



Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** China continued military activity around disputed islands amid joint drills with Russia, while Japan unveiled first national security strategy in almost decade.

China and Russia continued joint military drills in region. After Russia's Tu-95 bombers and Chinese H-6K bombers late Nov flew over Sea of Japan and East China Sea during eight-hour joint military drill, China and Russia 21-27 Dec held joint naval exercises dubbed "Maritime Cooperation 2022"; Japanese defence ministry 18 Dec said at least four large Chinese warships, including two Type 055 destroyers, were spotted during exercise in East China Sea. China Coast Guard vessels 21 Dec patrolled near disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, according to official statement from China.

Japan labelled China its pre-eminent security challenge in new strategy. Japan 16 Dec released its first National Security Strategy in nine years, which dubbed China as country's "greatest strategic challenge"; key policies include increasing defence spending by total of 43 trillion yen (\$313 billion) over five years, which will bring spending to 2% of annual GDP by 2027; strategy signalled clear move away from Japan's post-war pacifism.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** North Korea conducted space rocket launch and missile tests, vowing military satellite launch in April 2023, while its bellicose rhetoric hinted at further provocations to come.

Pyongyang launched space rocket and appeared to set April 2023 for satellite launch. Pyongyang 18 Dec launched what it claimed was carrier rocket for its space program and released grainy photos of South Korean capital Seoul and port city Incheon purportedly taken at 500km altitude; state media next day noted that country was now making "preparations for military reconnaissance satellite No. 1 by April 2023". Military reconnaissance satellite launch is one of five main military priorities announced by leader Kim Jong-un in Jan 2021 for 2021-2026 period.

North Korea conducted ballistic missile tests, rejected South Korea's criticism. Pyongyang 15 Dec conducted its first ever solid-fuel missile engine test at Seohae Satellite Launch Station, marking one giant step closer to obtaining solid-fuel inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability. Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong 20 Dec rejected South Korean comments, which asserted that technology used was same in ICBMs and therefore banned by UN Security Council resolutions; Kim also threatened to conduct down-range ICBM test, saying that Seoul "will immediately

recognize [North Korea's capability if] we launch an ICBM [at a normal angle]". Combined with hints that it may launch military reconnaissance satellite in April, comments underscore risk of further escalatory actions in coming months, including possible seventh nuclear test. North Korea 23 and 31 Dec fired short-range ballistic missiles and 26 Dec deployed five drones that entered south. Meanwhile, Pyongyang 23 Dec denied U.S. assessment that it delivered arms to Russia for use by private military company Wagner Group in Ukraine.

U.S. continued military drills, Japan unveiled new security strategy. U.S. 20 Dec flew nuclear-capable bombers and stealth fighter jets during joint military drills with South Korean jets in remote corner of south. Japan 16 Dec released first national security strategy in nine years, pledging focus on three areas related to Korean Peninsula: North Korea's state-sponsored abductions of Japanese citizens in 1970s and 80s, North Korean nuclear issue, and Pyongyang's missile programs.

➔ **Taiwan Strait China maintained frequent aerial and maritime activity around island, including largest-scale single day aerial incursion this year, while U.S. continued military support for Taiwan.**

China continued military presence around island and coercive trade practices. At least 472 Chinese military aircraft were detected entering Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) during month, of which at least 191 either crossed unofficial maritime demarcation known as "median line" or were detected in south west of ADIZ near strategic Bashi Channel; Taiwan reported 112 sightings of Chinese navy vessels in surrounding waters. Notably, China 27 Dec sent 71 warplanes into Taiwan's ADIZ, of which 47 crossed the median line – marking biggest number in single day reported this year. Policy chief of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party Koichi Hagiuda same day became most senior member of ruling party to visit Taiwan in 19 years; Hagiuda remarked that Beijing should refrain from using force to change status quo. China 10 Dec suspended shipments of seafood, beer, liquor and other beverages from key suppliers from Taiwan, citing failure to comply with new customs registration system introduced last year; move is widely seen as latest attempt to economically coerce Taiwan. Taiwan 27 Dec announced extension of its conscription military service from current four months to one year, which will come into effect in Jan 2024.

