



CrisisWatch 2023 – January Trends and February Alerts

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** **China continued military activity around Japan and disputed islands, while Tokyo deepened defence ties with West and India.**

China continued maritime activity in region. As of 19 Jan, Japanese Coast Guard spotted 94 Chinese vessels in Japan's contiguous zone, four of them within territorial waters. Four Chinese Coast Guard ships 10 Jan sailed around disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in first intrusion into Japanese waters around East China Sea islands this year; incursion followed 72-hour incursion 22-25 Dec off Senkaku/Diaoyu, marking longest since 2012.

Japan reinforced outlying islands. Media reports 10 Jan confirmed Japan's plan to deploy missile unit on Japan's Yonaguni Island – located just 110km from Taiwan near Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands – in order to expand military base; Chinese missiles fell near Yonaguni last Aug as China conducted exercises following then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei. As part of efforts to reinforce south-western islands, Japan will also begin construction of military base on Japan's Mageshima Island.

Tokyo sought to deepen ties with allies and partners. Japanese PM Kishida 9-15 Jan embarked on tour to fellow G7 countries (U.S., UK, France, Italy and Canada); notably, Kishida and U.S. President Biden reiterated commitment to bolster U.S.-Japan defence alliance amid rising security challenges in Asia and, related to Taiwan, emphasised goal to push for integrated deterrence with tighter alliance; Japan due to acquire hundreds of U.S. Tomahawk cruise missiles to strengthen counterstrike capabilities. In first such deal inked with European partner, Japan and UK 11 Jan signed landmark defence pact, allowing respective forces to be deployed to other's country for training, joint exercises and disaster relief activities. Japan and Italy 11 Jan upgraded their relationship to "strategic partnership". Japan and India 16 Jan commenced first-ever joint fighter aircraft exercise. Kishida and NATO sec gen 31 Jan pledged to deepen ties, as latter accused Beijing of "bullying its neighbours and threatening Taiwan".

➔ **Korean Peninsula** **North Korea vowed further nuclear and missile development, while South Korea President Yoon Suk-yeol stirred concern with nuclear armament comments.**

North Korea ended 2022 party plenum with promise of nuclear expansion. During speech on 31 Dec at culmination of annual review meeting of ruling

Workers' Party held 26-31 Dec, leader Kim Jong-un vowed to "exponentially increase" nuclear weapons production in 2023 in response to threat posed by U.S. and South Korea, specifically citing heightened trilateral coordination among U.S., Seoul and Japan; Kim also stated country was developing "another new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) system" with "rapid nuclear counterattack ability" and highlighted late June (Korean War anniversary) and Sept (75th anniversary of state foundation) as important anniversaries, indicating possible military provocations around those periods.

President Yoon sparked controversy with comments on nuclearisation. In off-the-cuff remarks to reporters, Yoon 11 Jan said South Korea could consider building nuclear weapons if nuclear threat from North Korea grows, explaining "we can have our own nuclear weapons pretty quickly given our scientific and technological capabilities." Government officials subsequently noted it was not official govt policy; nevertheless, comments sparked intense speculation at home and abroad about whether South Korea may one day pursue nuclear weapons, with opinion polling showing support for nuclearisation now running above 70%.

UN said north and south violated armistice agreement with drones. Following special investigation, UN Command 26 Jan said both North and South Korean forces violated 1953 armistice ending Korean War by sending drones across border into other's airspace late Dec; verdict followed incident in which five North Korean drones 26 Dec entered south, prompting south to deploy drone in tit-for-tat move.

➔ **Taiwan Strait China maintained frequent aerial and maritime activity around island, while Taiwan's ruling party appointed new leader ahead of 2024 election.**

China continued military presence around island. China 8 Jan announced military drill around Taiwan practicing land attack and sea assault. As of 30 Jan, Taiwan detected 346 Chinese aircraft entering Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), of which at least 119 either crossed unofficial maritime demarcation known as "median line" or were detected in south west ADIZ near strategic Bashi Channel; Taiwan reported 104 sightings of Chinese vessels in surrounding waters. In first transit of 2023, U.S. Navy's Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer *USS Chung Hoon* 6 Jan transited through Taiwan Strait. In New Year's message, newly appointed head of China's Taiwan Affairs Office 2 Jan reaffirmed Beijing's commitment to "peaceful reunification and one country two systems on the condition of One-China principle and 1992 consensus"; Taiwan same day responded Beijing must stop military coercion and imposing political frameworks.

