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Economy + Finance

HK visitor numbers slide for a third month, dashing hopes for a near-term recovery (SCMP, Dec 1): Visitors to HK declined for the third month in a row in October, albeit at a slower pace, with mainland tourists leading the drop, according to visitor numbers released by the Tourism Board. The latest figures pour cold water on hopes that there will be a turnaround this year. Visitors from the mainland fell 3.5 per cent year-on-year in October. But there were some silver linings in the latest statistics, as the short and long-haul tourist markets saw increases of 0.4 and 3.2 per cent respectively.
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HK financial secretary warns of economic instability and uncertainty in 2017 (SCMP, Dec. 5): Financial Secretary John Tsang warned HK of economic instability next year, arising from financial uncertainty in the United States, China, Europe and Japan. He told the Legislative Council's financial affairs panel that the city's growth will depend on domestic consumption, after a narrowing decline of retail sales, at 2.9 per cent in October, helped by better local consumer sentiment. Strong domestic consumption should allow HK to maintain what is considered full employment at the current rate of 3.4 per cent. Tsang cited a stronger but uncertain US economy, which could put pressure on currencies of emerging markets, leading to capital outflows. He was also worried about trade protectionism which could put more pressure on emerging markets that rely on developed markets for export growth.
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New HK tourism law set to target shady operators (SCMP, Dec. 8): HK is finally moving ahead with legislation to set up a new regulatory body with the power to crack down on unscrupulous business practices by tour guides and agencies which have long been blamed for tarnishing the city's image and reducing visitor numbers. In addition to forming a new Travel Industry Authority, the draft legislation proposes harsher penalties beyond the current fines or licence suspensions for offenders, with tour guides and operators having to bear criminal liability for cases involving serious misconduct. Commissioner for Tourism Cathy Chu expressed hope that the new law would help restore the city's reputation as a shopping paradise by eradicating much-criticised practices such as "coerced shopping" – where mainland visitors on cheap city tours are forced to shop in designated stores which pay commission to guides and agencies.
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HK pay increases fall as fewer employers seek to boost workforce, survey finds (SCMP, Dec. 12): Annual pay increases are on the decline and fewer HK employers are expected to increase their workforce in 2017, according to consulting firm Mercer. The company's Total Remuneration Survey, which collated salary and compensation data from more than 400 jobs across all industries, estimated HK workers would receive a 4.2 per cent pay rise next year – a 0.3 per cent decline from 2016 increases. Meanwhile, fewer employers indicated an intention to hire more people in 2017, compared to last year, owing to changing business models and the restructuring of certain industries.

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HK on track with China's bond connect plan, HKMA says (SCMP, Dec. 20): HK is in preliminary talks with mainland authorities in a potential bond market connect scheme to deepen the link between the two sides after the launch of the Shenzhen-HK stock connect plan, the city's de facto central bank chief Norman Chan said. Chan said the talks with the mainland's authorities were preliminary as no time frame and exact details have been decided, but he said HK can play a role in connecting foreign investors with the mainland's bond market. Separately, in a meeting with vice premier Ma Kai, Chan said the top official reassured HK's status as an international financial centre and offshore renminbi business hub. Chan cited Ma as saying that the mainland remains committed to internationalising its currency gradually, but there will be challenges during the process. Ma also said that the mainland will not depreciate its currency to spur exports, according to Chan.

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Bargain hunters rush to HK, but Christmas shopping frenzy fizzles out (SCMP, Dec. 28): Bargain-hunting tourists flocked to the city over the Christmas period as mainland visitor numbers jumped 18 per cent year on year during the four-day holiday. But despite the overall rise, tourists spent far less than a few years ago. Despite the festive rush retailers said December sales were down on last year, as mainland shoppers were spending less on big-ticket items. Tourism sector lawmaker Yiu Si-wing said the recent depreciation of the Chinese yuan had prompted mainland visitors to be more careful with their cash. "They are now spending their own money. Their mindset has totally changed from the days when luxuries were bought for gift-giving," he said.

