

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China (internal)** *New York Times* 16 Dec reported mounting evidence from satellite images, accounts from region and previously unreported official documents suggest system of forced labour from internment camps in Xinjiang, with growing number of detainees being sent to new factories built inside or near camps. Foreign ministry 17 Dec accused foreign media of making “many untrue reports” about “training centres”. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet 5 Dec reported she had requested direct access to Xinjiang region to verify “worrying reports” of re-education camps holding Uighurs and other Muslim minorities. German Commissioner for Human Rights and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation also expressed concern during month about reports of treatment of Uighurs; China repeated warnings for other countries not to interfere in its domestic issues. Responding to Indonesian govt expression of concern about alleged human rights abuses against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, Chinese embassy 20 Dec reiterated that China guaranteed religious freedom of all citizens, and that camps are to counter terrorism and religious extremism and provide vocational training.

➔ **China/Japan** Japanese govt 18 Dec approved revised National Defence Program Guidelines referencing concerns over China’s growing military capacity, and recognising “importance of strategic competition” with neighbour as it “challenge[s] the regional order”. Paving way for plans to remodel its helicopter carriers to carry aircraft, guidelines also emphasised improving cyber, space and electronic warfare capabilities. Five-year procurement plan also approved same day outlining \$225bn defence spending to include an additional 105 F-35 fighter jets. Both China and South Korea urged Japan to keep to its pacifist constitution in separate statements made same day, while China’s foreign ministry stated being “strongly dissatisfied” with representations of China made in new guidelines. Tokyo 3 Dec protested Chinese drilling activities sighted mid-Nov in contested waters of East China Sea (ECS). Japanese fighter jets intercepted Chinese electronic warfare and surveillance planes flying through Tsushima Strait (connecting ECS and Sea of Japan) 26 Nov and near Okinawa 14 Dec; 27 Dec reportedly intercepted Chinese navy surveillance plane crossing ECS. Tokyo 25 Dec lodged official complaint accusing Chinese fishing boat of fleeing its territorial waters with Japanese inspectors on board in early Nov; China denied boat was fishing in Japanese waters.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** Uncertainty continued on future of denuclearisation talks. U.S. President Trump 1 Dec said he hoped to hold second denuclearisation summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Jan or Feb 2019; U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton said another summit necessary as North Koreans “have not lived up to the commitments so far” on dismantling nuclear weapons program as agreed at June 2018 summit in Singapore. U.S. 10 Dec announced new sanctions on three senior officials over alleged serious human rights abuses and issued further condemnation of North Korea’s abuses, “among the worst in the world”; Pyongyang 16 Dec warned sanctions could derail improved relations and block path to denuclearisation “forever”. Further, North Korean state media 20 Dec said

denuclearisation of Korean peninsula includes “completely eliminating the U.S. nuclear threat to Korea”, in further indication of lack of agreement between negotiating sides over what denuclearisation would involve. Arriving in South Korea 19 Dec for visit aimed at getting denuclearisation negotiations back on track, U.S. Special Representative Stephen Biegun said U.S. plans to review its 2017 ban on U.S. citizens travelling to DPRK and other restrictions to help expedite humanitarian aid delivery to North Korea. U.S. and South Korea 21 Dec agreed ground-breaking ceremony for inter-Korean road and rail reconnection at Panmun Station near Kaesong to go ahead 26 Dec. In another confidence-building step, North and South Korean soldiers witnessed by media 12 Dec crossed border to conduct mutual inspections to verify dismantling of 22 guard posts in Demilitarised Zone (DMZ); South Korean President Moon called move “new milestone”. South Korean defence ministry 20 Dec in policy briefing said ongoing joint military exercises with U.S. should reduce in scale in 2019; govt’s defence acquisition agency 7 Dec said it plans to purchase dozens of U.S.-built ship-to-air missiles worth \$300mn in ongoing effort to boost air defences against North Korea. North Korea 14 Dec expressed anger at South Korean military budget increase.

