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## CrisisWatch 2023 – February Trends and March Alerts

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# Asia

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## North East Asia

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➔ **China/Japan** China continued military activity in Japan's territorial waters, while Tokyo and Beijing held high-level security talks.

*China continued maritime activity in region amid Japan-U.S. military drills.* As of 26 Feb, Japanese Coast Guard had spotted 86 Chinese vessels in Japan's contiguous zone. Notably, Chinese Navy survey vessel 12 Feb crossed into Japanese territorial waters from south west of Yakushima island, marking seventh entry by such a ship into seas off Kagoshima city since Nov 2021, with last sighting in Dec 2022. Tokyo 14 Feb said three unidentified flying objects spotted over its territory in Nov 2019, June 2020 and Sept 2021 are "strongly suspected" to have been Chinese spy balloons. Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force and U.S. Marine Corps 16 Feb held large-scale joint drills in south-western Japan, simulating defending and recapturing small islands, until 12 March.

*Tokyo and Beijing discussed contested islands and Taiwan.* In their first conversation, recently appointed Chinese FM Qin Gang and Japanese counterpart Yoshimasa Hayashi 2 Feb discussed East China Sea and Taiwan Strait; Qin expressed Beijing's hopes Japan can stop "right-wing forces" from provoking disputes over contested islands, while Hayashi noted Japanese public opinion regarding China is "extremely severe" and also expressed "serious concern" about China's increasing military activity near Japan and Taiwan; pair agreed to continue close communication "at all levels". Sides 22 Feb held first high-level security talks in four years in Japanese capital Tokyo; China cited Japanese military build-up as worry, while Japan highlighted concerns about disputed islands, China's ties to Russia and Chinese surveillance balloons.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** North Korea continued spate of provocative missile launches amid U.S.-South Korea drills, raising prospect of escalation around allied military exercises in March.

*North Korea elevated threats amid frequent missile tests.* Pyongyang seized upon perceived threats posed by U.S. and South Korea as pretext for planned military testing. Notably, North Korea 18 Feb launched Hwaseong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile on lofted trajectory, which reached almost 6000km altitude before falling into East Sea/Sea of Japan. South Korea and U.S. 19 Feb conducted joint drills involving B1-B strategic bombers. North Korea 20 Feb launched two "tactical nuclear" 600mm rockets at targets 395km and 337km away; U.S. and ten other states same day raised missile launch two days prior at UN Security Council,

though no agreement was reached on Council response. After South Korean, U.S. and Japanese Aegis-equipped destroyers 22 Feb participated in missile defence drill off peninsula's eastern coast, Pyongyang next day fired four long-range cruise missiles on 2000km trajectories. U.S. 23 Feb said it held tabletop drill with Seoul simulating North Korea using nuclear weapon, at which North Korea expressed deep concern. North Korea 24 Feb indicated further actions to come, underscoring likelihood of period of military escalation in coming weeks, potentially around U.S.-South Korea 11-day spring military exercise that commences mid-March.

*North held military parade to mark anniversary.* Pyongyang 8 Feb held late-night military parade to mark founding of country's military. Though largely aimed at domestic audiences, event allowed military to display numerous intercontinental ballistic missiles.

*Row erupted over nuclear contamination claims.* South Korea 24 Feb offered to test for nuclear contamination almost one thousand North Korean defector-migrants from regions near North Korea's only nuclear test facility at Punggye-ri in remote north east; offer followed 21 Feb report by Seoul-based NGO Transitional Justice Working Group that claimed many thousands of North Koreans from towns and villages near nuclear test site may have been exposed to contaminated water.

**► Taiwan Strait China maintained frequent aerial and maritime activity around island, while opposition party Kuomintang (KMT) went to China, and U.S. and Taiwan exchanged visits by senior officials.**

*China continued military presence around island.* As of 27 Feb, Taiwan detected 311 Chinese military aircraft entering its air defence identification zone (ADIZ) during month, of which at least 110 either crossed unofficial maritime demarcation known as "median line" or were detected in south-western ADIZ near strategic Bashi Channel; Taiwan reported 109 sightings of Chinese naval vessels in surrounding waters in course of month. Notably, Taiwan 1 Feb activated missile systems and scrambled jets in response to operations by 34 Chinese military aircraft and nine warships, including 20 aircraft crossing median line.

