

Economy + Finance

HK actively seeking to join Asian infrastructure bank, says financial secretary: Financial Secretary John Tsang said: "The government will actively pursue [membership of] the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. With our strengths in financial and professional services, we can contribute to the country as well as create opportunities for HK." The new institution, with a capital target of US\$100 billion, will aim to promote infrastructure development in regional states by providing loans. Some see the bank as potentially rivalling the US-led World Bank and Japan-led Asian Development Bank, although China has denied any such intentions.

Financial Secretary expects 'rainy days' after US Fed cools talk of interest rate hike: HK's economy would have its share of "rainy days" over the next financial year, the city's finance chief said, after comments by the US Federal Reserve cooled expectations of an early hike in interest rates. Financial Secretary John Tsang said the government would monitor the time and pace of any rate rise in the US and its impact on both the global and the city's economy.

HK retail sales plunge in biggest drop since 2003 Sars epidemic: A slump of 14.6 per cent in retail sales ahead of the Lunar New Year is the worst since a 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, putting businesses and concern groups at loggerheads over whether to curb the inflow of mainland visitors. Sales in January fell to HK\$46.6 billion from a year ago, the Census and Statistics Department said. It is the first decline in any January since 2007.

Passengers to pay HK\$180 departure fee for new HK runway; Legco in cold over funding: The construction funding of a multibillion-dollar third airport runway is set to bypass legislative scrutiny under a financing plan that includes levying surcharges on passengers and airlines. Adopting a "user pays" principle, the plan circumvents the need for vetting on the Legislative Council's Finance Committee, raising concerns from lawmakers about the risks of reduced accountability. Upon its planned completion in 2023, the runway will allow Chek Lap Kok airport to serve 30 million more passengers a year. The latest budget is set at HK\$141.5 billion.

Number of HK multi-millionaires up 14 pc (and one in 10 wants to leave): The number of Hongkongers with liquid assets of HK\$10 million or more was up 14 per cent to 56,000 last year, a survey has found. But the study also showed that about one in 10 of them wanted to emigrate. It found that the number of millionaires, defined as having HK\$1 million or more in liquid assets, such as stocks and bonds, went down slightly from 732,000 to 701,000. It means that 12 per cent of the city's adult population are millionaires. In addition, the survey found that 11 per cent of multimillionaires were considering emigrating in the next five years. Almost 40 per cent were dissatisfied with HK's education system, while 24 per cent were not happy with their living environment.

Domestic politics:

HK's political reform package will be unveiled next month, says Carrie Lam: A concrete political reform package will be unveiled next month, the city's No 2 official said, in the face of a fresh judicial review asking the High Court to order that the government restart the latest consultation. "The package must be voted on before the Legislative Council's summer recess, no matter what," said Carrie Lam.

Crunch time for Carrie Lam on HK's 2017 political reform package: After a second public consultation on the 2017 chief executive poll ended on March 7, Chief Secretary Carrie Lam faces the unenviable task of finding a model to win over pan-democratic lawmakers. The pan-democrats vowed to deny any reform based on Beijing's framework the two-thirds majority it needs, and the government will have to win over at least four of the camp's 27 members.

Justice secretary and pan-democrat leader wary of political reform referendum: The justice chief Rimsky Yuen poured cold water on an academic's idea of holding a public vote on political reform, saying HK law has no provision for a referendum. Civic Party leader Alan Leong also poured cold water on the referendum idea, although his pan-democratic colleagues were still debating it. He pointed out that 700,000 people voted in an unofficial poll last year, with the majority agreeing that any electoral system that did not meet international standards should be rejected.

Beijing official scraps HK trip after pan-democrats vow to veto reform proposal: A much-anticipated visit by a mainland official to HK next month is now off the table after he learned that 27 pan-democrats had signed a joint statement vowing to vote down the government's proposals for electoral reform. The trip by Basic Law Committee chairman Li Fei was expected to provide an opportunity for talks on political reform with pan-democrats for the first time since the Occupy protests ended in December. A HK official said that Li had made the decision a day after the pan-democrats issued their joint statement.

C.Y. Leung under fire over universal suffrage claims at question and answer session: The pan-democrats waged open warfare against Leung Chun-ying on March 26, making it clearer than ever there will be no compromise over universal suffrage. A day after the chief executive fired the opening volley by urging voters to punish opposition lawmakers in next year's Legislative Council election, they confronted him with slogans, banners and yellow umbrellas as he entered the chamber for a highly charged question-and-answer session. During the meeting, Leung said all universal suffrage systems in the world can be regarded as "genuine" if they are designed in accordance with the law. However, pan-democrats ridiculed Leung for "failing in elementary political theory", adding that his remarks could make HK a "laughing stock".

Protests against parallel-traders put pressure on HK government to curb mainland visitors: Three rounds of scuffles between police, protesters against cross-border trading and border residents since last month have put fresh pressure on the government to review the policy of allowing individual visits from the mainland. The city received 60.8 million visitors last year, 47.2 million from the mainland. Professor Lui Tai-lok, who chairs the SynergyNet think tank, says the government must address the issue regardless of opposition from the retail industry.

