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The Ripple Effects of Mounting Violence in Kachin

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Myanmar president Thein Sein January 2 confirmed reports that the military had employed air strikes and gunship helicopters in its fight against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) near Laiza, the rebels' capital in northeastern Myanmar. The strikes, which reportedly began December 28 in response to KIA attacks on government convoys, are continuing. . The United States and United Nations, among others, have decried the use of airpower against lightly armed fighters near a population center.

The Myanmar military has taken an 18-month-long humanitarian tragedy and, improbably, made it more tragic. The decision to use air strikes also raises important strategic questions about the reform process in Myanmar. It shines a light on two outstanding issues that are the most intractable for the government and the most likely to cause backsliding in reforms: the civilian authorities' control over the military, and the chance for nationwide peace with ethnic minorities.

Thein Sein's admission that troops had used air strikes contradicted government statements just two days prior denying the allegations. It is still unclear how involved the president was in ordering the air strikes, or whether he was even aware of the military's intention to do so. What is apparent, though, is that the recent uptick in violence is out of step with repeated calls from Naypyidaw for the military to halt offensives

Inside This Issue

THE WEEK THAT WAS

- War escalates in Kachin State, spills over into China
- Vietnamese authorities allegedly sexually assault blogger amid crackdown
- Taiwan to explore for oil in Spratly Islands

LOOKING AHEAD

- Discussion on fish and food security in Southeast Asia
- *Freedom in the World 2013* report release
- Conference on the Asia Pacific in 2013

The Ripple Effects of Mounting Violence in Kachin *(continued)*



A group of Kachin civilians displaced by fighting between the government and rebel forces. Recent air strikes by the Myanmar military have made an already-tragic humanitarian situation even worse.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/69583224@N05/8282252449/>

against the KIA. Reports throughout December suggested that violence was escalating as government troops attempted to reinforce their positions and retake lost terrain around Laiza. For each offensive, the military insists that it is merely responding to rebel attacks, but that excuse grows less credible with each passing day.

The military remains a strong force in Myanmar politics—many argue the strongest force—and its support for the reform effort is critical to the effort's success. The armed forces operated for decades with absolute impunity and have no experience with subordination to civilian authorities, creating inherent tension between the government and its troops.

Despite the military's privileged place in the state, civilian oversight of the armed forces will prove crucial for the consolidation of democratic reforms. The fact that the leadership in Naypyidaw, including the president and most members of the cabinet, are recently retired military officers has likely bought them a degree of acquiescence from the generals on this front. But the situation in Kachin State offers strong evidence that the submission of military commanders to the central authorities is far from complete.

Regional commands in Myanmar have long acted with an unusual degree of autonomy; many commanders treated their areas of responsibility as personal fiefdoms. In a junta-run country usually facing at least a dozen active insurgencies, this is understandable. But in an emerging democracy seeking national reconciliation, it undermines fragile trust in the government and allows a minority of the military to act as a spoiler.

The government's fidelity and control of the armed forces were regularly called into question in 2012 by incidents like the heavy-handed police crackdown on protesters at the [Letpadung copper mine](#), the reported involvement of security forces in communal violence in Rakhine State, and periodic skirmishes with Karen and Shan rebels, despite cease-fire agreements. These incidents continually mar the building of trust between citizens and the authorities. Creating civilian trust of the government will

The Ripple Effects of Mounting Violence in Kachin *(continued)*

prove a slow process; it will be knocked back each time security forces appear to buck civilian oversight, and it could be undermined entirely if the situation in Kachin State convinces citizens that the generals, not the president, hold ultimate power.

The escalation of fighting with the KIA threatens stability in more than just Kachin State. The government has signed cease-fire agreements over the last year and a half with most of the country's major armed ethnic resistance movements, except the KIA. While a few deals, most notably with the [Chin National Front](#), have advanced beyond initial cease-fire agreements, most are like those with the Shan and Karen—fragile at best. The only thing keeping occasional flare-ups with such groups from spiraling back into open conflict is ongoing dialogue with government negotiators and the hope that the authorities are serious about national reconciliation.