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HK to top fiscal 2016 housing supply by 8 per cent (SCMP, Dec. 30): The Hong Kong government is expected to have released enough private housing land to build 19,460 new flats before the end of the fiscal year ending March 31 – the highest level since the city resumed land sales in 2010. Secretary for Development Paul Chan said with land expected to be put up for sale in the fourth quarter of the current year, the annual total would exceed its private housing target of 18,000 units by 8 per cent in the 2016-17 year. Defending recent government sites sold for shockingly high prices, Chan said HK is a free market. "There is no guarantee developers winning government sites are bound to make a profit. Home buyers shouldn't let individual land sale results affect their buying decisions," he said.

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Domestic politics

Appeal judges uphold localist pair's dismissal from HK's Legislative Council (SCMP, Dec. 1): The two pro-independence lawmakers who were kicked out of HK's legislature for failing to take their oaths properly lost their appeal against disqualification on Nov. 30. In quashing the appeal by Sixtus Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching, who swore allegiance to a "HK nation" when taking their oaths last month, the three Court of Appeal judges unanimously confirmed the applicability of Beijing's "true and proper" interpretation of the Basic Law. "[The Basic Law] must mean that taking the oath is a prerequisite and precondition to the assumption of office," the judgment read. "All this is now put beyond doubt by the interpretation." The ruling is a political victory for both the HK and Beijing governments, which have stepped up their rhetoric against advocates of HK's independence from China since the pair were elected in September.

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HK government seeks to ban four more pro-democracy legislators (SCMP, Dec. 3): Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying launched an all-out legal offensive against the pro-democracy camp, moving to have four more of its lawmakers (Leung Kwok-hung, Nathan Law, Edward Yiu and Lau Siu-lai) disqualified over improper oath-taking. His latest targets accused Leung of "staging a coup" to overturn election results and "score" with Beijing for a possible second term, but the justice minister insisted the bid to have them kicked out of the Legislative Council was "free of political consideration". Their supporters marched from Legco to the Chief Executive's Office to protest, while civic groups are planning a bigger rally on New Year's Day.

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Legco announces two seats left vacant by disqualified localists, paving way for by-election (SCMP, Dec. 5): The Legislative Council has gazetted that two seats have been left vacant by disqualified lawmakers Sixtus Baggio Leung and Yau Wai-ching. A by-election will now take place to fill the two vacancies. The exact date is not known, but the polls are usually held within six months of such announcements.

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Amid uproar, HK government backs down after barring questions from lawmakers facing review (SCMP, Dec. 6): Confusion and conflicting stances emerged at the highest levels of HK's government as the city's finance minister refused to take questions in the legislature from four opposition lawmakers facing disqualification for improper oath-taking, only to back down after his bosses decided on a complete U-turn. Financial Secretary John Tsang stunned a Legislative Council panel meeting by announcing that he would not answer questions from Leung Kwok-hung, Nathan Law, Edward Yiu and Lau Siu-lai, citing advice from government lawyers to doubt their status as legislators. That drew objections and concerns from across the political spectrum, as the High Court had not even started hearing the government's case to have the four booted out of Legco. However, the government reversed its stance in the afternoon when even its allies in the legislature questioned the justification for shunning the four.

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HK leader CY Leung rebukes his finance chief for failing to consult him in lawmakers snub (SCMP, Dec. 7): Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying has rebuked HK's finance minister for failing to consult him and going his own way in snubbing four opposition lawmakers whom the government is trying to have removed from the legislature, a source told the Post. The growing rift between Leung and John Tsang, who are widely expected to face off in the city's leadership race next March, has further exposed the internal strife at the highest levels of government. Leung told the media that Tsang had been wrong to refuse to answer questions in the Legislative Council from the four lawmakers the government is taking to court to have them disqualified for improper oath-taking. But contradicting Leung's public disapproval of Tsang's conduct, a letter by Chief Secretary Carrie Lam to Legco stated that it was "the government's consistent position" not to entertain questions from lawmakers whose oaths had been called into question. The suggestion was that Tsang had merely followed official policy, until a change was decided after the fact. According to a second government source, the financial secretary's office had been clear in asking the Department of Justice whether Tsang should answer the four lawmakers' questions, given the legal proceedings against them, and he had an understanding that he should not.