Taiwan continued active engagement with partners. U.S. and Taiwan 17 Jan concluded second-round talks on Initiative on 21st Century Trade, which will lay groundwork for de facto free trade agreement; U.S. said that both sides have "reached consensus in a number of areas" covering trade "facilitation", anti-corruption, small and medium-sized enterprises and regulatory practices. German and Lithuanian parliamentary delegations 9 Jan arrived in Taiwan. President Tsai 30 Jan held telephone call with Czech President-elect Petr Pavel in which pair highlighted countries' shared values.

Ruling party prepared for upcoming polls. Ahead of presidential elections scheduled for Jan 2024, VP Lai Ching-te 16 Jan took over as new chief of ruling Democratic Progressive Party after Tsai stepped down following bad showing at local elections; Lai vowed to continue to follow Tsai's approach to maintain status quo and reiterated that there is no need to declare independence for Taiwan.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan Islamic State continued deadly attacks in capital Kabul, and hardships persisted amid electricity shortfall, severe winter and curtailed relief operations due to Taliban restrictions on NGOs.**

Islamic State continued attacks, resistance group struck in Taliban heartland. Suicide bomber 1 Jan struck defence ministry convoy near military airport in Kabul, killing around 20 security personnel and civilians; Islamic State's local branch (ISKP) later claimed attacker was one of two militants who had targeted Chinese hotel weeks earlier. ISKP claimed bombing at entrance to Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul 11 Jan that killed number of govt employees. Meanwhile, resistance group Afghanistan Freedom Front 18 Jan claimed attack in Kandahar province (south), continuing to illustrate group's operational presence inside Taliban's heartland.

Murder of former female parliamentarian fuelled concerns. Gunmen 15 Jan shot dead former female Afghan parliamentarian Mursal Nabizadeh at her home in Kabul, sparking concerns over safeguards for Afghan women, especially former politicians and women's activists, under Taliban rule. Authorities subsequently announced that lawmaker was killed as result of family feud, as bodyguard and jewellery remained missing.

Electricity blackouts resulted in hundreds killed. Amid unusually cold winter, and despite electricity supply deals struck late Dec with Uzbekistan and 10 Jan with Tajikistan, country continued to face electricity outages that hampered private sector and contributed to heating problems for ordinary Afghans, leaving hundreds dead; authorities in Jan also cut off electricity to Kandahar and Helmand provinces, despite unprecedented cold weather, due to dwindling water levels of Kajaki dam. Authorities 5 Jan signed oil extraction deal with Chinese company to invest \$540mn over three-year period, creating 3,000 jobs. UN 14 Jan resumed cash shipments after short hiatus. UN Deputy Sec-Gen Amina Mohammed led delegation to Afghanistan and 25 Jan reported efforts to obtain exemptions for women to resume working at NGOs, whose operations have been slowed by Taliban restrictions. World Food Programme 26 Jan said malnutrition rates countrywide are at record high.

➔ **Bangladesh Govt continued clampdown on opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) as it held anti-govt rallies, while deadly attacks continued in Rohingya refugee camps.**

Govt continued crackdown on BNP amid nationwide protests. New opposition alliance comprising 15 parties 7 Jan joined BNP's ten-point movement calling for govt resignation and new elections, bringing total parties in support to over 30. As

BNP and its allies 11 Jan held mass anti-govt sit-ins in capital Dhaka and countrywide, ruling Awami League supporters reportedly attacked BNP leaders and activists in Faridpur district, injuring several; police next day filed cases against 114 BNP leaders and supporters, arresting 13. BNP leaders and activists 16 Jan clashed with police in Chittagong city; BNP claimed police fired on peaceful protesters, injuring 20, while police filed anti-terrorism charges against at least 500 for attacking police and using explosives. BNP sec gen 18 Jan claimed govt had filed 1,209 cases under controversial Digital Security Act in four years against dissidents, journalists and opposition leaders.

