

Economy + Finance

Financial Secretary pledges to increase land supply: Financial Secretary John Tsang pledged an increase in land supply to cool the overheated residential property market. He unveiled plans to put up a total of 12 new property development sites for sale by June. Nine of the sites will be residential and are expected to provide 2,650 flats. Three commercial sites will also be offered. All will be sold through auction or tender. The financial secretary said he understood HK people's concerns about the overheated property market. Tsang said he would introduce further measures to reduce the risk of a property bubble – if necessary.

Fast-track work visas for fleeing Japan executives: More than 250 top-ranking professionals from Japan have been given HK work visas in just two weeks under an unprecedented fast-track approval system put in place following last month's devastating earthquake and tsunami. As well as the 270 approvals, the Immigration Department received a further 300-plus inquiries from professionals in Japan worried about radiation from the crippled Fukushima nuclear fuel plant and further earthquakes. Director of immigration Eric Chan said fast-track approval was necessary because professionals leaving Tokyo were eyeing other jurisdictions as potential alternatives. He said most of those given visas were senior managers of multinational companies in Japan, mainly in the financial sector.

Tourism board pins down big spenders: The Tourism Board made a survey to 10,000 mainlanders at border checkpoints. Of the big spenders, 60 per cent said they bought high-end goods such as handbags, 40 per cent went after watches and 30 per cent bought gold accessories. Total spending in the city by tourists from around the globe rose 32.7 per cent from 2009 to a record high of HK\$209.98 billion. Sixty-one per cent of tourist spending went to shopping.

Jobless rate falls to 3.4pc: HK's jobless rate continued to drop in the January-March quarter on the back of a stronger economy. The unemployment rate for the period between January and March was 3.4 per cent, lowest jobless rate since the global financial crisis of September 2008. More jobs were created in the postal, courier service, wholesale, and cleaning sectors in the January to March quarter.

Rising rent and food prices push annual inflation up to 4.6pc: Surging residential rents along with rising prices for seafood and cigarette prices have pushed the city's price levels to a new peak, and natural disasters have made matters worse. Overall, consumer prices in March were 4.6 per cent higher than a year ago, larger than the year-on-year increase in February of 3.7 per cent. Rents for private housing rose 4.9 per cent in March from a year ago.

Domestic politics

Rita Lau leaves vacuum at top of government: The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau has been left with a succession dilemma by the abrupt resignation, because of ill health, of its secretary, Rita Lau. It is a difficult time, with the bureau embroiled in several controversial and far-reaching policy issues while the clock ticks towards the end of the administration's term. At the top of the list of challenges is the Competition Bill legislation. Others include a consumer protection law, development of the new cruise terminal and reform of RTHK. The government is left with limited choices in picking a capable minister to take on the bureau's complicated schedule. Undersecretary Greg So appears the obvious choice, but business figures and lawmakers have expressed doubts about his ability to fill Lau's shoes.

July 1 march to target property prices and Chief Executive: "Toppling property hegemony" will be one of nine themes of this year's July 1 democracy march, along with a demand for Chief Executive Donald Tsang to step down. Tapping public concern over rising property prices and growing discontent with developers, the organisers plan to have so-called victims of the "hegemony" lead the march. The Civil Human Rights Front for the first time is calling on the chief executive to quit to take responsibility for government failures. Property prices have surged in the past year and the power of developers has been widely criticised. The Civil Human Rights Front will urge the government to build more public housing and reform the tax system to narrow the wealth gap.

Controversial budget approved without any fireworks: Financial Secretary John Tsang's controversial budget easily secured approval in the Legislative Council, clearing the way for the government to give all permanent residents a HK\$6,000 cash handout. It was passed by 33 votes to 19, with one abstention. All 16 amendments tabled by the pan-democrats were voted down.

Relations HK - Mainland China

Hundreds march in support of detained artist Ai Weiwei: Hundreds of protesters marched through Kowloon in support of artist Ai Weiwei, who was detained by mainland authorities early this month. Among the protesters was the young artist known as Chin Tangerine, who is wanted by police for spraying "Who's Afraid of Ai Wei Wei" stencil graffiti around the city recently. "This isn't about artists or politicians, it's about everyone," she said. "HK is part of China, but because we have a fair judicial system and the right to freedom of speech, it's our responsibility to speak out about what happened to Ai Weiwei." March organisers said 2,000 people took part, a turnout that exceeded their expectations.