Seeing that government offensives against the Kachin are not only continuing, but actually escalating, sends a chilling message to those groups still uncertain about the government's trustworthiness. The United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), which represents 11 of Myanmar's ethnic armies, has repeatedly called on the government to halt its offensive against the KIA. In mid-2012, the group's members threatened to consider their own cease-fire agreements with the government null and void if the fighting did not stop.

When chief negotiator Aung Min suggested during a meeting with UNFC representatives in early January that their next round of negotiations be held in Yangon, the [council declined](#), citing the situation in Kachin State. The process of building trust between the ethnic armies and the government will be slow and laborious, but can be squandered with relative ease.

Outside partners like the United States have limited ability to shape the outcome. What Washington can and must do, however, is ensure that the issue is not ignored. U.S. ambassador Derek Mitchell traveled last month to Kachin State, although only to government-held areas. Mitchell also said January 8 that he has quietly raised the Kachin issue with top brass in Naypyidaw. These are necessary, but not sufficient, messages of concern. U.S. and other like-minded officials should make it clear that the violence in Kachin State threatens the historic progress made toward opening Myanmar to the outside world and normalizing relations.



Myanmar president Thein Sein (left) with then-leader Than Shwe (center). As a former military officer, Thein Sein seems to have received the acquiescence of much of the military, but the situation in Kachin State shows that the generals' submission to civilian authority is incomplete. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/inmediahk/7344577410/>



The Ripple Effects of Mounting Violence in Kachin *(continued)*

The United States can begin to assist in some limited ways, including by attempts to help professionalize the Myanmar military. U.S. military officials held a groundbreaking meeting in October 2012 with their counterparts in Myanmar during which they discussed issues of human rights, the laws of war, and civilian control of the military. Such limited engagement must continue. Myanmar's leaders, both civilian and military, should be told that continued progress on these fronts will be a requisite for more advanced military engagement.

Setbacks on Myanmar's road to democracy will continue until a cultural change occurs within the military itself, and such changes do not occur overnight. The United States should respond critically, especially in a situation as troubling as that in Kachin State. But it must also remain engaged. The other choice is to condemn from the sidelines, which might assuage consciences but will do nothing to help Myanmar or the United States. ■

INDONESIA

- **Golkar: no decisions on vice presidential candidate until 2014.** Golkar executive Hajriyanto Y. Tohari said January 2 that the party, one of Indonesia's largest, will not make any major decisions on its 2014 presidential election ticket this year. Party chairman Aburizal Bakrie last year was named Golkar's presidential candidate, but the decision on a running mate is not likely until after the legislative elections in 2014. Separately, Democratic Party vice chairman Marzuki Alie December 31 said his party, which has seen its popularity plummet in the wake of recent corruption scandals, is considering partnering with former president Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle. Such a coalition would unite two of the country's three largest parties.
- **Authorities to increase security operations in Poso despite heavy criticism.** The chiefs of Indonesia's National Police, National Intelligence Agency, and military announced January 2 they would increase security operations in and around Poso, Central Sulawesi. The area witnessed a spate of anti-state terrorism in 2012, most of which involved attacks on police. Locals have complained of heavy-handed tactics by security forces, with 14 civilians reporting on December 20 to the Poso Legislative Council that they had been beaten and given electric shocks while being questioned by police. On January 3, residents demanded that the local police chief be removed.
- **Unions set up groups to monitor minimum wage increase.** The Confederation of Indonesian Worker's Unions (KPSI) will set up complaint stations to monitor a new nationwide minimum wage law that took effect January 1. Under the new law, workers must make at least \$228 per month, a 44 percent increase from the previous minimum rate. KPSI secretary-general Muhammad Rusdi announced January 2 that the group will take legal action against companies that violate the law, though it will grant some leeway to small businesses.
- **Protests in Sumatra upset gold mine plans.** Dozens of protestors from the Sumatran village of Telo remain in hiding following violent protests at the Martabe gold mine project in October, during which 1,000 people stormed the complex, according to the *Financial Times*. Locals remain concerned that waste water from the mine, which is backed by Hong Kong-based G-Resources, will be dumped into the Batang Toru River, fouling water used for agriculture and drinking. G-Resources has created several community development projects to address local concerns and says water