➔ **Taiwan Strait** Defence ministry 3 Dec confirmed Chinese naval vessels had stepped up patrols in western part of Taiwan Strait in 2018, responding to report by Taipei-based *China Times* 2 Dec that “irregular” patrols have become “routine”. Defence ministry reported several Chinese military aircraft and vessels passed near island’s southern coast 18 Dec. European Parliament 12 Dec adopted resolution reiterating support for “Taiwan’s meaningful participation in international organisations”. U.S. Senate 19 Dec approved House amendments to 2018 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which includes support for regular U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and enhanced bilateral economic, political and security relations. Taiwan signed new agreements to boost economic cooperation with Philippines 29 Nov, Japan 30 Nov and India 18 Dec.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** As momentum grew in U.S. negotiations with Taliban, intense hostilities on all sides continued despite winter conditions. U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad 2 Dec started third trip to region, including meetings in Abu Dhabi 17-18 Dec with delegations from United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and separately with Taliban. Taliban reiterated refusal to meet Afghan govt delegation and demand for withdrawal of U.S. forces; U.S. requested a ceasefire. Khalilzad said discussions were “productive”, UAE announced another round of talks to “complete the Afghanistan reconciliation process”. Reports 20 Dec that U.S. President Trump ordered military to start withdrawing roughly 7,000 troops from Afghanistan in coming months in abrupt policy shift were contradicted by White House 28 Dec, saying no drawdown planned. Iranian security official visiting Kabul 26 Dec said Iran has been holding talks with Taliban on security issues in Afghanistan, with further talks taking place 30 Dec. Major Taliban attacks and govt offensives continued including in Farah province where Taliban overran police outpost outside provincial capital and seized Shib-e Kuh district; Ghazni; and Helmand, where powerful Taliban commander and Helmand province shadow governor Abdul Manan was killed in airstrike in Nawzad district 1 Dec. Taliban

claimed responsibility for 11 Dec suicide bomb hitting govt convoy outside Kabul, killing at least four govt personnel and eight civilians; also continued to increase pressure on major highways. Militants stormed govt offices in Kabul 24 Dec, killing at least 43; Taliban denied responsibility. Month saw increase in U.S.-led airstrikes and night raids, contributing to high level of civilian fatalities. Afghan army reported it had killed Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) spokesman Sultan Aziz Azam in drone strike in Nangarhar 26 Dec. Political factions continued to contest preliminary results of Oct parliamentary elections; Independent Election Commission (IEC)'s ongoing announcement of results prompted demonstrations and complaints to Independent Electoral Complaints Commission, which 5 Dec decided to invalidate all Kabul votes due to technical problems and fraud allegations. IEC 30 Dec announced presidential election to be delayed three months until 20 July "to better prepare for the vote".

↓ 🌟 **Bangladesh** Violent clashes between supporters of rival parties across country resulted in hundreds injured and some 30 people reported killed in run-up to and on day of vote 30 Dec, with fears that flawed polls could provoke more violence in coming weeks; election also marred by govt clampdown on media, and opposition claims of Election Commission (EC) bias and complicity of security agencies in attacks on their leaders and supporters. EC 8 Dec rejected Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leader and former PM Khaleda Zia's appeal to stand in parliamentary polls. BNP-led opposition Jatiya Oikya Front (United National Front, UNF) 3 Dec alleged EC bias, citing rejection of 205 of its 900 nominees (EC denied); and 9 Dec alleged almost 2,000 supporters had been arrested on fictitious charges since Nov, accusing police of working on behalf of ruling Awami League (AL). AL 10 Dec accused BNP of attempting to subvert polls with help of Pakistan's national intelligence agency. Govt 10 Dec arrested news website editor for "publishing anti-state, false and fabricated news" and blocked 58 websites; EU and several Western countries called on govt to ensure democratic and participatory election process. NGO Human Rights Watch 13 Dec reported opposition members and supporters "have been arrested, killed, or even disappeared". Hundreds reported injured in pre-election violence, including day after campaigning began 10 Dec in several locations including in Sirajganj district (north-central) and cities of Netrokana (north) and Chattogram (south east), afterward spreading to other districts. Senior BNP party leader 17 Dec claimed two activists murdered 16 Dec in Dhaka and Chittagong. Ten people reportedly killed 24 Dec, troops deployed in 46 of 64 districts, navy given security responsibilities in remaining areas amid escalating violence; another two killed in clashes in Chittagong district 26 Dec. At least seventeen civilians and police reported killed in violence on polling day. PM Sheikh Hasina's ruling coalition won 288 of 300 seats; opposition rejected results citing reports of widespread fraud, calling vote "farcical", AL rejected allegations.