Violence in Rohingya camps persisted. In Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya camp, Rohingya leader was stabbed to death 8 Jan and another was shot dead next day; police attributed attacks to Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Human Rights Watch 17 Jan accused Armed Police Battalion, elite police unit overseeing security camps, of extortion, arbitrary arrests and harassment of refugees. UN refugee agency same day deplored "alarming rise" in numbers of Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar or Bangladesh in 2022, reporting 360% increase and "growing sense of desperation". In first clash between two groups, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation militants 18 Jan attacked ARSA outpost in Bangladesh-Myanmar border area known as "no man's land", where around 4,000 people shelter, killing one RSO militant; Bangladeshi authorities began processing those sheltering there to enter country.

Authorities arrested suspected militants. Counter-terrorism police 1 Jan arrested six suspected al-Qaeda-inspired militants in Dhaka, Chittagong and Teknaf cities; counter-terrorism police 8 Jan arrested three suspected members of new militant outfit, Jamatul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, in Bandarband's Naikhongchari sub-district; police 23 Jan arrested two suspected members of same group following reported gunfight in Cox's Bazar Rohingya camp.

➡ India China's activities along disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) continued to raise concerns in Delhi, while Maoist violence persisted in east.

Disputed border continued to fuel tensions with China. Indian army chief Gen. Manoj Pande 12 Jan said that situation along LAC is "stable yet unpredictable" and noted that China "slightly" increased its presence along border, but Indian troops are prepared to deal with any "contingency". Chinese President Xi Jinping 18 Jan reportedly held rare video conversation with Chinese soldiers stationed along LAC in which he reportedly ordered them to "remain alert and be ready for combat", which fuelled concerns in India. Satellite images posted 19 Jan showing China constructing dam on Mabja Zangbo/Brahmaputra River near LAC raised fears in India over China's future control of water. Meanwhile, U.S. Assistant Sec State Donald Lu visiting India 14 Jan said China has not taken "good faith steps" to resolve LAC issue and "U.S. will continue to stand with India"; China next day criticised remarks.

Maoist violence continued in east. In Andhra Pradesh state (east), Maoists 4 Jan killed tribal man suspected of working with police in Alluri Sitarama Raju district. In Jharkhand state (east), security forces 23 Jan killed local commander of Maoists' splinter group People's Liberation Front of India during clashes in Ranchi district;

improvised explosive device 24 Jan injured boy in West Singbhum district; security forces 28 Jan killed one Maoist during clashes in Chatra district.

In other important developments. News channel BBC 17 Jan broadcast documentary in UK examining role of PM Modi, then-Gujarat's chief minister, during 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim riots; govt 19 Jan slammed documentary as "propaganda" betraying "colonial mindset" and banned YouTube and Twitter from airing documentary's clips in India.

↓ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Militants launched first deadly attack on Hindus in years in Jammu region, while acrimony continued between India and Pakistan.**

Militants targeted Hindus in brazen attack despite low ebb in violence across Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). In first attack on minority Hindu community members in Jammu region's Rajouri district in over a decade, militants 1 Jan came down from forested higher reaches to village and fired indiscriminately on three houses, killing four people and injuring seven; explosive left behind by militants next day killed two children in same village. Security forces did not accuse any group of responsibility. Meanwhile, militant attacks across J&K remained at low ebb owing to harsh winter. Notably, militants 1 Jan lobbed grenade at security forces personnel in regional capital Srinagar, injuring one. Two alleged Lashkar-e-Tayyaba militants 15 Jan escaped during security operation in Budgam district but were killed two days later. Militants 22 Jan lobbed grenade in Srinagar, injuring one civilian. Home ministry declared The Resistance Front and People's Anti-Fascist Front as "[militant] organisations" 5 and 7 Jan, respectively.

Locals protested against govt's land laws in J&K. Hundreds of political activists 16 Jan protested in Jammu against J&K administration's ongoing eviction of locals from what has been declared "state land"; protest leader same day said govt had "fiddled" with laws of "erstwhile State of [Jammu and Kashmir]" to "allow people from outside J&K and deprive the residents of their due right to use the land".