A flooded market in Jakarta in 2007. Jakarta's new governor, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, faces a huge challenge in handling the city's notorious floods and is proposing new initiatives to solve the problem. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/shanghaidaddy/382761698/>



A fighter in Kachin State in March 2012. Renewed fighting between the central government and the Kachin Independence Army has resulted in over 1,000 deaths and 70,000 internally displaced persons since June 2011. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/anevillemorgan/7058662983/>

from the mine will be fully treated before being dumped into the river. The ongoing drama is being closely watched by foreign investors, who are concerned about increasingly nationalistic policies in Indonesia's mining sector.

- **Jokowi addresses Jakarta flooding; may push for public-private partnerships.** Recently elected Jakarta governor Joko "Jokowi" Widodo is exploring several solutions to Jakarta's perennial flooding, which brought Indonesia's capital to a standstill December 22 and 23. On December 26 Jokowi proposed that better water catchment projects be required for new construction and on January 3 ordered the city's Development Planning Board to include a tunnel for water drainage and easing traffic congestion in new development plans. He also said that public-private partnerships could be important components of any solution to the flooding.

MYANMAR

- **War escalates in Kachin State, spills over into China.** Fighting is intensifying between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Myanmar's military, with most fighting occurring near the KIA capital, Laiza. Rocket shells landed in China's Yunnan Province on December 31, drawing diplomatic complaints. On January 2, President Thein Sein admitted that the military was carrying out air strikes in response to attacks on government convoys, drawing criticism from the United States, the United Nations, and other outside observers. Nearly 1,000 people in Kachin State have died and 70,000 been internally displaced since the breakdown of a 17-year cease-fire in June 2011.
- **Myanmar celebrates first New Year's countdown; president reflects on 2012.** Thousands of people gathered December 31 to celebrate at the Myoma Parade Ground in Yangon, where the city held its first public countdown to the New Year. The celebration lasted six hours and included musical performances, comedy routines, and fireworks. President Thein Sein gave a five-minute national address via radio January 1, reflecting on the reforms of 2012 but saying that much remains to be done. He vowed to create more lines of communication between citizens and the government, and said mutual trust is the most important element of the reform process.
- **Christmas Day plane crash raises concerns about Myanmar's air safety.** An Air Bagan plane crash-landed on a road in central Myanmar December 25 before catching fire. The crash killed a passenger and a motorcyclist, who was struck by the plane, and injured 11, including foreign tourists. Seventy-one people were on board. Authorities say the pilot mistook the road for a runway due to foggy weather. The crash has raised serious

safety concerns about Myanmar's fledgling airline industry, which is overstretched. Myanmar's main airport in Yangon is expected to exceed its capacity in 2013.

- **Thai authorities escort Rohingya back to Myanmar despite human rights concerns.** Thai officials on January 4 repatriated 73 Rohingya refugees from western Myanmar who were found offshore near the Thai resort island of Phuket. The refugees' boat was headed for Malaysia, but was found January 1 after it encountered trouble at sea. Several human rights groups and the United Nations urged Thailand not to repatriate the group because it could qualify for refugee status, but Thai authorities refused. Rohingya have been the victims of widespread sectarian violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State and are denied citizenship by the Myanmar government.