➔ **India (non-Kashmir)** Suspected Maoist rebel killed 12 Dec in encounter with security forces in Bijapur district, Chhattisgarh state. Police reported suspected Maoists killed one person in Bihar state's Aurangabad district 29 Dec.

➔ **Kashmir** With expiration of six-month governor's rule in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) 19 Dec, Indian president same day Dec signed proclamation paving way for imposition of president's rule, as recommended by J&K Governor Satya Pal Malik 17 Dec in wake of Nov dissolution of state assembly.

Presidential rule can be imposed for two six-monthly terms if state elections are not held; governor's rule had been imposed in June after collapse of People's Democratic Party (PDP)-led coalition govt. Violence continued, including 9 Dec deaths of two teenage alleged militants – one of them fourteen, believed to be youngest militant killed in three decades of conflict – sparking major anti-India protests in northern town Hajin. Security forces 10 Dec killed three suspected militants on outskirts of J&K capital Srinagar. Security forces 15 Dec shot dead seven civilians protesting military operation same day in Pulwama district (south) in which three militants and one soldier killed; in response, demonstrations and shut-down strikes held 15-17 Dec in Srinagar and elsewhere in valley on call of Joint Resistance Leadership composed of separatist Kashmiri factions. In clashes in Pulwama district, military reported at least four militants killed in encounter 29 Dec, prompting local protesters to attack security forces. Indian defence spokesman said firing by Pakistani troops along Line of Control (LoC) 26 Dec killed one civilian in J&K's Rajouri district; Pakistani officials reported firing by Indian troops 31 Dec killed one woman and injured nine civilians (Indian military denied).

► **Nepal** Tensions within ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and between the party and its critics continued to escalate, while main opposition party Nepali Congress (NC) remained preoccupied with internal factionalism and unable to credibly pressure govt. Following several delays, NCP 15 Dec commenced first internal standing committee meeting since July to review govt performance thus far and address divisions within party; at meeting senior leader Narayan Kaji Shrestha issued sharp rebuke of govt – led by NCP's PM KP Oli – for being interested solely in profiteering and blamed “crony capitalists” within leadership for enabling corruption; Shrestha also termed party's leaders weak for marginalising critics. NC continued to be hamstrung by internal differences; NC's long-awaited general convention 15-22 Dec highlighted divisions between party's factions and ended with outcome document heavily criticising Oli-led govt. Oli 5 Dec issued warning to intellectuals criticising his govt; comments perceived as threatening by several civil society leaders. Concerns about mandate of two transitional justice mechanisms on truth and reconciliation and enforced disappearances grew, with their terms ending Feb 2019; govt yet to decide on extending term despite only fraction of total cases being investigated and amid calls for mechanisms to be restructured.

► **Pakistan** Govt appeared to launch crackdown on Sunni Barelvi hardline Labaik Ya Rasool Allah and its political front Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), but seemed unwilling to pursue criminal charges, instead filing scores of corruption charges against opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz parliamentarians, and continuing clampdown on dissent and media freedoms. Govt 1 Dec reported 3,164 TLP activists under preventative custody and claimed two TLP leaders had been detained on treason and terror charges though no formal charges pressed. Amid growing concern over repression of religious and other freedoms, authorities 2 Dec barred two parliamentarians and former leaders of Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM, leading Pashtun rights group) from leaving country and detained them for three days. Police 8 Dec filed cases against two journalists covering PTM rally in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan. EU, Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway and Switzerland 13 Dec stated concern about shrinking space for civil society, criticising closing down of eighteen international NGOs. U.S. Sec State Mike Pompeo 11 Dec announced U.S. late Nov had added Pakistan to list of “Countries of Particular