U.S. continued militarily supporting Taiwan. U.S. Congress 8 Dec passed National Defense Authorisation Act, which will provide as much as \$10bn loan to Taiwan over five years to acquire weapons in bid to enhance its defence capability against China; Beijing responded that it "firmly reject[s] the negative content about China from the bill" and urged U.S. to stop using Taiwan to contain China. Canada's FM Melanie Joly 5 Dec said Ottawa plans to send more warships through Taiwan Strait, as it aims to play bigger role in Indo-Pacific; Canada recently launched its Indo-Pacific Strategy in which it described China as "increasingly disruptive power".

South Asia

↓ Afghanistan Taliban banned women from universities and NGOs, prompting backlash and dramatic disruption of aid flows as civilians struggle to survive amid economic hardship and severe winter.

Taliban banned women from working for NGOs and attending universities. In dramatic decision, Taliban 24 Dec ordered “all national and international organisations to stop females working” immediately, next day exempted health workers. UN and some major NGOs paused some humanitarian assistance to signal disapproval, partially scaling back aid operations, which could have calamitous impact on one of the world’s largest humanitarian response. Earlier, UN Under Sec-Gen for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths 20 Dec reported that amid sub-zero winter temperatures, 97% of Afghans live in poverty, two-thirds need humanitarian assistance to survive and half population require access to clean water; Griffiths also warned “third consecutive drought is looming”. Further deepening restrictions imposed on women since banning girls from public secondary schools in March 2022, Taliban 20 Dec forbade university education for women countrywide; ban removed any illusions that educational restrictions on girls and women could be temporary.

Insecurity persisted amid attacks by Islamic State. Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) 2 Dec conducted two attacks in capital Kabul seemingly using foreign fighters from Central Asia, one targeting Pakistani ambassador and another attacking former warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in his mosque; assaults indicated increasing capacity and will by IS-KP to attack high-profile targets. IS-KP foreign fighters 12 Dec targeted Chinese-owned hotel inside Kabul, wounding at least five individuals. Meanwhile, armed opposition group Afghanistan Freedom Front showed increasing operational capacity in Dec inside Kandahar province (south). UN sec-gen 16 Dec reported that between mid-Aug and mid-Nov, country had witnessed 23% rise in security-related incidents compared to same period last year.

Taliban and Pakistani border forces clashed. Taliban border forces 11 Dec launched cross-border artillery and mortars into Pakistan, killing at least seven civilians and wounding 17 in Chaman, one of main border crossings. Further clashes 15 Dec erupted, with Taliban forces opening fire on Pakistani military personnel repairing section of border fence in Chaman, killing civilian and injuring 15 others.

↓ Bangladesh Violence and instability escalated as police and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) clashed, with further unrest possible.

Violence rose amid large-scale anti-govt rallies and police crackdown. Police arrested two, including BNP local leader, in connection with two homemade bomb explosions near ruling Awami League rally in Pirojpur district 6 Dec, which injured four. BNP activists 7 Dec clashed with police raiding central office in capital, killing student leader and injuring at least 50 others. Police 8 Dec arrested hundreds of BNP leaders and supporters. Police 9 Dec filed charges against 200 BNP leaders and activists allegedly linked to five homemade bomb explosions in Barisal district’s Babuganj sub-district previous day; police claimed they were attacked

with Molotov cocktails as information minister 9 Dec claimed police recovered 15 bombs at BNP headquarters. At massive anti-govt rally in capital Dhaka, BNP 10 Dec disclosed ten-point agenda that included resignation of govt and early polls; all seven BNP members of parliament next day resigned, with by-elections scheduled for 1 Feb. BNP and police clashes 24 Dec killed one party leader and injured 50 in Panchagarh district. BNP 30 Dec announced another rally in Dhaka for 11 Jan, raising risks of more political violence.

Proscribed Islamist group voiced support for BNP and clashed with police. Days after Jamaat-i-Islami – country's largest and banned Islamist party – declared its support for BNP's anti-govt movement, police 13 Dec arrested its top leader in Dhaka under Anti-Terrorism Act. Protests by Jamaat supporters against leader's detention 23-24 Dec led to clashes with police and scores of arrests in Dinajur town, Chittagong city and Lakshmipur district. Further arrests 30 Dec led to clashes with protesters that injured ten police officers in Dhaka.