VIETNAM

- **Authorities allegedly sexually assault blogger amid crackdown.** Nguyen Hoang Vi, a prominent Vietnamese blogger, on January 4 accused police of stripping, beating, and sexually assaulting her while in detention. Vi was arrested December 28 outside a Hanoi courthouse that was hearing the appeals of imprisoned bloggers Nguyen Van Hai, Ta Phong Tan, and Phan Thanh Hai. All three remain in jail. The incident followed the arrest a day earlier of another prominent blogger, lawyer Le Quoc Quan. At least 14 bloggers and journalists are currently in Vietnamese prisons, according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).
- **Investment, foreign assistance, exports hit highs in 2012.** Vietnam saw much-needed growth in foreign investment, foreign assistance, and exports in 2012 as the country tried to shore up its shaky economy. Vietnam received \$10.5 billion of new foreign investment in 2012, up slightly from the 2007–2011 average of \$10.3 billion, according to a December 29 [VGP News report](#). The country also received a record \$3.6 billion in official development assistance (ODA), and total ODA commitments hit \$7.3 billion. Exports also grew to \$114.6 billion, an increase of more than 18 percent over 2011. The ratio of exports to GDP hit a record 82 percent.
- **Vietnam becomes world's number two rice exporter.** Vietnam announced January 3 that it exported nearly 8.4 million tons of rice in 2012, up 10 percent from a year before and second only to India. Thailand fell from the number one spot for the first time in three decades, exporting just 7.6 million tons—35 percent less than a year earlier—after devastating floods in late 2011 and the introduction of a much-criticized government



Farmers work in rice paddies near Dong Hoi, central Vietnam. Vietnam became the world's number two rice exporter in 2012, behind only India. http://www.flickr.com/photos/advocacy_project/4710397139/



purchasing scheme to artificially inflate rice prices. India exported nearly 10.5 million tons of rice in 2012.

- **Indian naval vessel docks in Vietnam.** An Indian navy ship, the INS *Sudarashini*, arrived January 1 in Danang in central Vietnam for a three-day visit. The vessel is on a nine-nation goodwill tour of Southeast Asia in an effort to boost emerging defense ties between India and the region. The ship's crew was greeted by officials from Danang and from Vietnam's Defense Ministry and navy. On January 3 the *Sudarashini* continued on to Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

PHILIPPINES

- **Reproductive Health Law faces challenge in Supreme Court.** A Philippine couple filed a suit January 2 in the Supreme Court challenging the newly passed Reproductive Health Law, saying it violates the constitution. The couple, backed by the Catholic Church, asked the Supreme Court to stop the implementation of the law until the case is settled. President Benigno Aquino signed the bill into law December 21. It requires the state to provide information on family planning and access to birth control to couples that request it.
- **Philippine stock market hits all-time high in first day of 2013 trading.** The Philippine Stock Exchange index started the year strong, closing at a then-record 5,860.99 points in the first day of trading January 2. It has continued its climb since, closing January 8 at an all-time high of 6,048.9 points. The upswing was largely due to the "fiscal cliff" deal in the United States, which buoyed markets throughout the world. The Philippines enjoyed robust growth in 2012, reporting January 5 that the economy expanded 7.1 percent in the third quarter—one of the highest rates in Asia.
- **Transportation and Commerce officials face graft charges.** The Anti-Traffic Movement of the Philippines, a prominent corruption watchdog, filed an 80-page complaint with the Office of the Ombudsmen on January 3 alleging that six Department of Transportation and Commerce officials and several anonymous individuals engaged in graft involving a multimillion-dollar development project. The complaint states that the officials manipulated bidding to favor Stradcom Corporation, which has provided IT services to the Land Transportation Office since 1998, in winning a new contract when its current one expires February 11. President Benigno Aquino has made combating graft one of his administration's top priorities and has received considerable support from civil society.

- **Commission to halt investigations into Marcos family.** Andres Bautista, chairman of a government body charged with investigating the family wealth of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, recommended January 2 that the commission be abolished and its duties handed over to the Department of Justice. The Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) was created in 1986 to identify and investigate ill-gotten gains by the Marcos family. Reaction to the announcement was mixed. A U.S. lawyer representing thousands of victims of Marcos's rule lauded the decision, saying January 5 that the PCGG was the largest obstacle to collecting the \$2 billion awarded to victims from the Marcos estate. Other victims, however, said abolishing the commission sends the wrong signal.