Beijing pledges to adjust entry rules to HK after mainland tourist 'saturation': Schemes that make it easy for mainlanders to visit the city will soon be changed "to better suit HK's situation", a Beijing official overseeing local affairs pledged in the wake of violent protests against cross-border traders. Set to be refined are an individual visit scheme that lets residents of 49 cities travel to HK without joining tour groups, and multiple-entry permits that grant two million permanent Shenzhen residents countless trips, according to HK and Macau Affairs Office deputy director Zhou Bo.

Relations HK - Mainland China

'One country, two systems' for HK must comply with China constitution, says Li Keqiang: The implementation of the "one country, two systems" principle must strictly comply with the Chinese constitution and the Basic Law, Premier Li Keqiang said at the opening of the annual National People's Congress in Beijing. Li also restated the promise of "HK people governing HK" as well as the city's "high degree of autonomy" in his concluding remarks. Li added that the central government would "ensure that the mainland and the two regions (HK and Macao) develop more exchange and cooperation in all fields, and that the two regions continue to play their special roles in the country's reform, opening up, and modernisation."

No need for promises of more political reform, says top Beijing official: There is no need for Beijing to promise that the election model for the chief executive could be amended beyond 2017 as this is already guaranteed by the Basic Law, a mainland official on legal affairs has said. Zhang Rongshun, vice-chairman of the Legislative Affairs Commission of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), also said he was optimistic about the prospects of reform given its wide support in HK.

International relations

UK lawmakers push London to get tough with China over HK autonomy: London should step up pressure on Beijing and take a tougher stance in defence of HK autonomy, a group of British lawmakers studying the city's affairs concluded in a report published on March 6. The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, which launched the inquiry to howls of protest from Beijing last year, also acknowledges that Hongkongers' calls for greater democracy are "more than an abstract concern". And it rejects the idea that Beijing's framework for the 2017 chief executive poll – under which the public could from choose two or three candidates picked by a nominating committee – would in "any meaningful sense" offer "genuine choice" to voters.

Legal affairs and human rights

HK police told to 'be stricter over public gatherings of at least three people': All police officers are to enforce laws governing public order "more strictly" to prevent any "suspicious" gathering of at least three people from turning into a protest, according to a new guideline from the top cited by multiple police sources. It is understood that a post-Occupy Central style of protest in Mong Kok, along with occasionally chaotic gatherings against parallel-goods traders since last month, are reasons behind the police bosses' stress on enforcing the Public Order Ordinance.

Extremism

Top officials warn of possible international terrorist threats to HK: Two of HK's top officials have warned of the threat posed by international terrorism as Muslim groups in the city express concern over leaflets circulating which bear a logo associated with the extremist Islamic State. Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying took the unusual step of highlighting recent attacks overseas, warning that HK - as an open, international city - should not take the threat of terrorism lightly. Police Commissioner Andy Tsang added that police had stepped up anti-terrorism work in recent years, citing the establishment of a Counter Terrorism Response Unit and a Critical Infrastructure Security Coordination Centre. Cyberterrorism was an emerging issue to pay attention to, Tsang said.

Health

HK's doctor shortage will not ease until 2020: The government may further increase the number of openings in the city's two medical schools to meet the long-term demand for doctors after a new study found that the chronic shortage of medics would not begin to ease until 2020, the health minister Dr Ko Wing-man told the South China Morning Post. Ko's comments come as a study by the University of HK, commissioned by the government to assess the demand for health professionals, showed that a shortage would persist "over the years" despite measures to retain and attract talent.

Doctors fear for HK insurance scheme's financial health: Half of doctors regard the government's proposed voluntary health insurance scheme as financially unsustainable, according to a survey. The Medical Association, which has over 10,000 members, conducted the survey in January to try to better understand members' views on the scheme. The scheme aims to encourage more Hongkongers to buy health insurance and switch to private doctors, easing the burden on heavily subsidised and crowded public healthcare.

HK anti-smoking watchdog calls for total ban on electronic cigarettes: The government said it would consider a total ban on electronic cigarettes after the city's anti-smoking watchdog called for a ban on the

"personal vaporisers". Secretary for Food and Health Dr Ko Wing-man said the government was "inclined to agree" with the council's request due to some proven health risks. Professor Daniel Ho Sai-yin, of HKU's department of community medicine, said new findings about harmful ingredients in e-cigarettes kept emerging.

Environment

HK\$9b plan to keep HK taps running in a drought: A HK\$9.3 billion project to convert seawater into tap water is being rolled out to offset the risk of a severe drought in the Pearl River Delta drying up the city's main water source - Guangdong's East River, or Dongjiang. A 10-hectare site on Joss House Bay, southeast of Tseung Kwan O, has been earmarked for the desalination plant. After completion of a first stage in 2020, it would be able to meet about five per cent of HK's needs - some 135,000 cubic metres of water a day. Eventually that output could be doubled.

