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Switzerland in the local press

Art Basel Hong Kong cancellation urged by galleries amid coronavirus outbreak (SCMP, Jan. 31):

The spread of the deadly coronavirus may jeopardise Art Basel Hong Kong, one of Asia's most prestigious art fairs, with participating galleries asking organisers to cancel the event's eighth edition in March. Art Basel Hong Kong, which drew 88,000 people last year, is scheduled to open to VIPs on March 17 in Hong Kong. Some 241 galleries from 31 countries and territories are scheduled to exhibit art at the fair, according to the Art Basel website. The Art Basel franchise, which also includes fairs in Miami and Basel, Switzerland, is part of Switzerland's MCH Group.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam reveals in WEF she is 'facing a lot of pressure' to rein in journalists as protests rock city (SCMP, Jan. 23):

Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam, who was in Switzerland for the annual World Economic Forum, has disclosed to an audience of global business and political chiefs that she has faced pressure to tighten control of the press and journalists in light of the ongoing social unrest. She also admitted her government's handling of the now-withdrawn extradition bill, which sparked the months-long protests, was a political failure but blamed it partly on "world-class propaganda" against her administration. She said she would remain in her post to "practise what she has learned" from her administration's mistakes.

Donald Trump touts US economic success in Davos (Bloomberg, SCMP, Jan. 21):

President Donald Trump launched a veiled attack on environmental "alarmists" in a speech to business and political leaders in Davos, taking a swipe at the World Economic Forum's key focus this year. Trump's remarks were largely focused on America's economy as an example to other nations, which he urged to cut regulations and taxes. Trump is due to hold bilateral meetings with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Swiss President Simonetta Sommaruga, according to the White House. Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are the biggest-name political leaders in attendance.

Greta Thunberg calls on world leaders in Davos to listen to young activists (Reuters, SCMP, Jan. 21):

Greta Thunberg, who has inspired a new generation of activists to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos this year, urged world leaders to listen to young people. "The science and voice of young people is not the centre of the conversation, but it needs to be," she said at a panel session titled "Forging a Sustainable Path Towards a Common Future". Several young activists have travelled to the Swiss ski resort of Davos this year, following in Thunberg's footsteps.

Foreign Policy/International Relations

Human Rights Watch chief Kenneth Roth says barring him from Hong Kong is 'sad and troubling' reflection of Beijing pressure (SCMP, Jan. 13):

Kenneth Roth, the head of Human Rights Watch who was barred from entering Hong Kong said he was saddened at how the city had deteriorated under pressure from Beijing, as he vowed to unveil his report in New York instead. He had planned to visit the city to launch the New York-based group's "World Report 2020". On December 2, Beijing's foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the Chinese government would impose sanctions against Human Rights Watch and four other US-based non-profit groups that "played an egregious role" in the disturbances in Hong Kong.

US Congress should stop interfering in Hong Kong says government (SCMP, Jan. 9):

US lawmakers should stop interfering in Hong Kong's affairs, the Hong Kong Government said, as it hit back at congressional claims there had been "an accelerated trend of decreased autonomy" in the city. In its annual report, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China said it had observed a further erosion of Hong Kong's autonomy and fundamental freedoms under the "one country, two systems" framework. A spokesman for the Office of the Commissioner of the Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong rejected the US congress report as "distorting the truth", and a brutal interference with the city's and Chinese domestic affairs. The spokesman also said the US report was further evidence that the US was interfering in Hong Kong affairs.

External forces targeting Macau as well as Hong Kong, Chinese official says (SCMP, Jan. 2):

Zhang Xiaoming, Beijing's top official in charge of Hong Kong and Macau affairs, said the "external forces" that instigated the political turmoil in Hong Kong are also trying to infiltrate Macau. For months, Beijing has blamed foreign powers for instigating the unrest in Hong Kong but never suggested that foreign forces were targeting Macau. Lau Siu-kai, vice-chairman of the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies, said Beijing's concerns about Macau were likely related to several US-based non-government organisations.

Mainland Relation

Citing President Xi Jinping, Beijing's envoy Luo Huining pledges to boost Hong Kong patriotism and national security (SCMP, Jan. 20): New liaison office chief Luo Huining has pledged to help the city government protect national security and boost young people's sense of patriotism, warning that failure to do so could open the door to "infiltration and sabotage activities" from abroad. He added that, with Hong Kong in "the most complex situation" since its return to Chinese rule in 1997, residents needed confidence that Beijing's governing principle would help it overcome its various social and political challenges. He suggested that the "one country, two systems" principle would ensure Hong Kong remains stable and prospers with the rest of China.

New survey of Hong Kong protesters says 80 per cent support 'one country, two systems' and don't want independence from China (SCMP, Jan. 17): About eight in 10 anti-government protesters in Hong Kong support Beijing's approach to the city, and only a minority support independence from China, according to a study by a centrist party, Third Side. "Our study seems to suggest that the rise of Hong Kong independence is only an overblown topic, exaggerated by the pro-Beijing camp, which, unfortunately, could have affected the central government's policy on Hong Kong," said Tik Chi-yuen, the party's chairman.