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HK in shock as Chief Executive CY Leung decides not to seek re-election (SCMP, Dec. 10): HK's embattled leader left the city stunned and threw next year's chief executive election wide open by announcing that he would not seek a second term to spare his family "unbearable pressure". The chief executive, considered a highly polarising figure who has struggled to overcome his constantly low popularity ratings, was at pains to clarify that his decision was not due to any lack of endorsement from Beijing. Beijing backed that claim in a statement issued shortly after the announcement, with the HK and Macau Affairs Office saying it deeply regretted Leung's decision. Ray Yep, a political scientist at City University, said the announcement, which came two days ahead of polls for the Election Committee, might be due to Beijing's intention to sway the election of the 1,200-member body that will pick the next chief executive. The pan-democratic camp reacted with excitement that its arch-enemy was no longer in the leadership race, but also vowed to "remain vigilant".

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Pro-democracy camp takes record quarter of seats on Election Committee that will choose HK's leader (SCMP, Dec. 12): The city's democratic camp has seized a record quarter of the seats in the committee that will go on to pick HK's next leader in March. A group led by Occupy Central co-founders has taken all the seats in the higher education subsector, one of six subsectors in which pro-democracy candidates won all the seats. Pan-democratic candidates also won landslide victories in the accountancy and architectural subsectors, and secured at least half of the seats in the engineering and medical subsectors. Clean sweeps were seen in the legal, education, higher education, health services, IT and welfare subsectors. But business sectors such as hotels, tourism and commerce continued to be dominated by pro-establishment forces and tycoons. Pan-democrats seized 326 of the 1,194 seats on the committee. A record turnout of 46 per cent and a record number of voters at 107,000 out of a possible 230,000 cast their ballots to fill 733 seats on the 1,194-member committee. The remaining 461 seats have either been returned uncontested or are held by ex officio members such as lawmakers in the Legislative Council.

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HK Financial Secretary Tsang resigns, paving way for tilt at city's top job (SCMP, Dec. 13): HK's finance minister resigned but stopped short of confirming his bid for the city's top job, as the democratic camp won enough votes to become a kingmaker on the committee that will pick the next chief executive in March. "I shall think through this in the coming days and make an announcement once ready," was all John Tsang would say about his widely expected candidacy, days after his boss, Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, made the shock announcement that he would not seek a second term due to family reasons. While he has yet to throw his hat into the ring, Tsang's move was seen as pre-empting Chief Secretary Carrie Lam, who made a U-turn in announcing she would "reconsider" joining the race because of the "drastic change" caused by Leung bowing out.

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Regina Ip revives divisive issues, including Article 23, as she enters HK chief executive race (SCMP, Dec. 16): Lawmaker and former minister Regina Ip announced her intention to revive two of HK's most contentious political issues – democratic reform and national security legislation – as she launched her campaign for the city's top job with plans to tackle housing, social and economic problems. Her manifesto sporting the slogan "Win Back HK" fired a broadside at potential election rival Financial Secretary John Tsang, accusing the government of being "over-conservative in public finance, and falling short of being a leader in economic development". Ip's election platform covered nine major areas, but it was the last one that caught the most attention – relaunching the political reform process to enable the election of the city's leader by universal suffrage within the rigid framework set by Beijing – as well as the shelved national security legislation that once forced her to quit the government and leave HK.

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HK activist banned from mainland for 23 years now free to enter (SCMP, Dec. 19): A prominent HK democracy campaigner whose organisation has long been branded as subversive by Beijing has become the first barred activist to set foot on mainland soil after the lifting of a decades-old travel ban. Richard Tsoi, vice-chairman of the HK Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, travelled to Guangzhou, where his permit was cancelled by the authorities in August 1993 after a tour with Han Dongfang, an advocate for workers' rights on the mainland. It was the first time he had set foot on mainland soil since then. The first hint that the travel ban on pan-democrats would be lifted came from Zhang Dejiang, head of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, when he met lawmakers during a visit to HK in May. The first unofficial confirmation came from Robert Chow, a vocal critic of the pan-democrats, when he visited Beijing, on November 30.

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Wang Yi heaps praise on CY Leung as a patriot on his final duty visit to Beijing (SCMP, Dec. 22): HK leader Leung Chun-ying kicked off his final duty visit to Beijing with a call on two ministers who affirmed the city's standing as an international hub. Amid speculation that Leung had lost Beijing's favour, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, as the first central government official to meet him since his announcement, praised the chief executive as a patriot. Xinhua reported later that Wang and Leung discussed HK's strengths in contributing to the "One Belt, One Road" trade initiative and that the central government would support the city's involvement in the scheme. Leung also visited the HK and Macau Affairs Office and held talks with director Wang Guangya. Veteran China watcher Johnny Lau said Leung's meeting with the foreign minister highlighted HK's international status.