HK urged to use more renewables in future energy plans: HK should give up the idea of generating more power using natural gas and increase the use of local and imported renewables in its energy mix, green group WWF-HK has proposed. By increasing the share of local renewables to 30 per cent of the fuel mix, and imported renewables from the mainland to 50 per cent, the city can save at least HK\$12 billion by 2050. Such a change would also slash carbon emissions by 92 per cent, the group said.

Tough new law may make HK cleaner overnight, think tank researcher says: The city has not seen any policy intervention with the power of producing "overnight" improvements in air quality for more than 25 years, according to a think tank researcher. But an upcoming mandate ordering ships to use cleaner fuel while stopping by in HK was likely to be the "second time" this would happen since 1990, said Simon Ng, chief research officer at Civic Exchange.

City's background radiation levels 'astounding', says former top official: "Astounding" levels of background radiation measured in some of the city's poorly ventilated urban areas were almost a third higher than the world average, a former environmental protection official has revealed. Dr Mamie Lau, who retired as principal officer last year, measured background radiation with a Geiger counter at around a dozen points across the city last year. The source was likely to be granite building materials including some concretes which contain traces of gamma radiation-emitting minerals such as radon, uranium and thorium. Although Lau said levels were not life-threatening, constant exposure in small doses could have cumulative effects.

Culture and education

HK showcase arts fairs attract multimillion dollar sales: Galleries showing at Art Basel, which closed on March 17, and at the first edition of satellite fair Art Central, which closed on March 16, reported satisfactory sales. Multimillion US dollar artworks by modern period masters such as Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall at Art Basel were still waiting for collectors to take them home, but works with mid-market prices selling at or under six-digit figures were immensely popular. Dealers were glad to see a more international crowd from across Asia-Pacific and Europe, instead of a market dominated by buyers from mainland China, where spending on luxury goods has slumped.

National education for new HK teachers gets thumbs down all round: Executive Council member Fanny Law has come under criticism from political allies and pan-democrats alike for suggesting that new teaching recruits be put through mainland training in national education. Fears of brainwashing pupils were behind protests in 2012 that forced Leung, then at the start of his term, to scrap plans to teach national education in schools.

Defend HK's academic freedom, petition urges, in wake of political pressure: About 500 politicians, academics and journalists have signed a petition urging Hongkongers to defend academic freedom following recent alleged political pressure on the University of HK. They expressed deep concern about a recent increase in threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The threat came in the form of "totally unwarranted personal attacks, particularly in left-wing media" on the competence and integrity of prominent academics. They also said there was increasing interference in the choice of academic teaching materials, and growing perceptions of political bias and improper influence on the appointment of university officers and members of governing bodies.

Macau

Macau February casino revenue halves on lacklustre Lunar New Year: February casino revenue in Macau halved from a year ago, the biggest drop on record and the ninth straight month of decline, despite the Lunar New Year holiday, a peak period in which mainland gamblers usually show up in spades. Gross gaming revenue sank 48.6 per cent to 19.54 billion patacas, the largest drop in the five years the city's Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau has collected data. It is the longest slump for the world's largest gambling enclave as the anti-corruption drive and visa changes keep away high rollers while smoking restrictions on mass floors deter casual bettors.

Macau leader Fernando Chui vows to strengthen casino regulation: Macau should steel itself for a more regulated gambling industry, the city's leader has said at a time when operators are facing the double challenge of an unprecedented decline in business and the government's review of casino licences, starting this year. In his policy address, Chief Executive Dr Fernando Chui also urged casinos, the mainstay of the local economy, to focus more on non-gaming businesses in an apparent response to Beijing's repeated demands for diversification.

Varia

HK ranked 70th in world for quality of living - way behind rival Singapore: HK offers the best quality of living among cities in China, but falls behind main competitor Singapore and major Japanese centres, according to a

survey. HK ranked 70th - one place higher than last year - among 230 cities assessed in an annual quality of living survey by consulting firm Mercer. Vienna tops the rankings, which are dominated by European cities. Zurich, Auckland and Munich complete the top four. Connie Leung, a consultant at Mercer, said quality of living in HK remained at a relatively good standard compared to most other nearby cities in the region, but "the air pollution and road traffic in its major CBD areas continue to be a concern".

HK's new civil servants' retirement age increased by five years: New recruits to the civil service hired after June 1 this year will have to stay in work for five more years before they can retire. The new retirement age will be 65 for general civil servants and 60 for members of disciplined services such as the police. The retirement age for both groups is currently 60 and 55 respectively. The measure is part of a government population strategy aimed at coping with the ageing population and shrinking workforce.

Press articles related to Switzerland and Swiss matters

Solar-powered plane arrives in China ahead of toughest leg in round-the-world flight (SCMP, March 31): A trailblazing solar-powered plane, seeking to complete the world's first round-the-world journey using just the power of the sun, touched down in Chongqing early today. The plane, flown alternately by two Swiss pilots Bertrand Piccard and Andre Borschberg, aims to promote renewable energy use. It flies next to the eastern Chinese city of Nanjing before heading to Hawaii on its five-month trip. After Nanjing, the pilots face the most daunting leg of the journey: a cross-Pacific flight to Hawaii where the plane must fly non-stop day and night for five days – something that has never been done in the history of aviation.

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