India and Pakistan continued hostile rhetoric. Pakistan's foreign ministry 4 Jan called on India to end "vile anti-Pakistan propaganda", accusing Delhi of "brazen involvement in fomenting terrorism on Pakistan's soil". Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif 16 Jan called for talks "to resolve our burning points like Kashmir". India 19 Jan said "we always desire normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan" but there should be no "terror, hostility or violence". Indian Army Chief Manoj Pande 12 Jan said Feb 2021 ceasefire with Pakistan "is holding well but cross-border support to [militancy] and [militant] infrastructure however remains"; security forces 3 Jan claimed to have killed Pakistani trying to intrude in Punjab state's Gurdaspur district.

➡ **Nepal New PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal received near-unanimous support in vote of confidence, while tensions emerged within ruling coalition ahead of presidential election.**

New govt secured overwhelming support. In vote of confidence 10 Jan, Maoist Chairman and PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" received 268 votes in favour in 275-member House of Representatives after Nepali Congress in surprise move backed Dahal despite his withdrawal from Nepali Congress-Maoist electoral

alliance in Dec; Nepali Congress decision led to speculation that Maoists would in return support Nepali Congress candidate in upcoming March election for presidency.

Discord surfaced between ruling coalition parties. Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist, UML) Chairman KP Oli 17 Jan walked out of all-party meeting after rejecting suggestions that constitutional posts like presidency be shared with Nepali Congress; Oli accused Nepali Congress of “plotting” against Maoist-UML alliance, which is underpinned by 25 Dec deal whereby presidency and house speaker posts go to UML. UML leader Dev Raj Ghimire elected speaker of House 18 Jan. Meanwhile, Deputy PM and Rastriya Swatantra Party chief Rabi Lamichhane 27 Jan resigned after Supreme Court annulled his election to parliament due to invalid citizenship; Lamichhane’s citizenship was restored 29 Jan.

↓ **Pakistan** **Pakistani Taliban killed scores in suicide attack in Peshawar; tensions remained high as former PM Imran Khan campaigned for early polls and electoral dispute erupted in Sindh province.**

Deadly bombing rocked Peshawar city amid spate of Pakistani Taliban attacks. Suicide attack – claimed and then denied by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – at mosque in Peshawar’s Police Lines district 30 Jan killed more than 100 and injured over 200. Earlier, TTP maintained high-frequency attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, killing over dozen security forces. Notably: 6 Jan killed two police officers in Lakki Marwat district; 14 Jan killed three police officers in Peshawar; suicide attack 18 Jan killed three police officers in Khyber district. Attack from Iran in Panjgur district 18 Jan killed four soldiers. Security operation in South Waziristan district 5 Jan killed 11 militants, including top TTP commander. Meanwhile, interior minister 2 Jan said “Islamabad may target the TTP in Afghanistan if Kabul does not take action to dismantle them”.

Khan and allies maintained pressure on govt, dissolving two provincial assemblies. Khan ally and Punjab Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahi 11 Jan won confidence vote in Punjab assembly, which was dissolved 14 Jan. In KP, chief minister – and member of Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) – 18 Jan dissolved assembly; elections now due in both provinces in April. Election commission 22 Jan appointed opposition nominee as Punjab’s caretaker chief minister; PTI 27 Jan challenged nomination at Supreme Court. Meanwhile, PTI embarked on new bid to push for early general elections by seeking to withdraw April 2022 resignations of 131 lawmakers in order to defeat PM Sharif in potential confidence vote; 45 PTI members 23 Jan withdrew resignations but failed to prevent speaker from 17, 20, 22 Jan accepting resignations of all PTI lawmakers; election commission 29 Jan announced by-elections for 86 national assembly seats in March.

Political tensions rose in Sindh province. During second phase of local polls 15 Jan, clashes and electoral disputes erupted between rival party activists; if Sindh’s ruling Pakistan Peoples Party and closest contender Jamaat-e-Islami fail to reach agreement on key positions, particularly Karachi’s mayor, instability in financial hub could further undermine fragile economy.