International affairs

Medvedev makes landmark visit: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev met Chief Executive Donald Tsang at Government House on April 17 as part of the first visit to HK by a major foreign head of state in more than a decade. Growing bilateral investment and trade as well as possible crime and corruption co-operation are expected to be on the agenda in talks. HK officials have been quietly expanding ties with eastern European nations generally, highlighted by Tsang's visit to Moscow last August. HK government figures show that since 2006, annual bilateral trade has grown by an average 25 per cent. Last year, it surged by more than 60 per cent compared to 2009, reaching US\$2.5 billion. Medvedev said HK was a model for Moscow. "HK's experience is extremely indicative for us. We must lift excessive administrative barriers." Medvedev told Chief Executive Donald Tsang.

Transborder affairs

HK to tighten checks on mainland mums: HK is to tighten up the scrutiny of certificates which mainland mothers-to-be need in order to give birth in the city's hospitals as the controversy continues over pressure on maternity units. In a related move, health chiefs will also set up a working group to carry out audits of all obstetric units to determine the number of births the city can handle each year. Amid stretched maternity services, public hospitals have banned mainlanders from giving birth here until the end of the year. Health officials did not say how they will ensure unscrupulous doctors and dodgy agencies on the mainland cannot issue certificates. The two moves are among a seven-point initiative put forward by the Food and Health Bureau to limit the number of mainland women giving birth in the city. A working group will meet next month to set a quota for births in the city next year, after clinical audits on the capacity of each hospital.

Judge's ruling threatens work on delta bridge: The multibillion-dollar bridge being built across the Pearl River estuary might be delayed for months after a court quashed the environmental chief's decision to approve key elements of the HK section. Mr. Justice Joseph Fok ruled that the absence of a separate analysis of likely environmental conditions without the projects meant the impact assessment reports approved by the director of environmental protection in 2009 did not meet the required standard. "Once the adverse environmental impacts of the projects are properly assessed and presented in compliant environmental impact assessment reports, those will be the decisions for the director and not for the court." Fok said. The Environmental Protection Department said it was seeking legal advice. But whether it appeals or complies with the ruling, it will delay the start of work on the HK section of the bridge for which the mainland has already begun building the main span.

HK clinic beats bureaucracy to open in Guangzhou: Nearly three years after the cross-border free trade pact opened the way to wholly-owned HK clinics on the mainland without any minimum investment requirement, the first one has finally opened in Guangzhou. Dr Jay Kay, who works at the clinic, said dealing with rules and regulations on the mainland was a challenging process. He also expects cultural differences to present more challenges. The Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (Cepa) allows HK doctors to set up clinics and specialists with a required level of experience to run solo practices in Guangdong without sitting the mainland's professional examination.

Legal affairs and human rights

100,000 tipped for HK under new abode policy: A new policy making it easier for the grown-up mainland offspring of Hongkongers to emigrate to the city goes into force on April 1 after years of debate and anguish for split families. About 160,000 mainlanders were eligible, but no more than 100,000 were expected to move to the city, a person familiar with the policy said. The new immigration policy ends a decade-long saga over the right of abode, and the city is preparing for this group to be a new workforce to ease mounting demand in the construction and catering industries. Under the new arrangement, the grown-up children of Hongkongers born on the mainland who were under 14 when their natural father or mother obtained a HK identity card, before November 2001, will be eligible for right of abode.

More disputes predicted with minimum wage law: More disputes between bosses and workers over pay issues are expected with the minimum wage law about to go into force. Academics say arguments are likely to be more frequent after enforcement of the new labour law from May 1, as the city does not have standard working hours or established communication channels between employers and employees. Dr Wong Hung, an assistant professor of social work at Chinese University, said the absence of laws covering paid meal breaks and rest days under the minimum wage law guaranteed there would be disputes.

Health

Public hospital system 'on brink of collapse' amid labour shortage: Public hospital staff repeated their call for standard working hours, warning the public health system was "on the brink of collapse" because of manpower shortages. The shortage of doctors and nurses in public hospitals was seriously undermining service quality, with some doctors only able to give patients an average of three minutes. Dr Ernie Lo, a spokesman for the Frontline Doctors' Union, urged the government to set standard working hours to retain staff. He said doctors in many developed economies worked about 44 hours a week, compared with 50 in HK. In more extreme cases, they put in 62 hours a week. Health-care sector legislator Joseph Lee said the public medical sector was short of nurses. "Overseas, a nurse takes care of four to six patients. In HK, the ratio is one to ten," he said.