Insecurity continued in Rohingya refugee camps. Gunfight between Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and rival armed group over drug trafficking in Cox's Bazar Ukhiya camp 9 Dec killed two. In Ukhiya camp, assailants 22 Dec shot dead four Rohingyas and 26 Dec Rohingya leader. First group of 24 Rohingya refugees to be resettled in U.S. 8 Dec left Bangladesh, part of anticipated annual intake of 300-800; Dhaka previously resisted third-country resettlement.

↓ **India Indian and Chinese soldiers fought hand-to-hand along disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) in first clash in two-and-a-half years, injuring dozens.**

Scuffle broke out between Indian and Chinese troops along LAC. In first violent incident since deadly Galwan Valley clash in June 2020, Indian and Chinese soldiers 9 Dec violently confronted each other along LAC in Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh state (north east), leaving around 30 Indian and unknown number of Chinese soldiers with minor injuries; both sides reportedly disengaged immediately and local commanders 11 Dec met to discuss incident. Govt 13 Dec said that Indian soldiers prevented Chinese troops from crossing into Indian territory to “unilaterally change the status quo”, while China claimed that Indian soldiers “illegally” crossed LAC and “blocked” Chinese routine patrol. Clash prompted uproar in parliament: opposition parties 14 Dec walked out of both houses after chairpersons refused to discuss situation on LAC and 20 Dec accused govt of “legitimising Chinese aggression” – marking first major public criticism of PM Modi's handling of border crisis since June 2020. National Congress party 21 Dec staged opposition protest to demand discussion on LAC dispute. FM S. Jaishankar 30 Dec said relations with China are “not normal” and “[India] will never agree to any attempt to change the [LAC] unilaterally”.

Maoist violence continued in east and centre. In Jharkhand state (east), Maoists 1 Dec injured five security personnel in clashes in West Singhbhum district; 12 Dec set two construction vehicles on fire in Chatra district. In Odisha state (east), security forces 6 Dec killed two Maoist cadres in Kandhamal district. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), security forces 20 Dec killed one Maoist in Bijapur district.

Govt resisted calls to cease imports of Russian oil. During German FM Annalena Baerbock's visit 5 Dec, S. Jaishankar, when asked about India's imports of Russian oil, stressed that European countries prioritised energy needs and continued importing Russian oil in first months of Ukraine war, thus cannot "ask India to do something else". PM Modi 16 Dec reportedly urged "dialogue and diplomacy" in phone call with President Putin.

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Acrimonious atmosphere continued between India and Pakistan, while onset of winter saw slight reduction in violence in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K).**

New Delhi and Islamabad continued tit-for-tat verbal attacks. Pakistan's newly appointed army chief Asim Munir 3 Dec condemned India's "highly irresponsible statements", vowing "to take the fight to the enemy if ever war is imposed on us". New Delhi 13 Dec condemned visit by sec-gen of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on 10-12 Dec to Pakistan-administered Kashmir, calling sec-gen "mouthpiece of Pakistan"; Islamabad 15 Dec rejected criticism. Pakistani FM Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari 14 Dec said there was "clear evidence" that India had "planned and supported" June 2021 terror attack in Pakistan's Lahore city. India's FM S. Jaishankar 15 Dec accused Pakistan of sheltering Osama bin Laden, calling country "epicentre of terrorism"; Bhutto-Zardari next day responded that bin Laden was dead but "the butcher of Gujarat" was alive, referring to PM Modi, who was chief minister of Gujarat state during bloody anti-Muslim riots in 2002.

Militant attacks and security operations decreased with onset of winter. Security forces 2 Dec claimed to have foiled infiltration attempt by Pakistani militants into Baramulla district's Uri sector. Unidentified persons 16 Dec shot and killed two civilians in Rajouri district in Jammu region. Security forces 20 Dec claimed to have killed three Laskhar-e-Tayyaba militants in Shopian district. Security forces claimed to have recovered drugs sent across international border from Pakistan to India's Punjab region via drones on 3, 5 and 6 Dec.

