian violence erupted October 21 between Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine state in western Myanmar. The government said 89 people had been killed and over 5,000 houses destroyed during the violence. ASEAN secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan October 30 warned that the Rakhine unrest could radicalize Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim population and threaten the rest of the region. Myanmar's government responded that the issue is a strictly internal matter. Doctors Without Borders reported November 5 that many of its staff had received threats from the Buddhist community for treating Rohingyas. It has had to cut its staff in Rakhine state from about 300 in June to only a few dozen as a result.

#### INDONESIA

- **Supreme Court overturns mineral export restrictions.** Indonesia's Supreme Court September 12 upheld a challenge to a government ban on the export of unprocessed minerals, according to a Reuters report that said the verdict was released to the press on November 5. The decision overturns regulations passed earlier this year that were meant to increase revenue by forcing mining companies to export higher-value processed minerals. Mining executives had opposed the regulations amid falling global commodity prices. The court decision is an embarrassment for the government, which has been accused of protectionist regulations and frightening foreign investors.
- **General Elections Commission disqualifies 18 parties.** Indonesia's General Elections Commission (KPU) announced October 28 that only 16 of 34 political parties had passed the required verification process to compete in the 2014 general elections. Election watchdogs have criticized the KPU for twice delaying the announcement and allowing two initially disqualified parties, the Prosperous Justice Party and the United Development Party, to run. KPU commissioners made a decision to allow exceptions for the two parties because they are members of the ruling coalition and hold several parliamentary and cabinet seats.



*An Indonesian voter after casting his ballot in 2009. Indonesia's General Elections Commission recently announced the slate of political parties qualified to run in the 2014 elections. [http://www.flickr.com/photos/isa\\_e/3701025650/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/isa_e/3701025650/)*

- **New labor policy disappoints investors and workers.** Indonesia's Manpower and Transmigration Ministry November 2 issued a controversial decree to significantly limit outsourcing, meaning contracting jobs to other domestic companies, often to avoid paying workers' benefits. The move was meant to allay one of the concerns highlighted by an October 3-5 national labor strike, but was criticized by both the Indonesian Employers Association (Apindo) and the Confederation of Indonesian Workers (KSPI). Apindo claims there is nothing in the country's labor laws explicitly capping outsourcing, while KSPI said the decree endangers the jobs of roughly 14 million outsourced workers in Indonesia.
- **Indonesia ramps up counterterrorism efforts in Poso.** Indonesia's National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) October 31 arrested five terrorist suspects and killed one in Poso, Central Sulawesi, as part of heightened counterterrorism efforts. Officials confiscated several bombs and said they have identified Poso as the main training base for terrorist suspects connected to Jemaah Islamiya. Special forces October 26-27 also arrested 11 suspected terrorists for planning attacks across the country, including at the U.S. Embassy and at a consulate. Poso was a flashpoint for communal violence that left more than 1,000 dead between 2001 and 2002.
- **President launches infrastructure projects in East Kalimantan.** President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono October 31 inaugurated eight projects in East Kalimantan under the aegis of the Master Plan for the Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia's Economic Development (MP3EI). The MP3EI initiative seeks to create economic corridors across Indonesia to boost national growth. The government has initiated 135 MP3EI projects since July, valued roughly at \$52 billion, but progress has been mired by a lack of coordination between local and federal authorities, particularly on land acquisition and licensing issues. Indonesia's limited infrastructure and bureaucratic capacity have held back its growth potential of 7 percent or more.

#### THAILAND

- **Yingluck reshuffles cabinet; new Pheu Thai party leader named.** King Bhumibol Adulyadej October 29 endorsed Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's new cabinet line-up about a month after the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Yongyuth Wichaidit. The latest shak-eup is the third cabinet reshuffle since Yingluck took office in July 2011. Twenty-three cabinet positions were filled, largely by veteran politicians and Pheu Thai Party supporters. Jaruporn Ruangsawan, who

replaced Yongyuth as interior minister, also assumed leadership of the Pheu Thai Party during an October 30 party meeting.

- **Anti-government group stages rally in Bangkok.** Supporters of the anti-government group Pitak Siam staged a rally October 28 at the Royal Turf Club in Bangkok. Retired army officer and core organizer General Boonlert Kaewprasit said the crowd reached roughly 20,000, but police estimated only about 7,000 turned out. Speakers attacked the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra on a number of fronts, including its populist policies, allegations of corruption, concerns about the economy, and insufficient prosecution of lèse-majesté laws. General Boonlert said November 4 that Pitak Siam would stop holding rallies if attendance at its next one did not reach 1 million.