*Taiwan opposition delegation visited China.* Ahead of Taiwan's presidential election in Jan 2024, main opposition party KMT's Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia 8-17 Feb led delegation to China, meeting with newly appointed Director of Taiwan Affairs Office Song Tao and China's top Taiwan affairs official Wang Huning; KMT said visit concerned needs of Taiwanese based in China, Chinese business regulations and developing ties with Chinese officials; Song and Wang both expressed China's desire to enhance mutual trust and cooperation with KMT on basis of "1992 consensus". Shanghai's Taiwan Affairs Office officials 18-20 Feb visited Taiwan following invitation by Taipei city authorities, marking first visit by Chinese officials to Taiwan since borders reopened last Oct.

*Taiwan and U.S. continued defence ties and exchanged visits by senior officials.* Taiwan 8 Feb signed two contracts with U.S. worth total of \$85mn to maintain its fleet of F-16 fighter jets. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Chase 17 Feb arrived in Taiwan, marking visit by most senior U.S. defence official since 2019. Bipartisan U.S. congressional delegation 21 Feb met President Tsai, who confirmed two countries "continue to bolster military exchanges". Reports late month indicated U.S. looking to expand its small troop presence in Taiwan to help

train Taiwanese forces. FM Joseph Wu and National Security Council Sec Gen Wellington Ku 23 Feb visited Washington for [security dialogue](#) with senior U.S. officials, including Deputy Sec State Wendy Sherman.

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## **South Asia**

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➡ **Afghanistan Taliban killed Islamic State members while violence continued in south; senior Taliban officials voiced veiled criticism of leadership, signalling dissatisfaction with country's direction.**

*Taliban forces claimed victories over Islamic State, violence persisted in south.* Feb saw lowest levels of violent incidents countrywide since Taliban takeover in Aug 2021, notwithstanding Taliban raids on Islamic State hideouts and incidents in south. Social media accounts linked to Islamic State's local branch (ISKP) 21 Feb claimed that Taliban security forces 14 Feb killed Ejaz Ahmad Ahangar, head of group's Indian chapter known as Islamic State Hind. Taliban 27 Feb confirmed they had killed Qari Fateh – head of ISKP's intelligence and operations and mastermind behind group's recent attacks in capital Kabul – in raid in Kabul. Taliban authorities late Jan launched website aimed at countering ISKP propaganda, which criticised Taliban's relations with China and urged Uighur militant group Turkestan Islamic Party to join ISKP. Meanwhile, in addition to Afghan Freedom Front activity, Afghanistan Liberation Movement (both composed mostly of former security members) claimed attacks in south against Taliban; notably, Afghanistan Liberation Movement gunmen 8 Feb killed Taliban judge in Helmand province. Inter-tribal grievances pitting pro-Taliban elements of Noorzai tribe against anti-Taliban rival southern tribes appear to be driving conflict.

*Senior officials signalled potential disapproval of draconian policies.* Several top officials offered subtle yet notable criticism of Taliban leadership. Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani 11 Feb stated govt's responsibility was to avoid monopolising power. Deputy PM Abdul Salam Hanafi 13 Feb indirectly criticised shutdown of girls' schooling, stating that development of country without strengthening and modernising educational institutions was “mere fantasy” and Islamic scholars ought to find solutions to people's problems rather than declare everything prohibited. Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob 15 Feb stated that govt leaders “must respond to the legitimate demands of the people”. Comments may signal attempted pushback against recent draconian measures reportedly spearheaded by emir.