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President Xi Jinping praises HK leader for 'curbing independence' (SCMP, Dec. 24): President Xi Jinping hailed outgoing Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's efforts in "curbing HK independence and street violence", while also effectively setting requirements and priorities for the city's next leader. State leaders who hosted Leung on his final duty visit to Beijing urged him to ensure a smooth transition to a new HK government, which they listed as a key task for the remaining six months of his term. Lau Siu-kai, a leading Beijing adviser on HK affairs, said Xi's final report card on Leung's performance set the "top priority" for the next chief executive. "Whoever aspires to run for the top job must demonstrate that he has the determination to ... defend national unity, sovereignty and safety," Lau said.

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Song Zhe, Huang Liuquan promoted to deputy director of HK, Macau office (SCMP, Dec. 27): The nation's top foreign affairs official in Hong Kong has been promoted to a Beijing post in the latest management reshuffle at the State Council unit specialising in local affairs. Song Zhe, the foreign affairs ministry's commissioner in the SAR since 2012, was named a deputy director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. China watchers said the appointment showed that diplomatic experience managing Hong Kong's place as a global city in the context of the country's international relations and "one country, two systems" was important. Huang Liuquan was also named deputy director – a

promotion from his post as director general of the law department. Song and Huang replaced Zhou Bo, who has reached the retirement age of 60.

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Universal suffrage back in focus for HK New Year march (SCMP, Dec. 28): Organisers of a January 1 march for universal suffrage are worried about a lower turnout as a result of Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying announcing that he will not seek a second term. Civil Human Rights Front, the group behind the event, warned that Leung's high-handed style of governance would not necessarily fade with his departure, citing recent controversies surrounding two possible successors lawmaker and former minister Regina Ip as well as Chief Secretary Carrie Lam.

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HK localists launch final court appeal against Legislative Council disqualification (SCMP, Dec. 29): Two HK pro-independence activists engulfed in an oath-taking saga, which earlier saw them ousted from the legislature, lodged a last-ditch legal bid to be reinstated. In their final appeal, Youngspiration lawmakers-elect Yau Wai-ching and Sixtus Baggio Leung will ask the Court of Final Appeal to decide if HK courts have the power to -determine if Beijing went beyond its powers in issuing an interpretation of the Basic Law, according to court documents their lawyers have filed. The democratically elected pair were disqualified by the city's courts after the government filed a legal bid over anti-Beijing antics they used during a swearing-in ceremony in the Legislative Council in October.

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Britain, China forged 1987 deal on direct elections for HK, archives reveal (SCMP, Dec. 30): Britain secured a "private commitment" from Beijing in 1987 that provision for direct elections for the Legislative Council would be included in the Basic Law if they were not introduced until after the mini-constitution was promulgated in 1990. The existence of the mutual understanding came to light in British cabinet files recently declassified from the National Archives in London. In a minute to then British prime minister Margaret Thatcher on October 2, 1987, then foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe wrote that "during the summer, the Chinese have continued to represent to us their view that we should not introduce direct elections in 1988". "We proposed [to Beijing] that the white paper in early 1988 should acknowledge public support in principle for an element of direct elections, and state that these would be introduced in 1991 and 1992," Howe wrote. "For their part the Chinese would make it clear that the Basic Law would permit an element of direct elections to the Legco into the years after 1997. The Chinese replied that if direct elections were not introduced until after the promulgation of the Basic Law [in 1990], the Chinese government would see that there was appropriate provision for them in the Basic Law," the foreign secretary wrote. Martin Lee, a former member of the Basic Law Drafting Committee and an advocate of direct elections for 1988, said: "Now we know both sides kept HK people in the dark and that the consultation in 1987 was not genuine."