*Thailand's Parliament House. Democrat Party lawmakers are soon expected to submit a motion of no confidence in the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Thai\\_Parliament\\_House.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Thai_Parliament_House.JPG)*

- **No confidence debate set for end of November.** Democrat Party lawmakers plan to submit a motion of no confidence in parliament against the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra on November 9, with debate set for November 25-26. Thai media reported the debate will focus on economic issues and corruption in implementing the government's rice buying scheme. The deputy secretary-general of the Bhumjaithai Party, Supachai Chaisamut, said his party also supports the no confidence motion and will hold a discussion on whether all its parliamentarians will sign the motion.

#### PHILIPPINES

- **Moody's upgrades Philippines' credit rating.** Moody's Investors Service October 29 boosted the Philippines' sovereign debt rating to one notch below investment grade. Moody's praised the Philippines for "improved economic performance and continued fiscal revenue buoyancy in the face of deteriorating global demand." The decision follows earlier upgrades from credit rating agencies Standard & Poor's and Fitch Ratings, as well as raised economic growth forecasts from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

- **Four marines killed in firefight with Islamist group.** Four Philippine marines and at least two insurgents died October 28 in clashes between the military and Abu Sayyaf in Sulu province. The confrontation erupted while marines were searching for hostages kidnapped in February by Abu Sayyaf. More than 20 marines were injured during the daylong fight with about 200 Abu Sayyaf rebels and allied fighters. The U.S. and Philippine militaries have collaborated in recent years to eradicate Abu Sayyaf, an Islamist rebel group with past links to Al Qaeda.

- **Ex-president Arroyo refuses to enter plea on plunder charges.** Former Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo refused to enter a plea on corruption charges during an October 29 court hearing. Arroyo was arrested October 4 while in the hospital, accused of plundering \$8.8 million in state lottery funds during her 2001–2010 presidency. Her lawyer, Ferdinand Topacio, said that Arroyo's refusal to enter a plea reflected the illegality of the charges against her. The indictment is part of a string of charges filed against Arroyo by the government of President Benigno Aquino as part of his drive to stamp out political corruption.
- **Second U.S.-acquired warship to arrive in February.** Philippine officials said October 29 that the second warship the country procured from the United States in the last year will arrive in February. The BRP *Ramon Alcaraz*, formerly the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Dallas*, was officially transferred to the Philippines in May but remains in Charleston, South Carolina. Officials said it is in better condition than the BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, which the United States transferred to the Philippines in December 2011. The Philippines is eager to boost its naval capabilities amid ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Officials also said October 30 that the Philippines had acquired five French patrol boats, scheduled to arrive by 2014.



*Former Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo at the 2009 World Economic Forum. Arroyo recently refused to enter a plea on charges she plundered state lottery funds. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/worldeconomicforum/3488074811/>*

## VIETNAM

- **Constitutional amendments to grant president greater authority.** A National Assembly committee tasked with drafting amendments to Vietnam's 1992 constitution suggested on October 31 that the president would be given additional authority under a revised constitution. The president will be made commander of the armed forces and be able to request that the government discuss important issues when necessary. Lawmakers November 1 also said they supported a resolution that would allow votes of confidence for officials elected or approved by the National Assembly, including the president, prime minister, and cabinet members.
- **Central bank finalizing proposal for debt management scheme.** State Bank of Vietnam governor Nguyen Van Binh told the National Assembly that the central bank is finalizing a proposal for a national debt management company, according to an October 31 Bloomberg report. The proposed company would specialize in bank restructuring and resolving bad debts in the banking system. The state bank reportedly bought \$10 billion worth of debt in the last six months and has begun to oversee restructuring at several banks.

- **Vietnam jails musicians, student for anti-state propaganda.** A Ho Chi Minh City court October 30 sentenced two musicians to a total of 10 years in prison for writing songs supporting anti-China protests and critical of the government. The musicians have been detained since late 2011. Vietnamese police also admitted to arresting a 20-year-old student earlier in October for conducting anti-state propaganda. The United States November 1 said it is troubled by the conviction and sentencing of the musicians.