*Islamabad urged Taliban to curtail Pakistani Taliban.* Senior Pakistani delegation 22 Feb met top Taliban security officials in Kabul, reportedly to urge authorities to curb Pakistani Taliban's presence in Afghanistan amid series of deadly attacks in Pakistan (see Pakistan).

➡ **Bangladesh Ruling Awami League continued clampdown on opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), while violence persisted in Rohingya refugee camps.**

*BNP held anti-govt rallies countrywide, leading to violent clashes.* Calling for govt to step down and next election to be held under caretaker administration, BNP and allies 11 Feb held rallies in Narayanganj, Sirajganj, Natore, Bogra, Jamalpur,

Ghazipur, Barguna and Narsingdi districts, which led to clashes with Awami League supporters that left over 100 BNP leaders and supporters injured; police arrested scores of BNP and opposition Jamaat-e-Islami supporters. Election commissioner 14 Feb announced general election to be held between late Dec and early Jan. BNP sec gen 17 Feb reiterated demands and accused police of torturing and killing opposition activists; earlier, NGO Human Rights Watch 3 Feb had called on authorities to investigate allegations of forced disappearances. Court 20 Feb upheld govt's late Dec order shutting down BNP newspaper.

*Violence in Rohingya camps continued.* Assailant 16 Feb shot and injured Rohingya camp leader and armed Rohingya women same day reportedly shot dead woman; shooters 22 Feb targeted another camp leader who died next day. Govt report 15 Feb revealed ten militant and criminal groups active in Rohingya camps and said violent clashes between Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army – dominant group in most camps – and rival Nabi Hossen Dakat Dal often resulted in casualties. As envoys from France, Japan, China and UN agencies visited Bhasan Char camps to monitor living conditions, World Food Programme 17 Feb said it would reduce food assistance to Rohingya refugees from \$12 to \$10 per person, citing funding shortfall, and warned of “immense and long-lasting” food insecurity repercussions.

*Authorities arrested suspected militants.* Paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) 7 Feb arrested five militants of Christian-dominated tribal group Kuki-Chin National Front, which is fighting for separate state in some Chittagong Hill Tracts regions, amid reported gunfight in Bandarband district. RAB director next day said 14 members of group, and 43 militants from aligned outfit Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, had been arrested in operation under way since Oct 2022. Authorities 21 Feb arrested Jama'atul Ansar chief in Dhaka.

➡ **India Govt bolstered border presence as it held talks with China on disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC), while Maoist violence continued.**

*Govt shored up presence along border and continued talks with China.* Amid border dispute with China, govt 15 Feb mandated seven new battalions of paramilitary Indo-Tibetan Border Police to guard full length of 3,488km India-China border. Govt same day approved construction of Shinku La tunnel to boost connectivity between Ladakh region (location of LAC) and neighbouring Himachal Pradesh state, and allocated \$580mn to boost development and tourism in villages along disputed border. Govt and Chinese officials 22 Feb held bilateral consultation mechanism meeting in Chinese capital Beijing, discussing disengagement on remaining friction points along LAC and pledging to “continue discussions through diplomatic and military channels”.

*Maoist violence continued in centre and south east.* In Chhattisgarh state (centre), suspected Maoists 5 Feb killed tribal leader and member of ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Bijapur district; 20 Feb killed police constable in Bijapur district and two policemen in Rajnandgaon district; 25 Feb killed three security personnel in clashes in Sukma district. In Andhra Pradesh state (south east), security forces 20 Feb arrested two Maoists in Alluri Sitaramaraju district and 22 Feb arrested local Maoist leader during clashes near border with Odisha state.

*In other important developments.* Tax authorities 14 Feb raided news channel BBC's offices in New Delhi and Mumbai, in apparent retaliation for broadcasting in Jan documentary examining PM Modi's rise and role during 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim riot. Bajrang Dal – Hindu nationalist militant group with ties to BJP – 15 Feb allegedly kidnapped two Muslims suspected of cow smuggling in Rajasthan state's (north west) Bharatpur district; police next day found victims' burned bodies in neighbouring Haryana state. Meanwhile, hundreds of residents from Ladakh region – which govt split from Jammu and Kashmir state and turned into separate union territory in 2019 – 15 Feb held protest in capital New Delhi, demanding statehood and constitutional safeguards.

