



Top court overturns discriminatory religious law

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia’s top court has overturned a law that denied recognition and legal rights to followers of indigenous faiths in a surprise advance for religious freedom in the world’s most populous Muslim nation. The Constitutional Court, in a unanimous ruling from its nine-judge panel, said articles in the 2013 Civil Administration Law were discriminatory and violated the principle of equality before the law. “These articles are not legally binding as they contradict the 1945 constitution,” presiding judge Arief Hidayat told the court. The ruling is an unexpected victory for moderates at a time when religious conservatives have demonstrated growing political influence and undermined the country’s reputation for tolerance. The 2013 law effectively required followers of faiths not among the six recognized by the government to list one of the official religions on their national identity card or be denied basic rights such as marriage registration and land titles. The ruling, published on the court’s website, said the law caused injustice to followers of native faiths. Difficulties in obtaining national identity cards meant some were deprived of education, access to the justice system, and other rights, it said. Indonesia has for decades recognized only Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism as religions, but millions practice animism and other local faiths.

Hong Kong, Southeast Asian nations sign free-trade pact

MANILA, The Philippines (AP) — Hong Kong signed a free-trade agreement and an investment deal with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in pacts that it said are a vote against protectionism elsewhere. ASEAN officials said the free-trade agreement they signed with Hong Kong in Manila is the sixth such deal forged by the 10-nation bloc after concluding similar pacts with China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. The Philippines hosted the annual summit of ASEAN heads of state with Asian and western leaders. Hong Kong commerce secretary Edward Yau Tang-wah said the new free-trade accord is “a loud and clear vote from all of us here for freer and more open trade” amid protectionist tendencies in other parts of the world. He said ASEAN is Hong Kong’s second-largest merchandise trading partner and fourth-largest partner in services trade “but the best is yet to come,” with the agreements expected to fuel new investment opportunities and boost trade flows. Philippine trade secretary Ramon Lopez, this year’s chairman of the ASEAN Economic Ministers, said the signing of the two agreements marked the commitment toward shared prosperity and inclusive growth in the region. “We send a strong message to the world of our outward oriented drive and economic resolve toward cooperation,” he said.

Border traders losing money amid North Korea sanctions

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese traders are complaining about new U.N. sanctions on North Korea, saying they have all but dried up business in the border city of Dandong. They say they’re unable to collect payment from impoverished North Korean state companies for goods such as toothpaste, instant noodles, and other household items. Large-scale trade involving North Korean iron ore and coal has been banned entirely, dealing a big blow to Dandong’s port, whose operator defaulted on a \$150-million corporate bond. China has long been the North’s biggest economic partner. Beijing accounted for more than 90 percent of its neighbor’s foreign trade of about \$6.5 billion in 2016, and continues to be a key source of food and fuel aid to help keep North Korea’s weak economy from collapsing.

Pohang quake leaves 1,500 homeless, dozens injured

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Officials say a 5.4-magnitude earthquake that was South Korea’s second-strongest in decades damaged infrastructure, injured dozens of people, and left about 1,500 homeless. No deaths were reported since the quake rattled the southeastern coastal region around the port city of Pohang. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety said at least 1,536 people evacuated their homes and 57 people were injured. The ministry’s statement said the quake destroyed or damaged more than 1,000 houses and dozens of other buildings and cars. Cracks and other damage were found in military facilities, bridges, port facilities, and water supply facilities. It’s the second-strongest quake in South Korea since the country began monitoring in 1978. Last year, a 5.8-magnitude quake occurred near Gyeongju.

Ford, Chinese partner form electric car venture

BEIJING (AP) — Ford Motor Co. has announced it is launching a venture with a Chinese partner to develop electric vehicles for sale in China, the biggest market for the technology. The announcement of the \$750-million venture with Anhui Zotye Automobile Co. adds to rising investment by global automakers in China’s growing electric vehicle industry. Zotye already has its own electric vehicle business and said sales in the first 10 months of this year were up 14 percent over a year earlier, at 22,500. Sales of pure-electric and gasoline-electric hybrids in China rose 50 percent last year over 2015 to 336,000 vehicles, or 40 percent of global demand. U.S. sales totalled 159,620. Beijing has supported sales with subsidies and a planned quota system that would require automakers to produce electric cars or buy credits from companies that do. Ford said it expects China’s market for all-electrics and hybrids to grow to annual sales of 6 million by 2025. The company said previously that it plans to offer electric versions of 70 percent of its models sold in China by 2025. Daimler AG’s Mercedes Benz also makes electric cars with a Chinese partner.



