

## ***From VOA Learning English, welcome to AS IT IS!***

AS IT IS our new magazine show in Special English. Today and in the days to come, we will be expanding on major world events and reporting on issues that concern you. We will be talking with newsmakers, experts and VOA’s own reporters to help make sense of this quickly changing world --- AS IT IS.

Hello, I’m Jim Tedder.

On today’s show we look at possible cabinet changes as President Barack Obama begins his second term in office.

We also explain how growth in the Asian economy comes at a cost...

And we explore the findings of a report about the state of freedom around the world.

President Obama is saying goodbye to some members of his administration and adding new faces to Cabinet as he begins his second term.

Mister Obama has already made several nominations. Democratic Party Senator John Kerry is his choice to replace Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. The president also named Republican former Senator Chuck Hagel to serve as Defense Secretary. If confirmed by the Senate he would replace Leon Panetta.

Other nominations include White House Chief of Staff Jacob Lew to be secretary of the treasury. Timothy Geithner has served in that office since the start of Barack Obama’s first term.

VOA’s Jim Malone says cabinet changes are common in second terms.

“The cabinet level positions are grueling jobs. After four years in office a lot of cabinet officials are looking for a break, and administration higher-ups realize it’s time to bring in fresh blood. It’s a way to keep the energy in the administration going.”

Senator Kerry is expected to easily gain Senate confirmation to become America’s top diplomat. Chuck Hagel, however, faces fierce opposition from within his own party for some of his positions on foreign policy. And Mr. Hagel’s lack of deep managerial experience could also raise questions among Democrats.

Jim Malone says Democratic support is especially important for the president’s picks right now.

“I do think we’re in a very partisan place right now, and Democrats also realize that the president is going to have to stand up at times for some of these appointees and make a fight.”

That was VOA’s Jim Malone.

East Asia is expected to have strong economic growth in the coming years. But that is only part of the story. Other sides of East Asia’s economic promise are tension over territorial claims in the area and trade imbalances with the rest of the world. Mario Ritter has more.

Recently, VOA spoke about East Asia with Kenneth Lieberthal. He is a top Asia expert with the Brookings Institution in Washington. He talked about some of the main issues in East Asia, ones that will continue to be important in the years to come.

The World Bank estimates economic growth in East Asia and the Pacific will be 7.9 percent this year. That is higher than any other part of the world.

The United States is working to improve trade ties with many nations in East Asia. Kenneth Lieberthal says the Trans-Pacific Partnership is an important step to improving trade. The TPP is a trade agreement with countries around the Pacific Ocean.

“Specifically on US trade policy in Asia, I think the Obama administration is very heavily invested in the TPP process.”

Natural resources are an important part of export trade in East Asia. This has led to territorial disputes. For example, the islands known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan are thought to be rich in oil. China and Japan have competing claims for the territory.

Kenneth Lieberthal says he has not seen evidence that either China or Japan is willing to reduce tensions over the islands. China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines are all involved in territorial claims with neighbors over West Pacific islands.

East Asia has long been a source of exports. China’s big trade imbalance with the United States has concerned American lawmakers for years. Some blame China’s control of its currency for the big trade deficit. But Kenneth Lieberthal does not think so.

Instead, he notes a number of other issues. One is China’s direct support for many of its industries with government aid. Kenneth Lieberthal says Chinese rules at home also hurt countries seeking to export to China. He says the protection of intellectual property rights is another concern.

But he says the biggest task for the United States in East Asia and overall is to deal with its fiscal problems at home.

“I think Washington’s biggest single challenge overall is to get our fiscal house in order.”

He says the national debate over fiscal policy and its end result will have the biggest effect on future ties in East Asia.

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Kenneth Lieberthal says he has not seen evidence that either China or Japan is willing to reduce tensions over the islands. That means territorial disputes are likely to be a continuing issue. China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines are all involved in territorial claims with neighbors over West Pacific islands.

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I’m Mario Ritter.

A pro-democracy group says more countries around the world lost freedoms last year than gained them. But it also says more countries were rated “Free” in 2012 than the year before. June Simms has more.

The findings are from a new Freedom House report. The report, called “Freedom in the World 2013,” rated political rights and civil liberties in 195 countries. During the past year, the number of countries considered “Free” rose from 87 to 90. In all, 16 countries showed notable gains.

Libya recorded one of the biggest single-year ratings jumps in the 40 years since the first report on world freedom was published. Aala Abuzaakouk works for Freedom House. She says Libya recorded major gains last year, especially in political rights.

“Since the liberation of the country in October 2011, I think we’ve seen significant citizen participation and willingness to participate in the political direction of the country.”

Libya was one of only two countries, the other being Georgia, to reach “electoral democracy” status last year. It joined Egypt and the Ivory Coast in moving from “Not Free” to “Partly Free” in the new report.

The Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa were noted as a leading cause of some of the recent gains. However, Aala Abuzaakouk said these areas also experienced problems.

“We have seen repressions taking place in the some of the Gulf countries and the monarchies, trying to be a step ahead of the curve to contain any activism or change that would come from the ground up.”

The Freedom House report also recognized Burma for its political progress. The country remains “Not Free,” but is now rated higher than China in both political rights and civil liberties.

I’m June Simms.

And that’s AS IT IS for today. I’m Jim Tedder.

Tell us what you want to hear about on our new show. We want to cover the issues and ideas that matter to you, in your world, as it is. Let us know. Send an email to [special@voanews.com](mailto:special@voanews.com). Or go our website at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com) and click on “Contact Us.”