➡ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Acrimony persisted between India and Pakistan, while Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) witnessed insecurity, Hindu Pandits' relocation campaign and protests of property demolitions.**

*India alleged Pakistani drone operations.* Indian security agencies continued to claim they had intercepted drones infiltrating Indian territory from Pakistan. Notably, forces 3 Feb shot down drone in Punjab's Amritsar sector; 10 Feb recovered arms and drugs from intercepted drone in Punjab's Ferozepur sector and intercepted three Pakistani infiltrators in Kupwara district, killing one.

*Militant attacks and security operations remained at low ebb.* Amid harsh winter, militant activity remained reduced while security forces conducted arrests: 1 Feb arrested three alleged Lashkar-e-Tayyaba militants in Rajouri district and three more in Srinagar city 7 Feb; 3 Feb arrested six Jaish-e-Muhammad militant associates in Kulgam district. The Resistance Front claimed responsibility for reported 15 Feb attack in Srinagar; security forces 17 Feb arrested two militants of group in Srinagar. Security forces 18 Feb arrested three suspected Hizbul Mujahideen militant associates in Kulgam district. On fourth anniversary of Pulwama suicide attack that killed 40 security personnel, Kashmir's senior police official 14 Feb announced four of 19 Jaish-e-Mohammad militants involved were still at large and that group has only eight local fighters in region. Media outlet *Indian Express* 21 Feb reported govt was considering withdrawal of army from Kashmir, to be replaced by paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force.

*Hindu Pandits sought relocation, locals protested authorities' "anti-encroachment" drive.* Kashmiri Hindu Pandit govt employees continued protests, refusing to work until demands are met for transfer to Jammu from Kashmir following targeted militant attacks against them. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi early Feb urged govt "not to force Kashmiri Pandit government officials to return to the Valley amid targeted killings". Suspected militants 26 Feb killed Kashmiri Pandit man in Pulwama district. Meanwhile, J&K authorities continued anti-encroachment efforts through demolition of properties that started in Jan, triggering mass protests in Srinagar, Bathindi and Ramban on 4 Feb, while markets 15 Feb observed shutdown in Kashmir valley; people claimed authorities have not given enough time to prove ownership.

➡ **Nepal Ahead of presidential election in March, coalition govt collapsed just two months into tenure as Nepali Congress and Maoists revived their alliance.**

Maoists, Nepali Congress, and six other parties 24 Feb struck new pact endorsing Nepali Congress' candidate for forthcoming 9 March presidential election. Deal contravened Dec agreement between Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), or UML, which propelled Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" to PM. In response, UML 27 Feb announced its withdrawal from govt, following two other parties leaving governing coalition earlier in month. Senior Nepali Congress leader Ram Chandra Poudel 25 Feb filed his nomination for presidency at Election Commission, while UML put forward former House Speaker Subas Nembang. With new president to be elected via electoral college comprising federal parliament and provincial assemblies, Poudel appears set to garner sufficient support if new Maoist-Nepali Congress pact holds. Further politicisation of ceremonial head of state position could portend further political instability, as observers expressed concern over activist presidency undermining legislature.

► **Pakistan Insecurity persisted amid surging militant attacks, political tensions remained high over timing of provincial polls, and relations with Taliban authorities in Afghanistan displayed rifts.**

*Pakistani Taliban and Baloch militants continued deadly attacks.* Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) 17 Feb attacked police headquarters in Karachi city, financial hub and capital of Sindh province, killing four security personnel and civilian. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police chief 17 Feb reported 62 militant attacks in Jan. In Balochistan province, attacks continued amid reports of TTP alliance with local Baloch militant groups: notably, roadside blasts 4 Feb killed soldier in Gwadar and two soldiers in Bolan district; bomb blast 10 Feb killed two soldiers in Kohlu district. Meanwhile, TTP's Peshawar bombing fuelled political tensions: PM Sharif 1 Feb implicitly blamed former PM Imran Khan, whose govt had backed talks with TTP, as Khan in turn blamed Sharif for security failures; senior official of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) 19 Feb blamed former army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa.