Concern” for violations of religious freedom. U.S.-Pakistan relations appeared to improve around Afghanistan; President Trump 3 Dec wrote to PM Khan seeking “full support” for U.S.-led Afghan reconciliation process, reportedly suggested countries “explore opportunities to work together and renew partnership”; Khan 14 Dec confirmed Pakistan would facilitate talks between U.S. and Taliban, which took place 17 Dec. In ongoing militant violence, in Balochistan province (south west) Frontier Corps paramilitary officer was killed 5 Dec in landmine explosion, reportedly planted by militants, and six officers and four attackers were killed 14 Dec during attack in Kech district near Iranian border; Pakistan lodged protest with Iran; attack came two days after countries had signed MoU to improve border security (see Iran). Former leader of Muttahida Qaumi Movement Ali Raza Abidi died after being shot by unknown assailants in Karachi 25 Dec. Authorities banned former President Zardari alongside 171 others from leaving country following allegations of money laundering.

↑ **Sri Lanka** Constitutional and political crisis ended as President Sirisena reappointed deposed PM Ranil Wickremesinghe to office 16 Dec, following Supreme Court rulings blocking Sirisena’s attempt to install former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as PM and call early general elections, in developments hailed as significant victory for rule of law and parliamentary democracy. Court of Appeal 3 Dec issued interim order blocking Rajapaksa and his ministers from holding office, following petition by 122 parliamentarians who had passed two no confidence motions against Rajapaksa in Nov (which Sirisena had refused to recognise). Wickremesinghe won 12 Dec confidence vote in parliament with 117-0 majority, after Rajapaksa supporters boycotted parliamentary session following 29 Nov vote to deny PM’s office funding. Supreme Court 13 Dec unanimously ruled Sirisena did not have power to dissolve parliament before it had completed its four-and-a-half year term, thus voiding Sirisena’s 9 Nov dissolution and call for snap elections. Supreme Court 14 Dec refused to overturn Court of Appeal’s 3 Dec interim order. Bowing to Supreme Court’s two rulings, Rajapaksa 15 Dec “resigned” disputed position as PM; week-long dispute between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe over ministerial portfolios delayed finalisation of new Wickremesinghe-led United National Front govt. At Wickremesinghe’s 16 Dec swearing-in as PM, Sirisena repeated attacks on Wickremesinghe’s honesty and suitability for role, while Rajapaksa in 15 Dec “resignation speech” vowed to “bring the forces opposed to the country down to their knees” and singled out Tamil National Alliance for criticism, cementing fears among observers that political blockages that led to attempted constitutional coup remain in place. Economic fallout of political turmoil and uncertainty continued, including decline in value of currency, suspension of several key foreign loans and grants; ratings agencies 4 Dec downgraded country’s credit. Buddhist-Muslim tensions rose following 26 Dec vandalism of several Buddha statues in Mawanella area; nine Muslim youth arrested in subsequent days.

South East Asia

↓ **Indonesia** Fighting spiked day after crackdown on rallies marking anniversary of West Papuan independence with 2 Dec killing of nineteen state contractor employees working on major highway construction project in Nduga district, Papua province; West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) armed group claimed