Ferdinand Marcos during a 1966 visit to the White House. The Philippines is considering abolishing a commission investigating the Marcos family fortune. http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a3/Ferdinand_Marcos_at_the_White_House.jpg

THAILAND

- **Democrat-backed Bangkok governor resigns.** Bangkok governor Sukhumbhand Paripatra resigned January 8 after acknowledging charges that he approved a 30-year contract with Bangkok Mass Transit System Public Company Limited, which runs Bangkok's Skytrain, without due authority. The Democrat Party selected Sukhumbhand as its candidate for the Bangkok governor race in an executive meeting on December 27, while the ruling Pheu Thai party backed deputy national police chief Pol General Pongsapat Pongcharoen. The election, scheduled for February 19, will now be held on March 3.
- **Thailand's inflation hit 13-month high in 2012; baht rises to near three-month high.** The inflation rate in Thailand rose to a 13-month high in December, as the consumer price index increased 3.6 percent compared to December 2011, according to the Commerce Ministry. The average inflation rate in 2012 was 3 percent and the rate is expected to increase further in 2013 due to rising food prices and a minimum wage increase. The baht appreciated 3.1 percent in 2012 due to regional economic growth.
- **Rice pledging scheme architect defends program despite Thailand losing top exporter position.** Olarn Chaipravat, the Thai economist behind a highly criticized rice pledging scheme, argued January 2 in the *Bangkok Post* that the government's policy is necessary to increase farmers' incomes despite criticisms that it led to losses and declining exports. The scheme purchases rice from farmers at above-market rates, resulting in large stockpiles of rice remaining unsold on the global market. Thailand lost its title as the world's top rice exporter in 2012 for the first time in three decades, as it was overtaken by India.



The Bangkok skyline. The Democrat Party announced it will support current Bangkok governor Sukhumbhand Paripatra as its candidate for the gubernatorial race, while Pheu Thai is expected to back deputy national police chief Pol General Pongsapat Pongcharoen. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/intrepidflame/441848201/>

MALAYSIA

- **Malaysia resumes hiring Bangladeshi migrants.** The Bangladesh government announced December 31 that an online registration process for 10,000 plantation workers in Malaysia will start January 13, following the signing of a memorandum of understanding November 26 between Bangladesh and Malaysia. The MOU allows Malaysia to resume hiring Bangladeshi migrant workers following the government's halt to the program four years ago in response to high numbers of illegal migrants. The bilateral deal aims to recruit 500,000 Bangladeshi workers for manufacturing, service, agriculture, and construction in the next five years.
- **Any smartphone is eligible for rebate, as Najib eyes 2013 election.** Malaysia's information, culture, and communication minister Rais Yatim announced January 2 that the Cabinet agreed to abolish the \$165 price cap for low-income youths to get a rebate for buying smartphones. The government was responding to complaints from online communities and ruling Barisan Nasional coalition parties that the price ceiling was too low. Prime Minister Najib Razak announced the Youth Communications Package rebate scheme in September 2012 in an effort to give youths better access to 3G smartphones.
- **Bersih trains Malaysians to spot fraud in elections.** Malaysia's electoral reform group Bersih will launch a campaign in January with the help of the Popular Communications Center for Human Rights (Pusat KOMAS) and Malaysians for Free and Fair Elections (MAFREL) to train citizen observers in spotting electoral fraud. Separately, the activist group Tindak Malaysia is training polling and vote counting agents, according to Bersih's chairman Ambiga Sreenevasan. The activist groups believe that these campaigns will help promote fair elections; general elections are expected sometime after the lunar New Year in mid-February.
- **Iskandar Investment to develop a massive education complex in Johor.** Iskandar Investment is developing an education complex called EduCity in Nusajaya, Johor, that will include 10 campuses, a sports complex, and a student village. The Malaysian government will offer incentives such as a 15 percent flat income tax rate to attract foreign professionals and institutions to EduCity, according to the Iskandar Regional Development Authority. Most education institutions will have only one faculty or department and might not offer transferable credits with their parent institutions, according to a December 23 *New York Times* report.