*Constitutional-political crisis deepened over forthcoming provincial polls.* Following dissolution of legislatures in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, President Alvi (PTI loyalist) 20 Feb announced elections in both would be held on 9 April; announcement came after both provincial governors refused to set dates and election commission claimed it did not have legal authority. Sharif govt strongly rejected Alvi's declaration, emphasising his lack of constitutional jurisdiction. Supreme Court 22 Feb took up polling date controversy; ruling coalition parties 24 Feb demanded full court hearing. Meanwhile, Khan 21 Feb announced "court arrest drive" against "attack on our constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights" and "economic meltdown" amid accusations of govt intimidation and abuses; almost 100 party activists and leaders were detained.

*Govt publicly urged Afghan Taliban to address terrorism.* FM Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari 17 Feb confirmed "uptick in terrorist activity in Pakistan since the fall of Kabul" and warned of it spreading, citing need to convince Kabul to "take on terrorism within their borders". High-level security delegation 22 Feb met Taliban officials in Kabul to discuss TTP sanctuaries; Islamabad said authorities agreed to collaborate, but it remained unclear if engagement can stem TTP attacks.

↓ **Sri Lanka Tensions spiked as govt claimed funding shortfall, forcing indefinite postponement of local elections; police crackdown on pro-election protesters killed opposition politician and injured over dozen.**

*Govt invoked financial crisis, forcing election commission to postpone local polls.* Ahead of local elections scheduled for 9 March, cabinet 13 Feb approved President Wickremesinghe's proposal to limit govt expenditure on credit to five "essential" categories, which excluded election expenses. Election Commission next day was forced to suspend postal voting and 24 Feb announced vote's indefinite postponement. Election monitoring groups, Bar Association and opposition parties condemned govt's decision, while Wickremesinghe 23 Feb confirmed "we have no money" for elections and denied vote was ever properly scheduled. Police 20 Feb dispersed people protesting move in capital Colombo led by main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya party; opposition National People's Power member 26 Feb died from injuries sustained in police attack on protest previous day that injured over dozen.

*Govt marked Independence Day amid dissent and widespread strife.* Amid high inflation and severe recession, govt was roundly criticised for spending \$500,000 on military parade to mark 75th anniversary of independence on 4 Feb; police violently dispersed Colombo sit-in protesting cost. Tamil communities in north and east same day held demonstrations demanding end to "occupation of the Tamil homeland" and began four-day march from northern city Jaffna to eastern town Batticaloa. Govt employees continued protests over income tax hikes. Further compounding hardship, Ceylon Electricity Board 15 Feb announced increase in electricity prices by average of 66%, which threatens collapse of small and medium-sized businesses. Efforts to secure financial bailout continued: notably, media reports 17 Feb claimed International Monetary Fund was considering approving bailout before China agrees to join debt restructuring deal.

*Protest leader released amid UN Human Rights Council session.* Authorities 1 Feb released on bail student activist and protest leader Wasantha Mudalige after five and a half months of detention under Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and other laws. UN Human Rights Council same day began scheduled Universal Periodic Review; many states praised govt for its commitment to reform and reconciliation, while U.S., UK, Canada, New Zealand and Norway urged govt to repeal PTA.

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## **South East Asia**

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➔ **Indonesia Separatist fighters in Papua region kidnapped New Zealand pilot, demanding govt recognise region's independence.**

Members of West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) – military wing of Free Papua Organisation – 7 Feb took hostage New Zealand national and Susi Air pilot Philip Mehrrens in Paro District of Nduga regency, Papua region, demanding govt recognise Papua's independence in return for his release. TPNPB 9 Feb claimed it sought to bring "ongoing state of human suffering and war in West Papua to the attention of the international media and world community" and reiterated demands, including that foreign govts cease training and arming

Indonesian security forces. Reports during month suggested dialogue was under way to secure Mehrtens' release; Chief Security Minister Mahfud MD 28 Feb said security forces had surrounded hostage takers but would refrain from action that could endanger pilot's life.