responsibility, saying it regarded guards as members of military. Military launched hunt for suspects and mission to retrieve bodies; 3 Dec reported that militants using military grade weapons as well as spears and arrows attacked military post, killing one soldier and injuring two. At least four civilians reported killed in crossfire during subsequent fighting, in addition to unspecified number of soldiers and TPNPB fighters; hundreds of civilians reported to have fled to mountains. TPNPB video said group would continue armed resistance until it achieves self-determination; Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs General Wiranto dismissed idea of entering talks with group govt called “criminals”. TPNPB also called for govt to allow foreign journalists and international aid organisations to access area. Amid concern over suffering of civilians who had fled fighting, Papuan Governor Lukas Enembe 20 Dec called on President Jokowi to withdraw troops, and said local authorities would establish task force to investigate killings. Govt denied report in Australian newspaper late Dec that military had used chemical weapon white phosphorus in operation. Earlier in month, over 500 people reportedly arrested as thousands of people joined rallies in urban areas in Papua and West Papua as well as other parts of Indonesia 1 Dec marking 57th anniversary of West Papuan declaration of independence from Dutch rule; over a dozen protesters reported injured in Surabaya on Java island after clashing with nationalist paramilitary forces. UN Human Rights Office spokesperson said violence by armed groups was “unacceptable”, also that it was “troubled by the crackdown over peaceful demonstrations and increasing reports of excessive use of force by security forces, harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions in Papua”.

► **Myanmar** Tensions rose in northern Rakhine state, while ethnic conflict continued despite military’s unilateral ceasefire in Shan and Kachin states. In Rakhine state, discovery of bullet-ridden body of a policeman missing since being ambushed in Maungdaw township, and killing of two Buddhist men, prompted launch of military “clearance operations”; perpetrators unknown. Fears continued among Rohingya refugees in camps Bangladesh following Dhaka’s abortive attempt to repatriate almost 500 refugee families back to Rakhine state, compounded by fears over possible change in Bangladesh policy following its elections 30 Dec; Rohingya continued attempts to make dangerous boat trip across Bay of Bengal from camps in Bangladesh and from Rakhine state. International pressure on govt continued: U.S. House of Representatives 13 Dec passed resolution declaring military campaign against Rohingya a genocide, adding to growing momentum in EU and U.S. for new round of sanctions. EU 10 Dec decided to move ahead with more targeted sanctions on seven military and border guard officers; bloc scheduled to decide in Jan whether to formally begin process for revoking Myanmar’s trade preferences, amid ongoing concern over impact on hundreds of thousands of workers in garment industry. U.S. decided late-Nov to move ahead with sanctions against Myanmar related to trafficking in persons, requiring U.S. representatives to vote against any new support to govt by international financial institutions and placing significant restrictions on U.S. aid. Conflict between ethnic armed groups in Shan state continued amid fears it will further deteriorate in coming months, including between competing Shan factions. In surprise move, military 21 Dec announced four-month unilateral ceasefire against ethnic armed groups in Shan and Kachin states. Rakhine state not included in ceasefire, and month saw continuation of series of clashes there and in adjacent southern Chin state between Myanmar

military and Arakan Army; military 6 Dec acknowledged several officers had been killed.

➡ **Philippines** Month saw intense clashes between military and communist New People's Army (NPA) amid announcement of new counter-insurgency task force, while govt extended martial law in Mindanao and preparations continued for plebiscite to implement 2014 Bangsamoro peace agreement. Congress 12 Dec approved by 235-28 extension of martial law in Mindanao for third time until end-2019. President Duterte appointed newly-retired army chief of staff Carlito Galvez Jr as new presidential peace adviser, fuelling concerns over possible militarisation of approach to peace. Duterte 4 Dec signed Executive Order creating National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict by addressing root causes including delivery of basic services and social development in affected areas; also includes "mechanism for localised peace engagements or negotiations". Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) founder José María Sison said move intended to "terminate and prevent the resumption of peace talks at the appropriate national level". Govt rejected CPP's unilateral temporary ceasefire around holidays. Fighting between military and NPA included suspected NPA attacks on security forces in Bicol region and Capiz, one civilian killed; NPA raid in Sibagat, Agusan del Sur, 19 Dec, kidnapping twelve soldiers; clash in Compostela Valley 27 Dec wounding eleven soldiers. Congressman Rodel Batocabe shot dead 22 Dec in eastern Albay province along with police escort, amid concerns over possible violence around 2019 elections; NPA denied involvement. Clashes continued with Abu Sayyaf, including near Sulu's Patikul 7 and 13 Dec killing two soldiers and several suspected militants; Duterte 17 Dec activated new 11th Infantry Division in Jolo, Sulu, to combat Abu Sayyaf. Clashes also continued with Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, including reported attack on army camp in Ampatuan, Maguindanao province 4 Dec. Bombing at mall in Cotabato City 31 Dec killed two, wounded 34. Electoral commission 7 Dec opened campaign period for plebiscite on Bangsamoro Organic Law to take place on 21 Jan in ARMM, Cotabato City and Isabela City, and on 6 Feb in Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato and local govt units that petitioned to take part.