Officials downplayed militancy, as J&K chief introduced unique identification numbers. Minister of state for home 7 Dec told parliament that there were 123 militancy-related incidents in J&K during 2022, resulting in deaths of 31 security forces personnel, 31 civilians and 180 militants. Kashmir's police chief 11 Dec said there were no top militant commanders left since security forces had killed 44 this year. J&K Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha 12 Dec said administration will roll out eight-digit unique identification number for families in Union Territory "for speedy and transparent implementation of social security schemes"; Peoples Democratic Party President Mehbooba Mufti warned that this was yet another "surveillance tactic".

➔ **Nepal Maoist chief "Prachanda" became new PM after breaking alliance with Nepali Congress and partnering once more with KP Oli, raising concerns over durability of broad new coalition.**

Political jostling after final election results birthed another Prachanda-Oli alliance, denying Nepali Congress power. In official results following Nov poll, Nepali Congress cemented position as largest party in parliament, securing 89 out of 275 total seats in House of Representatives; Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) won 78 seats, while Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre)

won 32 seats. However, tensions between Nepali Congress and Maoists prevented formation of new govt, specifically due to impasse between Nepali Congress leader Sher Bahadur Deuba and Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal “Prachanda” over who would lead new govt first. President Bhandari 18 Dec gave parties seven days to form new govt. After Nepali Congress-Maoist talks faltered, Unified Marxist-Leninist chair and former PM KP Oli 25 Dec struck deal with Prachanda, forming new coalition govt led by Unified Marxist-Leninist, Maoists and five other parties, with Prachanda and Oli splitting up prime ministership in deal mirroring one that underpinned UML-Maoist govt formed in 2017. Prachanda 26 Dec took oath as PM. Concerns proliferated, however, over political stability and durability of new govt given ideological tensions between coalition partners and history of acrimony between Prachanda and Oli, specifically latter’s refusal to cede prime ministership in Dec 2020.

➔ **Pakistan Political turmoil continued to roil country amid standoff between govt and former PM Imran Khan, Pakistani Taliban launched major attacks, and border clashes continued with Afghan Taliban.**

Khan’s bid to dissolve provincial assemblies awaited court decisions. After Khan late Nov threatened to dissolve two Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led govts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, Khan 2 Dec demanded govt enter talks about snap polls or face elections “in almost 66 per cent of Pakistan”; govt same day rejected ultimatum. Punjab governor 22 Dec dismissed Punjab chief minister (Khan ally) for failing to obtain vote of confidence in assembly. Lahore High Court next day reinstated chief minister, providing assembly would not be dissolved until court 11 Jan resumed hearing on case, and 26 Dec put Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly on hold till decision on Punjab’s case. PTI leader 30 Dec claimed govt had discussed, and PTI rejected, interim govt of technocrats; cabinet minister same day denied plan, raising suspicions it was military-devised. PTI 31 Dec resumed countrywide anti-govt protests.

Attacks by Pakistani Taliban in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province sharply escalated. Pakistani Taliban claimed series of deadly assaults: notably, militants 6 Dec stormed police post in Bannu, killing constable; militants 14 Dec shot dead female schoolteacher in Peshawar; group 17 Dec attacked police station in Lakki Marwat district, killing four police constables. In significant escalation, Pakistani Taliban 18 Dec stormed facility run by Counter-Terrorism Department in Bannu, holding security personnel hostage; security forces 20 Dec launched operation, which defence minister claimed killed 33 militants, freed all hostages and left two soldiers dead. Suicide attack 20 Dec killed at least one soldier and two civilians in North Waziristan. In first such attack in capital in eight years, suicide attack by Pakistani Taliban 23 Dec killed one police officer. Groups’ attacks also spiked in Balochistan province.

Pakistani and Afghan Taliban border forces clashed. Taliban border forces 11 Dec launched cross-border artillery and mortars, killing at least seven civilians and wounding 17 in Chaman, one of main border crossings. Further clashes 15 Dec erupted, with Taliban forces opening fire on Pakistani military personnel repairing section of border fence in Chaman, killing civilian and injuring 15 others.