➔ **Sri Lanka Govt slashed spending amid economic strains and efforts to secure international bailout loan, while continuing initiative to address decades-old ethnic conflict.**

Govt cut back spending amid deep recession. Amid falling govt revenues, President Wickremesinghe 10 Jan instructed all ministries to cut 5% of their allocated budgets for 2023, with priority given to salary and pension payments to public sector employees. State Minister of Defence Premitha Bandara Tennakoon 13 Jan made surprise announcement that army personnel would be reduced by one third over 2023, falling to 135,000 from 200,000. In positive step, India 16 Jan informed International Monetary Fund (IMF) that it will support debt restructuring process, marking progress toward finalising bailout loan. Chinese Vice Minister Chen Zhou 16 Jan indicated “some good news soon” regarding debt restructuring. Wickremesinghe 27 Jan prorogued parliament until 8 Feb, when new policy program is due to be announced.

Govt continued discussion of initiative to address ethnic conflict. Wickremesinghe 15 Jan reiterated govt’s “hope to fully implement the 13th Amendment of the constitution”; successive governments have failed to implement key provisions since amendment was made law in 1987. Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran 16 Jan said, “Nobody takes it with any seriousness because it has been constantly promised.” Wickremesinghe also said govt was “discussing appointing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)”. Talks between govt and TNA, however, appeared stalled following former’s failure to meet deadlines for releasing Tamil prisoners held under Prevention of Terrorism Act and releasing private land held by military.

Local elections preparations resumed, Supreme Court ruled on 2019 bombings. Following govt attempts to delay local govt elections, Election Commission 21 Jan announced polls will be held on 9 March. In landmark ruling, Supreme Court 12 Jan ruled that former President Maithripala Sirisena and four other senior officials had violated fundamental rights of petitioners by failing to act on warnings received in advance of 2019 Easter bombings. In first by foreign govt, Canada 10 Jan imposed sanctions on former Presidents Mahinda Rajapaksa and Gotabaya Rajapaksa for “gross and systematic violations of human rights during armed conflict in Sri Lanka”.

South East Asia

➔ **Myanmar Regime prepared for election and pursued dialogue with ethnic armed groups, while ongoing heavy clashes between military and resistance groups displaced thousands.**

Regime continued election preparations and peace talks with ethnic armed groups. Leader Min Aung Hlaing 5 Jan called for update of voter list as part of preparation for election likely held mid-year. Regime 26 Jan issued new highly restrictive political party registration law, which will likely result in most parties being dissolved within 60 days. Election faced opposition: National Unity Govt (NUG) urged public not to cooperate with process, and resistance groups during month staged more than dozen attacks on teams updating voter lists across

country, including assault which killed one in Tanintharyi region 9 Jan. Meanwhile, discussions with ethnic armed groups under regime peace initiative continued; nine of ten groups participated in three rounds of meetings as of 25 Jan. Officials 5-7 Jan met United Wa State Party, National Democratic Alliance Army (Mongla) and Shan State Progress Party (SSPP); SSPP 7 Jan said groups would not oppose election process. Marking Independence Day, Tatmadaw 4 Jan released 7,012 prisoners, including some 300 political prisoners.

Military launched airstrikes against ethnic armed groups in north. In Kachin State, military 9 Jan conducted air attacks on Kachin Independence Army base in Tanai township and outposts in Hpakant and Hkamti townships. In Chin State, regime 10 Jan launched airstrikes against Chin National Front (CNF) headquarters at Camp Victoria, Thantlang township, killing five CNF soldiers and injuring ten; additional airstrike next day damaged medical facility and destroyed three homes.

Military and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) clashes displaced thousands. In Kayin State, military 1 Jan launched around 20 airstrikes against KNLA Brigade 6 and Kawthoolei Army's Lion Battalion in Kyainseikgyi township following groups' late Dec seizure of two bases near Payathonesu, killing seven Lion Battalion soldiers. Brigade 6 and allied People's Defence Forces (PDFs) 4 Jan launched attacks on three infantry battalions around Kyainseikgyi; military responded with helicopter gunships. Military next day bombed Brigade 6-aligned Karen National Union administrative office in Dooplaya district. Clashes displaced some 10,000 people, and KNLA claimed it killed 70 soldiers.