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Legal affairs and human rights

Tighter HK visa rules may affect more foreign visitors than only Indians (SCMP, Dec. 19): More nationals from countries whose asylum seekers flee to HK may need to register online before visiting, a senior immigration officer revealed to the Post, as the authority reviewed a similar requirement it would soon impose on Indian visitors. Immigration department assistant director Ma Chi-ming also urged Indian visitors not to enter fake data to try to enhance their chance of entering HK to seek economic asylum as they would bear legal consequences. The online registration platform opened from Dec. 19 as Indian passport holders who planned to visit the city from January 23 next year must obtain prior approval from the department. It marks the first time HK has implemented such a restriction to a third country. The aim is to curb Indian nationals seeking refugee status. "We picked India as a testing point as it was one of the major source countries," he said. "We do not rule out extending the scheme to other countries in the future." Among the current backlog of 10,335 refugee applications in the city, 80 per cent are claimants from India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Indonesia. At present, only Indian and Indonesian nationals may enter HK without an entry permit.

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Burglaries involving sums above HK\$500,000 up 50pc, police chief says, prompting call for cooperation with mainland officers (SCMP, Dec. 20): High-end household burglaries in HK jumped 50 per cent this year, prompting police to call for closer cooperation with mainland counterparts to crack down on cross-border criminals. While home break-ins in the first 10 months of this year were on the decline, the total amount of losses rose from HK\$94.6 million to \$139.9 million, largely due to individual burglaries with losses totalling more than HK\$500,000. Latest police figures show there were 1,468 household burglaries in the first 10 months, a 9 per cent drop compared to 1,613 in the same period last year. As some burglary cases involved mainlanders, he said, the police would cooperate with their mainland counterparts to target criminals from across the border.

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HK proposes tougher laws to deal with international terrorist threat (SCMP, Dec. 23): HK is seeking to catch up with tougher international anti-terrorism rules with the government proposing legislative amendments to fast track the freezing of terror suspects' assets by avoiding lengthy notification procedures. However, veteran Democratic Party lawmaker and security monitor James To warned of "the devil in the details" as he argued that without clearly defined terms there could be hidden grey areas leading to unrelated parties being incriminated. Under the proposed changes to the United Nations (Anti-Terrorism Measures) Ordinance, any person or entity would be prohibited from dealing with assets owned by a terrorist or terrorist's associate once they are gazetted under the law, unless they are under the authority of a licence granted by the city's security minister. Other proposed changes include prohibiting a person from leaving HK, or entering another state for terrorism purposes, and stopping the provision or collection of property for terrorist financing and the travel of individuals for the purpose of terrorism.

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Health

Two controversial items put on hold in HK voluntary health insurance plan (SCMP, Dec. 2): Two controversial items will be dropped temporarily from the planned voluntary health insurance scheme after resistance from insurers, the health minister Ko Wing-man confirmed. Insurers would not have to cover high-risk patients or guarantee to cover anyone regardless of age or illness. But Dr Ko Wing-man said the government would not "give up" on these two features and would carry on the legislation work in the next phase. The idea of the scheme is to reduce the burden on the public health care system by encouraging the middle class to switch to the private sector. Alex Lam, chairman of HK Patients' Voices, said the scheme no longer existed without the high-risk coverage, which was a key element of the original plan. But he said the move had been expected given the objections from the insurance sector.

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HK man dies in first imported case of bird flu this winter (SCMP, Dec. 27): A 75-year-old man in the first imported case of bird flu this winter has died after being admitted to hospital following a visit to mainland China, health authorities confirmed. The Hongkonger, who went to Changping in Guangdong province in late November, passed away at North District Hospital on Christmas Day, according to a statement from the Centre for Health Protection. The exact cause of death is not known, but the man was known to have had other underlying chronic illnesses. He was positive for the H7N9 virus, and HK health officials last week declared the incident as the first imported case of bird flu this winter.

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HK health officials ban poultry imports from three more areas after bird flu outbreaks (SCMP, Dec. 28): HK food safety officials have placed a temporary suspension on the import of poultry meat and products from three more regions – in mainland China, Japan and Poland following the detection of bird flu strains in these areas. The centre said the move was based on advice by the World Organisation for Animal Health, adding that authorities in the affected regions had been contacted and the situation would be closely monitored.