➔ **Sri Lanka Govt pursued plan to exit near-unprecedented economic hardship facing millions, and renewed calls to political parties to endorse plan to address decades-old ethnic conflict.**

Govt sought relief amid acute economic and humanitarian crises. Inflation fell from record levels but remained high at 57% in Dec; govt 15 Dec reported economy shrank 11.8% in July-Sept quarter, marking second-worst quarterly contraction ever. World Food Programme and UN Food and Agriculture Organisation early Dec reported that 6.3mn people (30% of population) were food insecure, while over 60% of families were eating less, and eating cheaper, less nutritious food. World Bank 6 Dec confirmed its decision to renew govt's eligibility for concessional loans from International Development Association; President Wickremesinghe same day presided over roundtable discussion with World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, who were later reported to have endorsed a "coordinated assistance program" to address economic crisis. Central bank governor 20 Dec confirmed debt restructuring negotiations with bilateral creditors were progressing more slowly than hoped. Meanwhile, parliament 8 Dec approved budget with comfortable majority of 123 votes (out of 225), winning support from most of now-fragmented Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party led by Rajapaksas.

Govt provided accelerated initiative to address ethnic conflict. At All-Party Conference held 13 Dec, Wickremesinghe reiterated his appeal for all political parties to agree on solution to ethnic problem by country's 75th anniversary on 4 Feb, specifically by: addressing immediate concerns of Tamils, especially in north and east; establishing "truth-seeking" process to address legacy of war and conflict-related violence; and constitutional reforms to strengthen devolution of power to provinces. Despite positive responses from party leaders in attendance, scepticism is high they can achieve consensus so quickly on issue that has violently riven Sri Lankan politics for decades. Wickremesinghe 21 Dec met Tamil National Alliance leaders for follow-up discussions on release of prisoners and land.

Local election preparations continued. Elections commission chief 28 Dec announced that nominations for local govt elections would be called before 5 Jan, with vote held before 10 March.

South East Asia

➔ **Myanmar Violence between regime and resistance forces continued, as late Nov fragile ceasefire held in Rakhine State, while U.K., Canada, U.S. and UN Security Council censured regime.**

Military continued operations, notably in Shan State; late-Nov pause in Rakhine State continued. Military continued major military operations during month; notably, ground and air forces 7 Dec launched surprise attack on ethnic armed group Ta'ang National Liberation Army close to Namhsan township headquarters, Shan State, conducting 30 airstrikes and shelling area for five days. Ceasefire in Rakhine State declared late Nov between Arakan Army (AA) and regime held throughout month despite little attempt by sides to de-escalate, with both AA and regime troops still entrenched amid regime redeployments and ongoing arrests of

AA members; deal could collapse any time. Tatmadaw 4 Dec detained prominent Kachin civil society leader Rev. Hkalam Samson at Mandalay Airport.

Evidence surfaced of serious abuses at hands of People's Defence Force (PDF). In Sagaing region, video 3 Dec emerged purportedly showing resistance group torturing and executing woman accused of being military informant in Tamu township; unnamed Tamu People's Defence Force (PDF) member said video was six months old; National Unity Govt (NUG) 5 Dec commenced investigation. PDF Kantbalu Battalion 4 on 1 Dec detained lawyer San San Yi along with two others in Shwebo township, next day killed her in Kantbalu township and released other detainees; NUG 8 Dec confirmed investigation into her death.

Canada and UK imposed new sanctions, U.S. passed bill to support anti-regime forces. Marking Human Rights Day 10 Dec, Canada sanctioned three entities and 12 individuals including military personnel, cabinet members and arms dealers, while UK sanctioned Office of the Chief of Military Affairs Security and Light Infantry Divisions 33 and 99. U.S. Congress 15 Dec passed National Defense Authorisation Act, which included clauses to support NUG and other anti-military groups; provided for humanitarian assistance, including for first time to ethnic armed groups; and supported (but did not mandate) sanctions against state-run Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise. UN Security Council 21 Dec adopted first Myanmar resolution in seven decades, calling on junta to release all political prisoners.

➔ **Philippines Insecurity persisted in south amid ongoing militant arrests and surrenders, while clashes between govt and Communist rebels continued as communist party founder died.**

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)-linked militants clashed with military in south. Philippine paramilitary 9 Dec fought MILF-affiliated armed group in Aleosan town, Cotabato province, allegedly over longstanding land feud, killing nine and wounding six. Decommissioning phase of peace process between govt and MILF continued at slower pace due to Dec holidays.