China's new top official in Hong Kong hopes city can return to normal, and says 'one country, two systems' must be implemented in long-term (SCMP, Jan. 6): Luo Huining, China's new top representative to Hong Kong, hopes the city will "get back on the right track" after months of anti-government protests and says the "one country, two systems" formula has offered it the best advantages. Luo was speaking to the media on his first day as director of the central government's liaison office in the city, after replacing Wang Zhimin. The reshuffle is the first major leadership change since the ongoing protests broke out in June.

Domestic Policy/Politics

More than 500 doctors, health care workers in Hong Kong join calls for border closure with mainland China, threatening strikes in strongly worded letters to officials (SCMP, Jan. 31): More than 500 doctors, nurses and health care professionals in Hong Kong public hospitals have threatened to go on strike after penning strongly worded letters to officials, demanding immediate action to close all borders with mainland China. Frontline staff in the overburdened local medical sector also complained about a "dangerous working environment" amid the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak that put both their lives and that of patients at risk. They threatened a strike and other industrial action beginning as early as February 3 if their demands were ignored. The novel coronavirus originating from Wuhan has infected 11 people in Hong Kong.

Demosisto drops call for Hong Kong self-determination (SCMP, Jan. 20): Hong Kong political party Demosisto began the new year with a change to its manifesto. Their members approved changing the party's stated objective from "advocating for Hong Kong's democratic self-determination" to "promoting Hong Kong's democratic and progressive values". Political analysts believe that by dropping that controversial objective from its manifesto, Demosisto is signalling its desire to ensure its place in the political landscape without having its leaders disqualified from elections.

Carrie Lam says Hong Kong capitalism can only survive beyond 2047 if 'one country, two systems' is fully respected (SCMP, Jan. 17): Hong Kong capitalism can only continue beyond 2047 if city residents, especially the younger generation, uphold "one country, two systems", Chief Executive Carrie Lam warned. She said attacking Beijing's governing principle, which gives the city a high degree of autonomy, put its liberal economic model at risk in the long run. Under Article 5 of the Basic Law, Beijing promised that Hong Kong's capitalist way of life would remain unchanged for 50 years after it returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam's HK\$10 billion welfare package (SCMP, Jan. 15): Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam has unveiled a HK\$10 billion-a-year welfare package expected to benefit more than a million people, saying she aims to ease the burden on the city's poor and elderly, while attributing the series of apparent U-turns it contained to a "breakthrough" in government thinking. However, she said demands by anti-government protesters, including an amnesty for those arrested over the last seven months of unrest, would not be met with the same flexibility. "Any political demand that violates the rule of law will not be accepted by us," she reiterated.

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Beijing's new envoy urges Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam in first talks to step up efforts to quell protest unrest (SCMP, Jan. 10): Luo Huining, who replaced Wang Zhimin as director of the central government's liaison office, set out four tasks for Chief Executive Carrie Lam to do more and do better, in their first official meeting. He called on Lam to further ensure that the "one country, two systems" principle for governing Hong Kong would continue to guide the city's progress, do more to end the violence, further improve the economy and people's livelihood, and further strengthen communication in handling the city's problems.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam insists she will remain in office to tackle challenges (SCMP, Jan. 7): Hong Kong's embattled leader has insisted that she will stay in office to help tackle public health (risks from mbvpneumonia-like virus in Wuhan) and economic challenges, when asked if she was concerned that Beijing might replace her after changing its top representative in the city. She believed she could work well with Luo Huining, the new man in the central government's liaison office in Hong Kong. She emphasised that her cabinet had been committed in past months to helping Hong Kong overcome difficulties.

Hong Kong begins 2020 just like 2019 ended – with protest chaos (SCMP, Jan. 2): Hong Kong started Jan. 1 with a massive anti-government protest march that ended in chaos, as radicals blocked roads, smashed traffic lights, threw petrol bombs, vandalised bank branches, trashed shops and targeted the High Court, while police fired tear gas and water cannons, and arrested hundreds. Protest organizer were forced to call off the march early by police. Police said at least 400 people were arrested mostly for illegal assembly and possession of offensive weapons, making it one of the biggest mass arrests in a single day. Sources said police had changed their strategy from usually dispersing crowds to making mass arrests.

Economy/Finance

Hong Kong exports in 2019 record sharpest drop in a decade at 4.1 per cent amid US-China trade war (SCMP, Jan. 31): Hong Kong exports recorded their sharpest drop in a decade in 2019, down 4.1 per cent under the shadow of the US-China trade war. The year-on-year drop, together with a 6.5 per cent decrease in imports, resulted in a trade deficit of HK\$426.8 billion (US\$55 billion) last year, the Census and Statistics Department said. "Hong Kong's export performance is still subject to high uncertainties in the near term," a government spokesman said. "Attention should be paid to the coronavirus outbreak as it may weigh on the performance of some Asian economies and disrupt Hong Kong's economic activities as well."