Bersih supporters during the Bersih 3.0 rally in Kuala Lumpur. The electoral reform group is planning to launch a campaign to train citizen observers how to spot fraud in the upcoming general elections. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/nicholas-chan/6976016984/>

SINGAPORE

- **Singapore looks to tighten consumer credit.** The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) on December 21 proposed stricter rules on consumer credit cards, requiring banks to scrutinize credit candidates more carefully. The proposal follows an earlier plan to tighten rules on mortgage lending, and both efforts aim to prevent over-leveraging the economy. Separately, Singapore managed to avoid recession in 2012, growing 1.2 percent thanks to expansion in the services industry. The 2013 outlook remains gloomy, however, due to weak demand from manufacturing.

- **Singapore's Fraser and Neave to extend deadline for Thai bid.** Singaporean beverage conglomerate Fraser and Neave (F&N) agreed January 3 to give an extra week for Thai beverage tycoon Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi to submit an improved takeover bid under TCC Assets. TCC Assets has asked for an extension three times since Indonesian rival Overseas Union Enterprise, controlled by the Lippo Group, announced its counterbid for F&N in November. F&N became a takeover target after it sold Tiger Beer-maker Asia Pacific Breweries to Heineken in September.

- **Five-way election in Punggol East.** The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) announced December 27 its interest in contesting the by-election for a single-seat ward in Punggol East that has been vacant since former parliamentary speaker Michael Palmer resigned December 12 following revelations about an extramarital affair. The SDP became the fourth party to enter the race, joining the Workers' Party, Reform Party, and Singapore Democratic Alliance. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced January 9 that the by-election will take place January 26.

- **Singapore Polytechnic launches Cyber Wargame Center.** Singapore Polytechnic launched a Cyber Wargame Center on January 3 that will train students in cyber defense by immersing them in real-life security scenarios as a part of the institution's Diploma in Infocomm Security Management Program. The center aims to produce IT professionals capable of protecting Internet users, according to the Ministry of Home Affairs. The facility is a collaborative effort between vendors e-Cop, ST Electronics, and Paraben, and Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore.



A vending machine in Singapore selling Fraser and Neave beverages. The Singapore company agreed to extend the bidding deadline for Thai beverage tycoon Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/teduction/3542101383/>

SOUTH CHINA SEA

- **Taiwan to explore for oil in Spratly Islands.** Taiwan's state-owned CPC Corporation announced December 28 that the Bureau of Mines will hire the company to explore for oil and gas on Itu Aba Island in the disputed



Spratly archipelago. Itu Aba is the largest islet in the Spratlys and is one of only two features occupied by Taiwan. CPC Corporation said it expects the exploration to begin in March. China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam all explore for oil and gas in the South China Sea, but this is the first time Taiwan has entered the fray.

- **Chinese troops stage defense drill in Paracels.** Chinese soldiers stationed on the Duncan Islands in the Paracels engaged in an early-morning drill January 2 meant to prepare them for a surprise attack. Vietnam and Taiwan also claim the China-controlled Paracel Islands. Chinese troops also held drills January 2 at Shenyang and Jinan and December 31 at Hangzhou—all cities along the East China Sea coast where China and Japan are locked in a standoff over the Senkaku Islands.
- **China decries Vietnamese law claiming disputed islands.** China's Foreign Ministry on January 2 lambasted a Vietnamese law laying claim to the Paracel Islands, calling the law illegal and reiterating China's position that it has "indisputable sovereignty" over the archipelago. The law, which came into effect January 1, restates Vietnam's long-standing claim to the islands. China drove South Vietnamese forces from the western half of the Paracel Islands in 1974, completing its control of the archipelago.