REPTILE ROUNDUP. Fireman Phinyo Pukphinyo removes a python from a garage roof in Bangkok, Thailand. When the latest distress call came into Pukphinyo’s fire station in Bangkok, it was not about a burning home or office building. Instead, the caller needed urgent help with a far more common problem facing Thailand’s capital: snakes. City authorities say the number of snakes caught in Bangkok homes has risen exponentially in recent years, from 16,000 reported cases in 2013 to about 29,000 in 2016. Figures for the first half of 2017 are more than 30 percent higher than last year. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

Bangkok firefighters on front line of city’s snake scourge

By Tassanee Vejpongsa
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — When the latest distress call came into Phinyo Pukphinyo’s fire station in Bangkok, it was not about a burning home or office building. Instead, the caller needed urgent help with a far more common problem facing Thailand’s capital: snakes.

A 10-foot-long python was dangling from the caller’s garage roof, and after rushing to the scene, it took Phinyo less than a minute to remove the slithering reptile.

The number of snakes ending up in urban homes is on the rise in Bangkok, apparently in part because of development pains in the vast metropolis of about 10 million people.

Tara Buakamsri, Thailand country director for Greenpeace Southeast Asia, said the city is seeing more snakes because it sits on a “flood plain with a wetland ecosystem which is a habitat [for reptiles], including snakes,” and housing expansions in recent years have curtailed their land.

Bangkok’s low-lying landscape makes it prone to floods during the rainy season, which also invites snakes and other reptiles such as monitor lizards.

The huge python Phinyo’s team caught was not the first of the day, or the last. Hours later, the station was called to remove a green snake found in the bathroom of another Bangkok resident, who apologized to the firefighters for calling them for the third time this year.

“I’ve been living in this house for 20 years and we would very rarely see any snakes,” said the caller and homeowner, Chanun Chisa.

“But this year, it seems like we see one every few months.”

Phinyo said his fire station gets more calls to catch snakes than to put out fires.

“In a day, we can get several calls to catch snakes,” he said. “I think people have just started to become aware that they can call officials up to deal with it. Beforehand, people used to handle the snakes themselves, using sticks to hit them and that kind of thing.”

He said he can now identify most types of snakes and has become an in-house instructor who teaches other firefighters how to safely capture the wriggly reptiles.

“We have no choice but to learn how to handle them,” Phinyo said.

Piya Saereerak, a veterinarian who works for the Thai government’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife, said Bangkok’s snake invasion is sustained by the city’s growing piles of trash, which subsequently leads to more rats and birds — favored prey for serpents.

The Thai capital is producing more trash every year, which it has struggled to get rid of. The city has produced around 10,454 tons of trash per day this year, up from 8,943 tons daily in 2011, according to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

“In the wild, you’d have eagles and big birds that eat snakes, and their eggs are food for other reptiles,” Piya said. “But in a big city like Bangkok, there is nothing hunting them.”

Piya heads a wildlife clinic that takes in around 300 to 400 snakes per month from rescuers such as firefighters in Bangkok. Every week, the staff from his clinic releases

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Units per U.S. dollar as of 11/17

Bangladesh Taka	83.565
Cambodian Riel	4027.0
China Renminbi	6.6268
Fijian Dollar	2.0935
Hong Kong Dollar	7.8116
Indian Rupee	65.015
Indonesian Rupiah	13531
Iranian Rial	35262
Japanese Yen	112.1
Laos New Kip	8316.6
Malaysian Ringgit	4.161
Nepal Rupee	104.1
Pakistani Rupee	105.3
Papua N.G. Kina	3.242
Philippine Peso	50.953
Russian Ruble	59.026
Saudi Riyal	3.7502
Singapore Dollar	1.3561
South Korean Won	1097.5
Sri Lankan Rupee	153.65
Taiwan Dollar	30.084
Thai Baht	32.846
Vietnam Dong	22827