➡ **South China Sea** U.S. allies continued efforts to balance China's Pacific influence, and South East Asian countries made further efforts to stake their claims. Chinese state-run news agency Xinhua late Nov confirmed rumours China is building its third aircraft carrier. Despite rising tensions between China and U.S. in recent months, statements following G-20 summit 1 Dec made no mention of South China Sea (SCS) disputes; meeting between U.S. and Chinese presidents at summit resulted in 90-day reprieve on U.S.-China trade frictions for continuing talks. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 10 Dec identified new Chinese construction on Bombay Reef in disputed Paracel Islands as likely part of a wider communication and surveillance system. Indonesia inaugurated military base on its Natuna Islands 18 Dec, Exclusive Economic Zone of which juts into waters claimed by China under its "nine-dash line". U.S. Senate 19 Dec approved House amendments to 2018 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, serving as policy framework for U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and reaffirming regional security commitments. Philippines Defence Minister Delfin Lorenzana 20 Dec told press conference: "If we see Chinese actions that are not consistent with our national interest, we are going to protest China", and: "We will still continue with our activities" in West Philippine Sea, where "we will patrol regularly ... [and] continue strengthening our islands"; also said Philippines would

upgrade troop housing on Pag-asa Island in disputed Spratly archipelago. Lorenzana also said defence ministry is seeking to review provisions of 1951 mutual defence treaty between Philippines and U.S. to expand its coverage to nine islands claimed by Manila in SCS, and strengthen bilateral alliance; said issue was raised in meeting between U.S. and Philippines officials in Nov. Australia, New Zealand, Japan and U.S. continued to step up engagement with Pacific nations in what are widely seen as efforts to balance Chinese influence, while European Parliament 12 Dec adopted resolution emphasising “critical importance” of Indo-Pacific security to EU interests, calling for peaceful resolution of disputes and refraining from unilateral attempts to change status quo. Senior U.S. defence official 28 Dec called on allies to boost military presence in SCS.

➡ **Thailand** At meeting of ruling junta National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), National Legislative Assembly, cabinet, Constitution Drafting Committee and Election Commission 7 Dec with representatives from dozens of political parties to discuss upcoming general election, PM Prayuth affirmed vote will take place 24 Feb; two largest parties, Democrats and Pheu Thai, refused to participate on grounds that NCPO should not be involved in election procedures. NCPO 11 Dec partially lifted ban on political activities, allowing political parties to publicise their platforms. Opposition parties continued to question NCPO-appointed Electoral Commission’s impartiality and denounce flurry of govt cash handouts to important political constituencies and alleged govt intervention in redrawing of electoral boundaries seen as attempt to influence vote, denied by Prayuth. Amid ongoing insurgent violence in Deep South, roadside bomb killed one police officer and wounded five in Bacho, Narathiwat 24 Dec. Two bombs exploded on Samila Beach, Songkhla, 26 Dec, damaging two sculptures popular with tourists; also in Songkhla, two bombs damaged power poles while authorities disarmed four more explosive devices. Roadside bomb wounded four civilians in Si Sakhon district, Narathiwat 28 Dec. Insurgents attacked security outpost in Rangae district, causing no injuries, and authorities recovered six small bombs in Chanae and Tak Bai districts. On 29 Dec, three rangers wounded in ambush in Si Sakhon; assistant village headman killed in Mayo, Pattani; and four bombs exploded in Cho Airong, Rangae, Reusoh, and Si Sakhon districts, Narathiwat province, causing property damage.