#### MALAYSIA

- **Ruling coalition factions debate potential reach of Islamic law.** Chua Soi Lek, president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), October 20 hailed the success of the party's campaign warning that victory by the opposition coalition in upcoming elections would result in the Chinese community being subject to *hudud*, Islamic punishments for breaking certain laws. MCA, a member of the ruling coalition, has seen its support among Chinese Malaysians dwindle in favor of the opposition Democratic Action Party. The opposition coalition also includes the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which supports the implementation of *hudud*. MCA's senior partner in the ruling coalition, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), October 24 denied that *hudud* could be extended to non-Muslims. UMNO risks turning more religious Malays toward PAS if it joins MCA's anti-*hudud* campaign.
- **Petronas appeals rejection of bid for Canada's Progress Energy Resources.** Malaysia's national oil corporation Petronas said the company plans to appeal a Canadian government decision to reject its \$5.2 billion bid to buy Progress Energy Resources, according to an October 23 report from the *Star*. The Canadian government October 19 rejected Petronas's bid without revealing a reason. Many analysts believe Canadian officials were looking beyond the Malaysian project to a larger bid from a Chinese state-owned enterprise to buy another Canadian oil and gas company. The rejection is a setback for Petronas, which is seeking to expand abroad amid shrinking domestic oil reserves and increasing demand. Petronas has 30 days to appeal the decision.
- **Singapore to help build \$1.2 billion industrial park in Malaysia.** Singapore's government-linked firm Ascendas October 23 said it had agreed to help Malaysia's UEM Land Holdings construct a \$1.2 billion industrial park in Iskandar, Malaysia's special development zone across the Johor Strait from Singapore. The industrial park will cater to the



*Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia's state-owned oil company plans to appeal the Canadian government's recent rejection of its bid to buy Progress Energy Resources. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/11385709@N04/2365603529/>*

electronics, pharmaceuticals, medical device, food processing, and precision engineering industries. Iskandar was set up in 2006 and initially received lukewarm reaction from foreign investors, but has garnered increasing interest since Singapore signed a broad investment agreement in 2010.

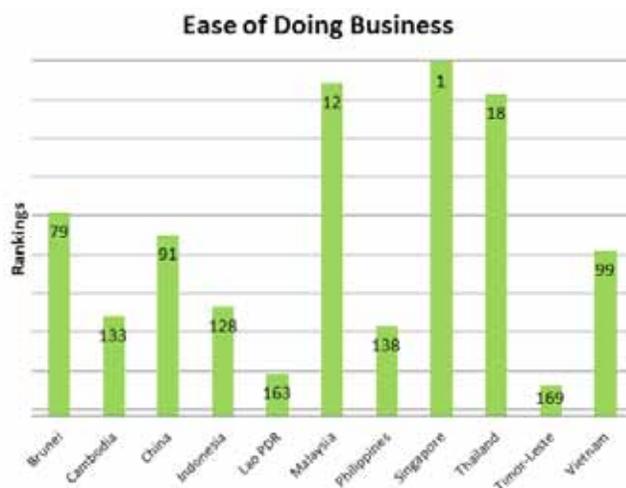
- **Two Malaysians arrested for suspected Al Qaeda links plead not guilty.** Two Malaysians arrested in Lebanon October 18 for suspected links to Al Qaeda pleaded not guilty October 31 at a military tribunal in Beirut. Lebanese authorities have accused Muhamad Razin Sharhan Mustafa Kamal and Razif Mohd Ariff of being members of an organization planning to carry out foreign jihadist missions in Syria. They were closely monitored by Lebanese intelligence agents before being arrested in their hotel room.

**ASEAN**

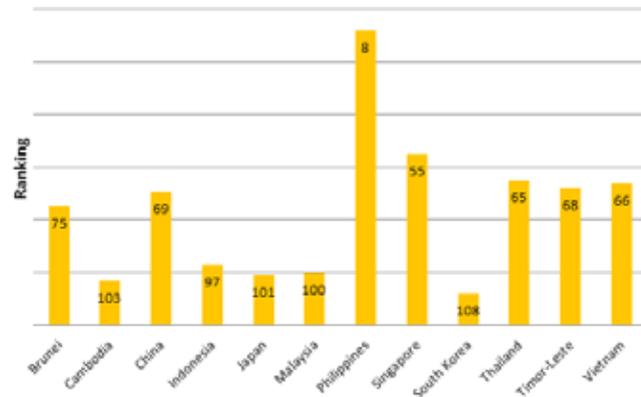
- **Vientiane hosts Asia-Europe summit.** Leaders from the 48 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) partner countries traveled to Vientiane November 5-6 to attend the ninth ASEM summit. The agenda included global economic and financial issues, nuclear nonproliferation, social and cultural cooperation, and the future direction of ASEM cooperation under the theme “Friends for Peace, Partners for Prosperity.” Asian leaders also urged their European counterparts to take necessary action to fix the economic crisis in the eurozone, which threatens to dampen economic growth in Asia. The successful hosting of the meeting was of particular importance to Laos, which had never hosted an international meeting of that scale.