➡ **Myanmar** **Govt delayed elections as it extended state of emergency and expanded martial law, while military and resistance groups clashed heavily and regional leaders debated crisis response.**

*Regime extended state of emergency and imposed martial law.* Amid widespread insecurity, regime 1 Feb announced six-month extension of state of emergency, beyond constitutional deadline, pushing back timeline of election to no later than 31 Jan 2024. Regime 2 Feb imposed martial law on 37 townships in eight states and regions, and another three townships on 22 Feb, bringing total number of townships under martial law to 52. Election preparations, however, continued: govt 3 Feb said voter list data from some 87% of households had been verified.

*Resistance groups continued raids and battled regime forces.* In Chin State, Chin National Army and Chinland Defence Force 8 Feb raided police station in Thantlang town, killing four soldiers; military next day launched airstrikes around town. In Sagaing region, resistance groups led by Homalin People's Defence Force (PDF) early Feb overran Shwe Pyi Aye town, Homalin township, before major military offensive repelled resistance. Regime forces 4-5 Feb allegedly raided five villages in Kanbalu township, displacing 2,000 villagers. Regime 7 Feb overran resistance camps in southern Salingyi township following martial law imposition. Light Infantry Division 44 soldiers 3 Feb allegedly beheaded six PDF members and killed one civilian near Pale township. In Magway region, Pakokku District PDF Battalion 3 on 5 Feb attacked two regime vehicles on Pakokku-Yesagy road, killing seven.

*Indonesia and Malaysia urged more robust crisis response.* Indonesian President Widodo 1 Feb revealed intention to send top general to Myanmar "as soon as possible" for dialogue and said regional bloc ASEAN would not be "held hostage" by crisis. ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat held 3-4 Feb concluded "inclusive national dialogue" was only way to peacefully resolve crisis. In meeting with Thai PM Prayut Chan-o-cha, Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim 9 Feb urged Thailand to take more active role, next day said crisis should "not frustrate our moves". Meanwhile, European Union 20 Feb imposed fresh sanctions on nine regime-linked individuals and seven entities.

➡ **Philippines** **Insecurity persisted in south amid attacks by Islamist groups and clan feuds, while deadly hostilities continued between govt and Communist rebels.**

*In south, military clashed with Islamist groups and clan feuds continued.* Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). In Lanao del Sur province, remnants of Islamic State-linked Maute group 5 Feb ambushed Philippine Marine Corps unit in Marogong town, killing soldier and injuring three others. In Sulu province, police 5 Feb clashed with Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) fighters at Maimbung and Parang boundary while serving arrest warrant, wounding two civilians. In Sultan Kudarat province, military 18 Feb killed Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) commander "Boy Jacket", previously involved in clashes with Moro Islamic Liberation Front and govt forces,



in Tacurong city. Two ASG militants 6 Feb surrendered to military in Patikul town, Sulu province, while five BIFF members 20 Feb surrendered in Tacurong city. Meanwhile, violence stemming from clan feuds during month killed several minors in Pikit town, Cotabato province; in response to attacks, police 18 Feb suspended gun permits and imposed province-wide gun ban.

*Communist insurgency killed over dozen and displaced hundreds.* 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 killed at least 18 combatants and civilians. Clashes between military and NPA in Negros Occidental province 4 Feb displaced hundreds of civilians.