Hong Kong unemployment rate expected to hit to 5 per cent (SCMP, Jan. 29): The unfolding crisis from the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak has dealt yet another blow to Hong Kong's fragile economy. Secretary for Labour and Welfare Law Chi-kwong said that the unemployment rate would hit 4 to 5 per cent this year from the existing 3.3 per cent. Economist have projected that the disease would exacerbate the city's economic woes caused by months-long anti-government protests and the ongoing US-China trade war.

Moody's downgrades Hong Kong's ratings, saying its ability to govern effectively has been eroded by protests (SCMP, Jan. 21): Moody's lowered the long-term issuer and senior unsecured ratings of the Hong Kong government by one notch to Aa3 from Aa2, becoming the second agency to lower the city's credit rating. In September, Fitch Ratings cut Hong Kong's sovereign rating by one notch, to AA from AA+. Moody's said the decision to downgrade came because of the government's inability to resolve issues highlighted by the protests.

Hong Kong tourist arrivals drop 14 per cent year on year in 2019 amid anti-government protests (SCMP, Jan. 15): The number of visitors to Hong Kong dropped by 14 per cent to 55.9 million last year amid the ongoing protests roiling the city, the Tourism Board revealed. The months-long protests prompted the city's tourist arrivals to contract 39 per cent in the second half of the last year, offsetting the 14 per cent growth in the first half. More than 40 jurisdictions have issued travel warnings or advisories against heading to Hong Kong.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam tells Asian Financial Forum the city is withstanding protests, US-China trade war (SCMP, Jan. 13): Hong Kong's financial system has not been undermined by the protests and remains stable, the city's leader told overseas investors and policymakers at the Asian Financial Forum. She acknowledged that the city had faced unprecedented challenges over the past two years from the global economic downturn, US-China trade war, political uncertainties and months of anti-government unrest in Hong Kong. She said the city was withstanding the pressure and the divisions in society would be resolved.

Hong Kong bourse reclaims world's IPO crown while more firms eye secondary listings (SCMP, Jan. 7): Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing chief executive Charles Li Xiaojia, who runs Asia's third-largest capital market, has rejected claims that Hong Kong's glory days are numbered, insisting the city has a bright future as a bridge between China and the international markets in the next decade. Hong Kong has ranked top of the world's IPO market seven times over the past 11 years. He warned, however, that Hong Kong could not take its role for granted, and needed to solve the social unrest currently gripping it.

Hong Kong protests continue to batter retail sector as sales plunge 23.6 per cent in November (SCMP, Jan. 3): Hong Kong's retail sector continues to take a beating as sales plunged 23.6 per cent in November from the previous year, the second largest drop on record, as tourism and consumption activities were severely affected by increasingly violent anti-government protests. For the first 11 months, the decline was 10.3 per cent against the same period last year. "The near-term outlook for the retail trade continues to hinge on how local social incidents will evolve," a government spokesman said.

Technology/Innovation

Government should embrace innovation in health care sector (SCMP, Jan. 16): Hong Kong's government should be more open-minded and realise the urgency of innovation in the health care sector, representatives from the medical and pharmaceutical industries said. They envisioned Hong Kong in the next five years to make progress in health care technology, such as harnessing artificial intelligence to interpret imaging scans, or rolling out Uber-like mobile apps to match patients with doctors. The Hong Kong government has set out policy directions to encourage technological development in health care in recent years. Industry insiders saying city risks stagnating if technology remains constrained by regulatory framework.

Macao

Macao gaming revenue drops in December by most since March 2016 (SCMP, Jan. 2): Gambling revenue in Macau fell by 13.7% in December by the most in nearly four years, as the Chinese city came under a security lockdown ahead of President Xi Jinping's visit to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its handover from Portuguese rule. For the full year, revenue was 3.4 per cent lower at 292.5 billion patacas, following two years of gains, amid tepid demand from high rollers amid the US-China trade war and protests in neighbouring Hong Kong.

Mainland tourists to Macau plummet during Lunar New Year amid deadly outbreak of Wuhan virus (SCMP, Jan. 28): Owing to coronavirus epidemic that originated in Wuhan, mainland tourist numbers were 75 per cent lower over the first four days of the Lunar New Year holiday, according to the Macau Government Tourism Office. On Jan. 26, the Macau government announced that anyone from Hubei province, or anyone who had visited the province in the last 14 days, would not be allowed into Macau. As of Jan. 28, the city had confirmed six cases. Macau's gaming sector is likely to remain under pressure until the virus outbreak is brought under control.

Special Focus

China coronavirus: Hong Kong scrambles to roll out containment plan (SCMP, Jan. 29): Hong Kong will drastically reduce cross-border travel with the rest of China as it adopts tougher measures to contain the spread of the deadly Wuhan coronavirus, starting with the shutdown of the two railways and suspension of new visas to individual mainland tourists. The six checkpoints to be closed from Jan. 30 only accounted for 7.6 per cent of passenger flow in 2018. Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced as she spelled out a new containment strategy that stopped short of a total closure of the city's borders demanded by legislators from across the political spectrum. The government also asked all its employees, except for those providing essential and emergency services, to start working from home – while more private companies offered the same option to their staff.

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