- **ASEAN Human Rights Declaration faces criticism.** Indonesian civil society groups October 29 expressed disappointment about the drafting process and content of the first ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. Representatives of the groups said ASEAN’s human rights body, the Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, has failed to include the public in drafting the declaration. They expressed concern that the draft placed national interests of states above individual human rights. ASEAN is expected to adopt the declaration at the upcoming ASEAN Summit November 18-20 in Phnom Penh.

- **Singapore tops Ease of Doing Business Index; rest of ASEAN mixed.** Singapore is the best place in the world to do business, according to the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index released October 22. Singapore topped the ranks in ease of starting a business, protecting investors, trading across borders, and resolving insolvency. Malaysia



### Gender Equality



and Thailand ranked 12th and 18th, respectively, out of 185 countries scored. Vietnam and Indonesia are in the second tier, while Cambodia, the Philippines, and Laos land in the bottom tier of the rankings.

- **Philippines near top of gender equality index, rest of ASEAN near bottom.** The Philippines ranks eighth out of 135 countries in the World Economic Forum's October 23 report on gender equality, which measures countries based on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The rest of ASEAN finished much lower on the list, with Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam in the report's second tier and Indonesia, Malaysia, and Cambodia near the bottom of the rankings.

### SINGAPORE

- **Singapore Airlines signs deals with Airbus and Virgin Australia.** Singapore Airlines (SIA) October 24 announced a \$7.5 billion purchase agreement with European plane-maker Airbus, followed October 30 by a deal to purchase a 10 percent stake in Virgin Australia. The Airbus deal includes an order for five A380 and 20 A350 airliners. It will also see Airbus buy back five A340-500 long-range airliners because SIA plans to cease operating the world's longest flights—between Singapore and Los Angeles, and Singapore and Newark—in 2013. SIA's deal with Virgin Australia is being seen as a move to challenge rivals in the lucrative Australian market.
- **Singapore's first yuan-denominated IPO suspended.** Singapore's first yuan-denominated initial public offering (IPO), for Dynasty Real Estate Investment Trust, was suspended October 24 due to weakening global markets and the poor performance of several recent IPOs. Dynasty, which is part-owned by Hong Kong tycoon Li Ka-shing, was scheduled to be listed October 30. The suspension came despite substantial demand for the IPO from institutional and retail investors. Singapore has lost substantial ground as a leading offshore yuan-trading hub, failing to match Hong Kong and being overtaken by London.
- **Singapore to expand unfinished LNG terminal to meet growing demand.** Second Trade Minister S. Iswaran said October 24 that Singapore plans to build a fourth liquefied natural gas (LNG) storage tank at its still-unfinished terminal in Jurong. The fourth unit, which will be completed by 2016–2017 at a cost of \$409 million, will boost Singapore's LNG processing capacity to nearly 10 million tons per year. The city-state anticipates rapid growth in the LNG market and is trying to position itself as a regional LNG hub.



A Singapore Airlines Airbus A380 at Changi Airport. Singapore recently signed a \$7.5 billion deal with Airbus for 25 airliners. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/39551170@N02/5621409862/>

- **Director of award-winning film to appeal ban.** The director of the Singaporean film *Sex-Violence-Family Values*, Ken Kwek, said October 17 that he will appeal a decision by the city-state's Media Development Authority to ban the film. The award-winning movie was rejected just days before its scheduled release after the panel deemed some of the dialogue offensive to Singapore's Indian community. Supporters of the film argue that it is meant as satire discouraging racism. The film was originally given an adults-only rating and some of its crew members have urged censors to respect the "intelligence" of Singaporean moviegoers.