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Hongkonger in hospital tests positive for H7N9 in possible second imported case of bird flu this winter (SCMP, Dec. 30): HK health officials are looking into the source of a newly confirmed human case of bird flu. The Centre for Health Protection said it was unsure whether the source of the infection was local or imported, prompting a call for Hongkongers to maintain "strict" personal, food and environmental hygiene at home and abroad. Lab tests confirmed the patient, who had an underlying illness, was positive for H7N9. He is currently in stable condition. A centre spokesman said the case would be reported to the World Health Organisation as well as national, Guangdong provincial and Macau health authorities. He added the centre was communicating with mainland officials to ascertain the patient's exposure and movements on the mainland.

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Environment

Government's ambitious 2030 land reclamation plan to cost HK\$400 billion, group says (SCMP, Dec. 4): The government's grand long-term blueprint for HK, which envisions a 1,000-hectare man-made island in the middle of the sea, could cost over HK\$400 billion, a concern group estimated. The estimate for the East Lantau Metropolis (ELM) project was raised at the first public forum on the 2030 Plus blueprint. The proposed ELM – the size of about four Cheung Chau islands to be located east of Lantau – was included in the 2030 Plus long-term planning blueprint. It is one of two major new towns the government hopes will resolve a projected shortfall of 1,200 hectares of land for housing and economic development. The ELM is envisaged to be the city's third business district, with railway and

road connections to Lantau, western Hong Kong Island and Tuen Mun in the New Territories. The new town would accommodate a population of between 400,000 and 700,000.

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Rubbish found in clean-ups on HK beaches down by more than third in 8 years, green group says (SCMP, Dec. 14): The amount of foam boxes, plastic bottles and glass shards collected along HK's beaches has dropped by more than a third in the past eight years, according to a green group. Some 2,600 volunteers removed 54,605 pieces of rubbish, or 4,800kg, between September and November along the city's coastlines during environmental group Green Council's annual clean-up. The amount was 37 per cent less than the 86,034 pieces collected in 2008 when the group hosted its first clean up, and also the lowest ever on record. Kelvin Chiu, the group's senior project officer, said it was partly due to the growing awareness among Hongkongers of the need to clean up after themselves.

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HK plan to ban ivory trade by 2021 receives Executive Council go-ahead (SCMP, Dec. 22): A three-step plan to phase out the local ivory trade by 2021 was approved by the Executive Council and will go before the legislature in the first half of next year. Legislative amendments will involve banning the trade in elephant hunting trophies and ivory carvings, followed by a ban on ivory acquired before a 1975 convention regulating the trade in endangered species, and finally, a total ban on all sales of ivory obtained before 1990, when an international ban was enacted. "The measures will send a very strong signal to the international community on HK's -determination to curb illicit trade in ivory," environment minister Wong Kam-sing said.

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Average Hongkonger sent 1.39kg of solid waste to landfills, up 3pc on last year (SCMP, Dec. 23): The average Hongkonger sent 1.39kg of municipal solid waste into landfills last year, marking a 3 per cent rise from the year before and the highest level in 10 years, though notable reductions in food and special waste were recorded, new official data revealed. The Environmental Protection Department attributed the increase to more commercial and industrial waste being dumped, which in turn was partly attributable to a "relatively buoyant local economy" last year. Recycling rates for municipal solid waste also fell – from 37 per cent in 2014 to 35 per cent last year – driven by significant declines in recovery rates for waste paper and plastics, which fell by 52,000 and 5,000 tonnes respectively. Environmental group Green Earth said the sustained high disposal rates stemmed from a variety of factors: a lack of volume-based waste charging, the delayed commissioning of an organic waste treatment facility for food waste, and a downturn in the recycling trade.

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Culture and education

HK slips to new low in international ranking for student performance in science (SCMP, Dec. 7): The performance of HK students in science has dropped to a new low possibly because of a decrease in numbers studying the subject under the new senior secondary school curriculum, according to the results of the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa). Singapore students topped HK to become the world's best at reading, maths and science. More than 5,000 secondary school students from 138 schools in HK were randomly selected last year to have their ability in science, maths and reading tested. They were among 510,000 students assessed from around the world. Professor Esther Ho, director of the Centre for International Student Assessment in HK, said a possible contributing factor in the drop was the launch of the new senior secondary school curriculum in 2009, which does not require students to choose subjects in either the arts or science stream.