LAOS



Thanaleng Railway Station in Laos. The United Nations Development Program warns Laos about the financing terms of a Chinese railway from Yunnan in southern China to Bangkok and Dawei. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/axelrd/6186434525/>

- **Chinese railroad financing threatens Laos's macroeconomic stability.** A United Nations Development Program report warns that Laos's financing of a Chinese railway will put the country's macroeconomic stability in danger and could turn northern Laos into a wasteland, according to a January 1 *New York Times* report. The \$7 billion railway is designed to link southern China to Bangkok and Dawei in Myanmar, but Laos will bear the brunt of the cost through loans from China. Laos's annual GDP is only \$8 billion. Other international organizations have echoed similar concerns. The Lao National Assembly approved the project as part of a 20-country trans-Asian rail agreement signed in 2006.
- **Respected Lao agricultural economist missing.** Lao agricultural economist **Sombath Somphone** is still missing after he was stopped at a police checkpoint in the suburbs of Vientiane December 15. The Lao government has denied any involvement, although police CCTV footage shows that unknown persons stopped Sombath, drove away his jeep, and took him away in a truck in front of a police post in Vientiane. Sombath is well known for his agricultural development work and has been involved in environmental and land rights causes, though friends say that his work is not political.

- **Stock Exchange of Thailand extends MOU with Lao Securities Exchange.**

The Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) and Lao Securities Exchange (LSX) agreed December 25 to a second extension of their memorandum of understanding. The 2013–2014 MOU covers human resource training, market surveillance, and business opportunities promotion between the two exchanges. The agreement began in 2008 before the establishment of LSX and aims to deepen financial services relations between the two countries.

- **Thailand's Ministry of Transport to build Thai-Laos bridge.** Thailand's Ministry of Transport unveiled a plan to construct a Thai-Laos bridge across the Mekong River between Thailand's Beung Kan province and Laos' Bolikhamxai province. The bridge construction will start at the end of 2013, according to Thai minister of transport Sornsak Sansombat. The planned bridge will be the fifth Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge that aims to boost bilateral trade, investment, tourism, and transportation.

CAMBODIA

- **Human rights groups decry "sham" court cases.** **Human Rights Watch** and other groups have accused the Cambodian government of manipulating two court rulings to punish political opponents. The Court of Appeals December 27 upheld the convictions of Born Samnang and Sok Sam Oeun for the 2004 murder of labor leader Chea Vichea. The two were sentenced to 20 years in prison despite a lack of evidence, and observers have accused the government of using them as scapegoats. Another court the same day sentenced Yorm Bopha, an outspoken land rights advocate for the **Boeng Kak Lake community**, to three years in prison after a trial that the human rights community has condemned as a "sham."

TIMOR-LESTE

- **UN peacekeeping mission ends.** The United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) ended its operations in the country December 31 amid progress in establishing peace and stability in Timor-Leste. In a January 1 ceremony, Timor-Leste police officially took control of internal security operations from the UN troops, 13 years after the fledgling democracy gained independence. Most UNMIT staff had departed prior to the turnover. A small group will remain in the country in 2013 to oversee the liquidation of assets.
- **Group calls for government compensation for 1975–1999 victims.** The Timorese Human Rights Association called on the government December 4 to pass a Law of Reparations that would allow victims of violence and



Timor-Leste national police and UN Peacekeeping troops during a joint exercise in 2009. UN troops handed over security to Timor-Leste January 1, following the official end of UN peacekeeping operations. http://www.flickr.com/photos/un_photo/6096782149/in/set-72157626194186743



human rights abuses during the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999 to receive compensation from the state. Opposition member of parliament Antonio Bianco said the opposition would support the law, but it would need support from the majority coalition to be passed.

ASEAN

- **Brunei highlights priorities for ASEAN chairmanship.** Brunei's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 2 said the promotion of human rights and negotiation of a binding code of conduct for claimants in the South China Sea would top the country's agenda as 2013 ASEAN chair. Officials said Brunei would focus on promoting negotiation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade liberalization pact, boosting inter-ASEAN trade, and lowering the cost of doing business in the region.