#### CAMBODIA

- **Government denies Sam Rainsy's appeal to pay respects to former king.** The Cambodian government has refused a request from opposition leader Sam Rainsy to return to the country to pay respects to former King Norodom Sihanouk, who died October 15 in Beijing. Rainsy, who was sentenced in absentia in 2010 to 12 years in prison for various political offenses, lives in self-imposed exile in Paris. He would be arrested if he returned to Cambodia. Rainsy previously served in the royalist Funcinpec Party in 1993 and recently resigned from the Sam Rainsy Party to head a new National Rescue Party.
- **European Parliament passes resolution condemning human rights violations.** The European Union's parliamentary body passed a resolution October 26 that called on the Cambodian government to uphold human rights. In the resolution, the European Parliament condemned human rights abuses, including the October 1 conviction of radio broadcaster Mam Sonando for allegedly instigating a secessionist movement, and called on the Cambodian government to disband its controversial land concessions program. The resolution does not require the European Union to take any specific actions, but could have significant ramifications because the organization is Cambodia's largest aid donor.
- **Minister of foreign affairs announces ban on U.S. adoptions to be lifted.** Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Long Visalo October 29 announced that Cambodia will resume foreign adoptions with the United States on January 1, 2013. Cambodia suspended all intercountry adoptions in 2009 after claims of corruption and human trafficking arose. To ensure safe adoptions and fulfill obligations under the Hague Adoption Convention, Cambodia will enforce regulations that limit U.S. adoptions to children under eight years of age and impose an annual adoption quota of 100 to 200 children.



*Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy (fourth from left) marches with supporters in 2007. Rainsy was recently denied permission to return to Cambodia to pay respects to recently deceased King Norodom Sihanouk. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/65619190@N04/5972840205/>*

## LAOS

- **WTO accepts Laos's membership.** The World Trade Organization (WTO) General Council October 26 approved Laos's membership in the grouping. Laos applied for WTO membership in 1997 and is the last member of ASEAN to join the organization. The Lao National Assembly must ratify its membership package and submit its instrument of intent to the WTO Secretariat to finalize its membership. Joining the WTO is expected to boost Laos's efforts to implement economic and legal reforms to better integrate into the global economy, especially with regards to strengthening rule of law.



*Officers from the UN Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) and the Polícia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL) conduct joint training exercises. The PNTL took over full policing responsibilities November 1. [http://www.flickr.com/photos/un\\_photo/6096782149/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/un_photo/6096782149/)*

## TIMOR-LESTE

- **Timor-Leste takes over security duties from UN peacekeepers.** The United Nations November 1 handed over full policing responsibilities in Timor-Leste to the country's national police. The last UN peacekeepers will leave the country by December 15. The national police began to take over policing responsibilities in March 2011 and the United Nations confirmed it would leave the country completely after successful elections earlier this year. The UN force arrived in 2006 to reestablish security following a political crisis that sparked mass violence in and around the capital.
- **UN Security Council officials travel to Timor-Leste.** Representatives of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) arrived in Timor-Leste November 1 to assess the country's future as the UN transfers policing responsibilities to Timorese authorities. Colonel Martin Dransfield, New Zealand's military adviser to the United Nations, said that the UNSC is ascertaining whether Timor-Leste can remain stable without assistance from international peacekeeping forces. The delegation met with Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, President Taur Matan Ruak, members of the police and defense forces, and nongovernmental organizations.

## MEKONG RIVER

- **Laos to begin construction on Xayaburi mega dam.** Laos November 7 officially began construction of its long-delayed Xayaburi mega dam on the Mekong River, a day after Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong assured critics the project would remain postponed for further assessments. The Lao government announced the decision to resume construction during its hosting of the November 5-6 Asia Europe Meeting in Vientiane. Neighboring Cambodia and Vietnam oppose the project, citing likely damage for those downstream. The Lao government says improvements to the dam's design have addressed concerns about potential harm to fish migration and sediment flow.

- **ADB may back disputed Mekong dam.** An Asian Development Bank (ADB) official said October 25 that the bank is considering funding a hydropower project along two tributaries of the Sekong River in Laos, provided that environmental mitigation and resettlement requirements are met. Critics worry the proposed \$1 billion, 400-megawatt Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy project, which includes three dams, could affect the flow of the river in downstream Cambodia. The project is owned jointly by Thailand's Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding Public Company Limited, Korea's SK Engineering and Construction, Korea Western Power, and the Lao government.

- **Cambodia approves major hydroelectric dam on Mekong tributary.** Cambodia's government November 2 announced that it had approved a 400-megawatt hydroelectric project along the Sesan River following eight years of environmental and social impact studies. The dam, a joint venture involving companies from China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, will be located in the northeastern province of Stung Treng. The Sesan is a tributary of the Mekong, and critics fear that the dam will threaten the river's biodiversity, lead to forced relocation, and hurt the livelihoods of people who depend on the waterway.