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China has highest international school tuition fees, while HK takes fifth place, survey shows (SCMP, Dec. 8): The mainland charges the world's most expensive international school tuition fees, while HK comes in fifth in the global ranking, according to a new survey. The poll of 707 international schools across 98 countries conducted by ExpatFinder.com, a website offering information on living abroad, found that the median tuition for a sixth-grade student at an international school in China is US\$36,400 a year. That is followed by US\$28,300 for Switzerland and US\$27,800 for Belgium. Britain is in fourth place, charging US\$25,270, followed by Hong Kong with US\$23,360. Ruth Benny, an education consultancy in HK, questioned the validity of the ranking as it only focused on school fees and did not factor in other costs that are compulsory for some international schools, such as debentures and capital levies. Benny said that as far she knew, such costs were unique to HK.

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Government still unsure over remaining cost of work on West Kowloon Cultural District (SCMP, Dec. 20): The government has said it is still working out the amount of the extra funding it needs for the West Kowloon Cultural District art hub on the top of its initial grant of HK\$21.6 billion. The 40-

hectare West Kowloon blueprint aims to turn a prime piece of harbourfront land into a world-class cultural district, featuring art facilities such as theatres and museums. Betty Fung, permanent secretary for home affairs, said the long-delayed project would need extra funding for its remaining work, including a basement and a footbridge that links the facilities to Elements shopping mall near Kowloon MTR station. "We are still calculating the budgets," Fung said, adding they aimed to submit the funding applications to the Legislative Council within the legislative year.

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HK arts hub to get HK\$3.5 billion replica of Beijing's Palace Museum (SCMP, Dec 24): In a cultural coup for HK, the city signed a HK\$3.5 billion deal with Beijing to create a replica of the capital's celebrated Palace Museum at the West Kowloon Cultural District. The project, funded by the Jockey Club, is a highlight of next year's events to mark the 20th anniversary of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule and the culmination of close collaboration following an agreement in 2012 between the city and the Palace Museum. At the signing ceremony, Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying said construction of the new "HK Palace Museum" would begin next year. A government press release added that "developing a museum with a clear focus on Chinese history, art and culture in HK is fully in line with the vision of developing HK into a cultural metropolis".

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Macau

Macau confirms ATM cap to 'further strengthen' regulation of money flow (SCMP, Dec. 10): Monetary chiefs in Macau have confirmed they are imposing new controls on the amount of cash people using mainland-issued China Union Pay bank cards can take out at ATM machines in the city, to "further strengthen" regulation of mainland money flows. The new restriction follows the introduction by Beijing in recent months of a raft of measures to tackle massive outflows of capital. It is the first move to exert control over Union Pay transactions since a 2014 crackdown involving Union Pay point of service machines in the casino dominated city which is fighting hard to shake off its reputation as a centre for hot money out of the mainland.

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Macau bans live chicken sales, ready to cull 10,000 birds after man infected with H7N9 virus (SCMP, Dec. 14): Macau has banned the sale of live chickens for the next three days and is prepared to cull 10,000 birds at a wholesale market after reporting its first confirmed human infection with avian flu. A 58-year-old man who owns a poultry stall at the wholesale market was diagnosed with the H7N9 virus after two samples from a batch of chickens he had handled tested positive, Macau's health bureau announced at an emergency press. Hong Kong's Centre for Health Protection said it had been notified of the case in Macau and urged the public to maintain strict hygiene while travelling.

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Press articles related to Switzerland and Swiss matters

Gunman in Zurich mosque rampage is dead, police say (Reuters, SCMP, Dec. 20): A man who shot three people at a Zurich mosque on Dec. 19 is dead, police said on Dec. 20, confirming that a body found near the scene was that of the assailant. Zurich cantonal police said authorities had identified the suspect, but gave no details. The gunman had stormed into the Islamic centre and opened fire on worshippers. Two of the three victims – aged 30, 35 and 56 – were seriously injured in the attack. A third sustained less severe injuries. Two thirds of Switzerland's 8.3 million residents identify as Christian but the nation has been wrestling with the role of Islam as its Muslim population has risen to 5 per cent, swelled by the arrival of immigrants from the former Yugoslavia. In 2009, a nationwide vote backed a constitutional ban on new minarets. The Federation of Islamic Organisations in Switzerland said the centre was not a member and it did not have any direct knowledge of the incident.

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