Militant arrests and surrenders continued in south. Police and military 15 Dec arrested two Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members allegedly involved in kidnappings and killing during joint execution of search warrant in Panamao town, Sulu province, with five others escaping. Meanwhile, 44 Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters belonging to Karialan faction members 9 Dec surrendered to army in Kabacan town, Maguindanao province, handing over firearms and explosives.

Communist insurgency killed two, senior communist party leader died abroad. Military operations and some militant ambushes by communist New People's Army (NPA) in Mindanao Island in south, Visayas Islands in centre and Luzon Island in north claimed three combatant and civilian fatalities and ten injuries. Military 13 Dec reported dismantling of Eastern Mindanao Command and six NPA units primarily in Davao and Bukidnon regions, Mindanao. Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) founder Jose Maria Sison 16 Dec died in Netherlands; Department of National Defense urged insurgents to surrender, while minority bloc in House celebrated Sison as "patriot and revolutionary" calling for renewed peace talks. CPP 20 Dec said NPA would not observe ceasefire over holiday season.

➔ **South China Sea Tensions surfaced between Philippines and China over disputed claims, as new imagery revealed alleged Chinese construction in Spratly Islands.**

Philippines asserted South China Sea (SCS) claims amid ongoing tensions with China. Philippine President Marcos Jr. 1 Dec reiterated Manila could still exploit SCS energy resources even without reaching deal with China, as ongoing talks on joint energy exploration stalled amid overlapping territorial claims and sovereignty concerns. Philippines 14 Dec expressed “great concern” over “unacceptable” continued Chinese presence near Iriquois Reef and Sabina Shoal in disputed Spratly Islands. U.S. 19 Dec echoed concern over “escalating swarms” of unsafe Chinese Coast Guards vessels encountering Philippines navy; China next day slammed remarks as “unfounded accusation”. Manila 22 Dec ordered military to strengthen presence in SCS, citing “Chinese activities” in disputed waters close to Pagada (Thitu) Island. Meanwhile, satellite images released 20 Dec showed newly developed formations appearing over previously unoccupied land formations over past year at Eldad Reef in northern Spratlys and neighbouring Lankiam Cay, Whitsun Reef and Sandy Cay; China next day dismissed allegations it was responsible as “completely untrue”. U.S. military 29 Dec said that Chinese fighter jet performed unsafe maneuver during intercept of U.S. Air Force jet.

➔ **Thailand Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) and Thai govt resumed peace talks amid ongoing violence in deep south, while concern amplified over ill-health of princess, presumed to be royal successor.**

BRN and Thai govt engaged in dialogue to resolve ongoing conflict. Main insurgent group BRN and Thai officials 7-9 Dec met in German capital Berlin; BRN 10 Dec said group and govt were drawing up “roadmap”, including provisions for safety and legal immunity of BRN representatives to facilitate consultations with locals in southernmost Thai provinces, and shared BRN’s aim of “democratic governance system”. BRN and Thai delegations’ technical teams met 19 Dec in Malaysia.

Violent attacks persisted during month in deep south. In Songkhla province, bomb 3 Dec exploded under railway tracks in Sadao district in rare attack, derailing freight train. IED 6 Dec detonated at temporary command post, killing three railway workers and wounding four others. In Bannang Satar district, Yala province, unidentified assailants 6 Dec shot and killed rubber buyer. Militants 14 Dec launched two attacks in Bannang Satar sub-district; attack on security checkpoint wounded four rangers. Militants 31 Dec set fire to car tyres on major roads in Panare, Mayo and Nong Chik districts, Pattani province, as well as police checkpoint in Mayo district. Gunmen same day fired shots at army base in Yaring district, Pattani.

In other important developments. Princess Bajrakitiyabha Narendira Debyavati – widely presumed to be successor of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, despite no official confirmation – 14 Dec fell unconscious at army base in Nakhon Ratchasima province and was taken to hospital; palace next day announced princess was in stable condition. Independent journalist citing palace sources same day reported doctors had pronounced princess dead, with palace allegedly withholding

announcement until after new year. Meanwhile, HTMS *Sukhothai* 19 Dec sank in Gulf of Thailand during storm while conducting ceremony on death anniversary of Prince of Chumphon, regarded as “Father of the Thai Navy”; as of 1 Jan, 76 of 105 passengers were rescued and 24 bodies recovered, with five still missing.