*The Sekong River, a major Mekong tributary in Laos, is the site of the planned Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy dam. The ADB is considering funding the project if it can meet certain environmental requirements. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/princeroy/5458240076/>*

#### SOUTH CHINA SEA

- **China, ASEAN meetings end without progress.** Senior officials from ASEAN and China failed to make demonstrable progress toward a legally binding code of conduct during an informal ASEAN-China meeting October 29 in Pattaya, Thailand, and a two-day workshop November 1-2 in Phnom Penh. Both meetings concluded with officials vowing to implement the nonbinding 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea but warning that the much-anticipated code of conduct would not be signed at this month's East Asia Summit in Cambodia.

#### BRUNEI

- **Singapore prime minister concludes three-day Brunei visit.** Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah and Singapore prime minister Lee Hsien Loong discussed monetary and educational cooperation during an October 28-31 visit by the prime minister to Brunei. The two scheduled future bilateral meetings between their countries' monetary authorities to discuss areas of mutual interest. They also emphasized educational exchanges, announcing that Singapore will send 15 Malay language teachers to Brunei in 2013 and Brunei will send special education teachers to Singapore schools. ■

# Looking Ahead

- **U.S.-ASEAN human rights symposium.** The U.S. Department of State and the ASEAN Studies Center at American University will host a daylong symposium November 9 on human rights in ASEAN and its member states. The conference will take place from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. at American University's School of International Service, Hughes Formal Lounge, 4400 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Please e-mail [aseanstudiescenter@american.edu](mailto:aseanstudiescenter@american.edu) for more information.
- **Discussion on Malaysian political prospects.** The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Asia Program will host a discussion November 13 on Malaysia's political future. The event, titled "Malaysia's Performance and Prospects," will feature Ambassador James Keith, American University's Pek Koon Heng-Blackburn, the International Monetary Fund's Alex Mourmouras, and Carnegie's Vikram Nehru. It will take place from 10:30 a.m. to 12 p.m. at 1779 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Please register [here](#).
- **Workshop on U.S.-ASEAN smart grid initiatives.** The U.S. Trade and Development Agency and the Heads of ASEAN Power Utilities/Authorities will cosponsor a two-day workshop November 13-14 to discuss the region's smart grid initiatives. The event will take place at the Sheraton Hanoi Hotel, Hanoi. Please click [here](#) to register for the event.
- **U.S.-Myanmar business summit in Yangon.** The American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore and the American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand will organize a one-day conference November 14 in Yangon for U.S. companies interested in investing in Myanmar. Attendees will have the opportunity to hear from the U.S. Embassy on the business environment in Myanmar, gain insights from businesses already operating there, and network with the local business community. The event will be held at the Sedona Hotel. Please [click here](#) to register, or e-mail [Anne Marie Brooks](mailto:AnneMarieBrooks@americanchamber.com) for more information.
- **Discussion on the U.S. Navy in the Asia Pacific.** The National Press Club Speakers Luncheon will host Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert November 16 for a talk on the state of the U.S. Navy and its strategy in the Asia Pacific. The event will take place from 12:30 p.m. to 2 p.m. at the Ballroom in the National Press Club, 529 14th St., N.W. For reservations, please e-mail [reservations@press.org](mailto:reservations@press.org) or call (202) 662-7501. The cost of admission is \$19 for National Press Club members, \$30 for their guests, and \$37 for the general public.

- **Discussion on the business environment in Malaysia.** The Malaysia U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the ASEAN Studies Center at American University, the Asia Society, and the Malaysia-America Society will cohost a symposium November 16 on the business environment in Malaysia. Speakers will include a representative from the Malaysian Investment Development Authority and several Washington-based experts. The event will take place from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. at American University's School of International Service, Room 120, 4400 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Please call (202) 885-1688 for more details.
- **ASEAN Summit and East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh.** Heads of state from the ASEAN countries and their eight most prominent dialogue partners, including the United States, will travel to Phnom Penh November 18-20 for the annual ASEAN Summit, East Asia Summit, and related meetings. Leaders will discuss a range of pressing issues including ongoing tensions in the South and East China Seas, competing visions for trade liberalization, and efforts to integrate ASEAN ahead of the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. The ASEAN Summit will take place November 18, followed by the U.S.-ASEAN Meeting November 19 and the East Asia Summit November 20.
- **Workshop on India-Southeast Asia defense relations.** The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore will host a full-day workshop November 30 on India-Southeast Asia defense relations. The event will be held at the Traders Hotel in Singapore. Please click [here](#) for more information. ■

## SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM THE CORNER OF 18TH & K STREETS

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