➔ **South China Sea Philippines deepened military cooperation with U.S. and Japan amid elevated tensions with China over South China Sea (SCS).**

*Philippines expanded partnership with U.S. and Japan.* U.S. and Philippines 2 Feb signed deal permitting U.S. forces access to four military bases in Philippines, adding to five existing bases and bolstering U.S. presence on south-eastern rim of SCS; pair also agreed to restart joint maritime patrols in SCS. U.S. *Nimitz Carrier Strike Group* and marines 11 Feb conducted drills in SCS; Manila 15 Feb announced annual Balikatan joint exercises with U.S. will be conducted in spring on greater scale than last year. Philippine President Marcos 8-12 Feb signed seven agreements with Japanese PM Kishida, including \$13bn package covering several areas related to defence; deal marks step toward completing Reciprocal Access Agreement facilitating greater military cooperation. Marcos 12 Feb also expressed interest in adopting Visiting Forces Agreement with Japan as well as revisiting potential trilateral security pact with Washington. Philippines 22 Feb discussed conducting joint patrols with Australia.

*Maritime tensions persisted between Philippines and China.* Two Chinese Coast Guard and two maritime militia vessels 1 Feb tailed Philippine warship near Mischief Reef. Philippine Coast Guard 6 Feb accused Chinese Coast Guard vessel of shining "military-grade laser light" at one of its boats around 20km from Second Thomas Shoal (Ayugin Shoal) in Spratly Islands under control of Philippine forces; Beijing said incident was "intrusion without permission" by Philippine Coast Guard. Marcos 14 Feb summoned Chinese ambassador to express "serious concern" over "increasing frequency and intensity of actions". Philippine FM Enrique Manalo 20 Feb said Chinese harassment of Philippine vessels in SCS is "daily situation". Chinese Coast Guard vessel 21 Feb issued radio challenges to Philippine Coast Guard aircraft flying over Sabina and Second Thomas Shoals inside Manila's exclusive economic zone; around 30 Chinese vessels continued to linger in area late month.

*Regional bloc ASEAN pledged to wrap up Code of Conduct negotiations.* ASEAN foreign ministers during 3-4 Feb meeting vowed to complete SCS Code of Conduct negotiations with China; ASEAN chair Indonesia said it is ready to host first round of negotiations by March.

➔ **Thailand Courts granted bail to several prisoners convicted of lèse-majesté as activists continued hunger strike, while insecurity persisted in deep south amid peace dialogue meetings.**

*Courts granted bail to protesters amid activists' hunger strike.* Activists Tantawan Tuatulanon and Orawan Phuphong 27 Feb entered 40th day of hunger strike, and fourth day carrying out their protest in front of Supreme Court, demanding release of political prisoners and revocation of lèse-majesté and sedition laws; both women were charged with variety of crimes, including lèse-majesté. Courts granted several bail requests during month: notably, court 9 Feb granted bail to Sombat Thongyoi, convicted of lèse-majesté; Supreme Court 10 Feb granted bail to Sittichok Sethasavet, convicted of lèse-majesté; Bangkok Criminal Court 17 Feb granted bail to four people jailed following June 2022 pro-democracy protest; Ratchadaphisek Criminal Court 20 Feb granted temporary release of three activists. Meanwhile, authorities indicated that general election is expected to be held on 7 May.

*Deep south peace dialogue produced new plan as insecurity persisted.* Malaysia's General Zulkifli Zainal Abidin – newly appointed facilitator of peace dialogue process between main separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) and Thai govt – 3 Feb met head of Thai dialogue delegation General Wanlop Rugsanaoh in capital Bangkok. Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim 9-10 Feb visited Bangkok, where he expressed optimism about finding solution to instability in southern provinces. Sixth round of Joint Working Group-South Thailand Peace Dialogue 20 Feb commenced in Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur; Thailand and Malaysia next day issued statements that Thailand and BRN agreed on Joint Comprehensive Plan toward Peace with timeframe of 2023-2024. Meanwhile, in Pattani province, IEDs 2 Feb damaged two power poles in Khok Pho district; unidentified gunmen 14 Feb shot and killed retired imam in Saiburi district. In Yala Province, militants 17 Feb ambushed police officers responding to arson attacks in Bannang Sata district, killing one police officer and wounding four.