MEKONG RIVER

- **Chinese court rejects the appeals of six Mekong murderers.** The High Court of Kunming on December 26 rejected the final appeal from six defendants convicted of murdering 13 Chinese sailors on the Mekong River in October 2011. The Chinese court sentenced four of the defendants to death in November 2012, and ordered them to pay \$960,000 in compensation. One of the convicts is Naw Kham, the leader of the largest illegal armed drug trafficking gang on the Mekong River who is suspected of robberies and armed attacks against Chinese vessels.



A rare Irrawaddy dolphin in the Mekong River. Despite Cambodian government efforts to conserve the dolphins, locals continue to use gill nets for fishing. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/crdt/5985972953/sizes/m/in/photostream/>

- **Cambodia battles to save rare dolphin in Mekong.** Despite the Cambodian government's efforts, gill nets continue to be used for fishing as the government struggles to educate locals about the dangers of the nets to rare Irrawaddy dolphins. The Cambodian government in August set up a dolphin protection zone from Kratie to the Lao border that bans gill nets and fish cages in order to prevent the deaths of adult Irrawaddy dolphins. Estimates of the dolphin population range from 85 to 180, according to a December 31 *Channel News Asia* report. ■

Looking Ahead

- **Screening of film about corruption in Indonesia.** Partnerships for International Strategies in Asia and the United States-Indonesia Society will screen the Indonesian film *Kita vs. Korupsi* (Us vs. Corruption) January 10. The film will be followed by a discussion with David Timberman, technical director for governance and conflict practice areas at Management Systems International, and Gerald Hyman, president of the CSIS Hills Program on Governance. The event will be held from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, Lindner Commons, 1957 E St., N.W., Room 602. Please [click here](#) to RSVP.
- **Discussion on fish and food security in Southeast Asia.** The Sumitro Chair in Southeast Asia Studies and the Global Food Security Project at CSIS will host a panel discussion January 14 on the importance of fish to Southeast Asia's food security. The panel will include the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Roger Pulwarty, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Barbara Best, and Anova Holding's Blane Olson. The event will take place from 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the CSIS B1C Conference Facility, 1800 K St., N.W. Please RSVP to the [Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies](#) by January 11.
- ***Freedom in the World 2013* report release.** Freedom House and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) will release the findings of the latest Freedom in the World survey January 16. Freedom House president David Kramer and CFR adjunct senior fellow Mark Lagon will make opening remarks before Freedom House's Arch Puddington provides an overview of the report. Stanford University's Larry Diamond and the Brookings Institution's Tamara Wittes will take part in a roundtable afterward. The event will be held from 1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. at CFR, 1777 F St., N.W. Please [click here](#) to RSVP.
- **Presentation on Taiwan's strategic role in Asia.** George Washington University's Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the Center for National Policy will host a discussion January 23 titled "Reassessing Taiwan's Strategic Position." Scott Bates, president of the Center for National Policy, will present his recommendations for Taiwan to redefine its military posture, resolve its disputes in the South China Sea, and launch a "democratic offensive" in Asia, followed by a discussion. The event will run from 12:30 p.m. to 2 p.m. at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, Lindner Commons, 1957 E St., N.W., Room 602. Please [click here](#) to RSVP.



- **Conference on the Asia Pacific in 2013.** CSIS will host a conference January 29 on what 2013 holds for the Asia Pacific in the realms of politics, security, and trade. Senior experts from CSIS's Freeman Chair in China Studies, Japan Chair, Korea Chair, Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies, Wadhwani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies, and William E. Simon Chair in Political Economy will offer their insights and analysis during a series of panel discussions. The conference will take place from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. at the CSIS B1 Conference Facility, 1800 K St., N.W. An invitation and complete agenda will be released shortly. ■

SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM THE CORNER OF 18TH & K STREETS

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