HK urged to lead fight against superbugs: A leading European specialist in the global fight against superbugs called on HK to use its unique experience in fighting bird flu and Sars to lead Asia's campaign against the misuse of antibiotics. "HK has been very successful in the containment of H5N1 and [severe acute respiratory syndrome]. I'm sure you will be equally successful in the containment of antibiotic resistance," said Herman Goossens, a Belgian professor who is visiting the city to raise awareness about superbugs. Goossens warned that, with the advance of superbugs like NDM-1, most antibiotics could become useless within five years if steps were not taken to curb their over- and misuse.

Environment

Daya Bay in nuclear safety success: The Daya Bay nuclear plant in Guangdong has won top marks in a safety competition organised by Electricite de France - a leading Paris-based nuclear energy company. The plant earned the highest number of top rankings in the 2010 Safety Challenge Competition, rating No 1 in the categories of capacity, industrial safety, nuclear safety and radiation protection, Xinhua reported. Daya Bay nuclear plant is only about 50 kilometres from HK. To allay public concerns, the HK government plans to hold a nuclear emergency drill early next year, the first such drill since 2001.

Caesium-137 detected in air at King's Park: The Observatory has detected for the first time the radioactive Caesium-137 in HK air. The substance was detected in the air sample in King's Park. The Observatory said it was a minuscule amount, 37 million times less than the level when precautions needed to be taken. In the past few weeks, only iodine-131 from the damaged Fukushima nuclear plant was detected in the air here. Professor Lee Chack-fan, an expert in earthquake risk management at the University of HK, said it was unlikely the minute concentration of the radioactive substances would reach a dangerous level.

Culture and education

It's class warfare in battle to cut schools down to size: All schools are equal under a government plan to reduce classes, but some are more equal than others. These are the elite schools. Their alumni are often wealthy donors and powerful people, so it is much more difficult for the government to encourage them to join the class-reduction plan. Officials want about 200 secondary schools to volunteer to cut a secondary-one class as part of government efforts to cut costs because of falling birth rates. But alumni of Wah Yan College and King's College are leading the rebellion, and many parents who want to enrol their children in such elite schools do not want them to cut classes. Alumni of King's College are considering launching a judicial review of the school's decision to join the scheme.

Macau

Another handout for Macau residents: Macau Chief Executive Dr Fernando Chui announced the handout - 3,000 patacas for permanent residents and 1,800 for non-permanent residents, - the fifth such bonus since the casino town began splashing the cash in 2008. It will cost the Macau government 1.7 billion patacas. He said with a budget surplus of 41.8 billion patacas, the government had a duty to help ease the pain of high inflation. Chu also announced the introduction of a special stamp duty to rein in property speculation.

Varia

Gap between rich and poor gets even wider, figures show: HK's wealth gap continued to widen last year, the latest government statistics reveal. The average household income of the top-earning 10 per cent of the population was about HK\$104,900 a month, up from HK\$97,600 in 2009, according to the Census and Statistics Department. But the lowest-earning 10 per cent of households received just HK\$2,500 per month, the same as they did two years ago. Statistics since 2004 show that while the incomes of the city's poorest have slowly declined, the wealthiest have seen their earnings grow by about 20 per cent.

Press articles related to Switzerland and Swiss matters

Portrait of a genius as the Einstein show comes to town (SCMP, 18th April 2011): For more than four months from today (18th April), some 200 of the genius' personal possessions and writings from the museum in Berne will be on display at the HK Science Museum. The opening kicks off an array of programmes in the city, including public lectures by prominent scientists, academic conferences, music workshops and concerts related to the father of modern physics. HK is the third stop on the exhibition's tour of China. The exhibition attracted 400,000 visitors in Beijing and Guangzhou, and may go on to other Chinese cities. The HK

exhibition is the largest to date, with displays added to explain the scientific achievements of the 1921 Nobel physics laureate, such as his theory of relativity. The exhibition is organised by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to celebrate 60 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

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