➔ **Philippines Local insecurity persisted in south, while clashes continued between govt and Communist rebels.**

Clashes between armed groups and clan feuds continued. In Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), insecurity persisted; in Maguindanao del Norte province, gunmen 12 Jan attacked Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) members belonging to 104 Base Command, sparking local clashes between armed groups in Sultan Kudarat town. Twenty gunmen from Datu Odin Sinsuat town 18 Jan attacked Moro community on outskirts of Cotabato city, killing two and injuring five after strafing houses mostly owned by MILF-aligned Pangilan clan; officials attributed attack to clan feuding. Decommissioning phase of peace process between govt and MILF remained slow through Jan. In Marawi city, European Union, UN's children agency, BARMM officials and local executives 16 Jan launched €4mn program comprising health, education, child protection and disaster risk reduction provisions for tens of thousands affected by 2017 conflict in Marawi city.

Islamist militant activity continued amid surrenders. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) elements 8 Jan clashed with local paramilitary in Lamitan city, Basilan province, injuring four. Meanwhile, 21 ASG members and supporters 5 Jan surrendered to military in Jolo town, Sulu province, and five surrendered 12 Jan in Ungkaya Pukan town, Basilan province. In Maguindanao del Norte, six Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters members 16 Jan surrendered to military in Tacurong town.

Communist insurgency killed eight, 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 claimed eight

combatant and civilian fatalities and three injuries. Clashes 18 Jan in Negros occidental displaced hundreds of civilians.

➔ **South China Sea Philippines and China signed economic deals despite differences over South China Sea (SCS), while U.S. and Beijing continued maritime activity in region.**

Philippines and China struck agreements amid SCS tensions. Philippine President Marcos Jr. 3-5 Jan visited Chinese capital Beijing and met President Xi, signing agreements on issues including fisheries, infrastructure and finance; meeting followed late Dec announcement of new SCS hotline between two states. Philippine Supreme Court 11 Jan declared 2005 joint oil exploration pact between China, Philippines and Vietnam unconstitutional; Philippine foreign ministry said it would take ruling into account when resuming talks with China over possible cooperation on oil and gas in disputed waters. Former National Security Adviser Clarita Carlos 13 Jan said Philippines was examining Chinese partnership proposal with fishing villages in West Philippine Sea; Marcos 15 Jan clarified Philippines and China only have agreement, not partnership, allowing Filipino fishermen to fish in SCS.

U.S. and Chinese ships continued maritime activity in region. China late Dec sent its largest coastguard vessels to patrol Indonesia's Natuna Islands, which remained present during month; vessels arrived as Indonesia and Vietnam finalised their 12-year negotiation to delimit overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones late Dec, which may challenge China's "nine-dash-line" claims. Indonesia mid-month deployed warship to North Natuna Sea to monitor Chinese Coast Guard vessel. U.S. *Nimitz Carrier Strike Group* and accompanying warships 12 Jan entered SCS and conducted routine operations; in response, Chinese Shandong aircraft carrier group held series of "confrontational drills" in SCS. Media reports mid-month suggested Beijing turned down U.S. offer to hold military talks on SCS ahead of U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken's visit to China in Feb. Meanwhile, Japanese Coast Guard 13 Jan concluded four-day security drills training with Malaysian counterpart on repelling foreign intruders in SCS.

➔ **Thailand Pro-democracy activists charged with lèse-majesté went on hunger strike, while Malaysia announced new peace dialogue facilitator amid persistent violence in deep south.**

Activists staged hunger strike calling for release of prisoners and revocation of lèse-majesté law. Pro-democracy activists Tantawan Tuatulanon and Orawan Phuphong 16 Jan appeared in court to revoke their own bail; two women are charged with variety of crimes, including lèse-majesté, for conducting public opinion surveys about royal motorcades. Two activists 18 Jan commenced hunger strike while detained at Central Women's Correctional Institution, demanding release on bail of other jailed activists and revocation of lèse-majesté and sedition laws, and were taken to hospital 20 Jan. Banners same day appeared at Thammasat and Chulalongkorn universities in capital Bangkok, criticising lèse-majesté law and calling on students to defend right to free speech. Hundreds 26 Jan gathered in candlelight vigil in support of two activists. Court in Chiang Rai province same day sentenced activist Mongkhon Thirakot to 28 years in prison for Facebook posts deemed insulting to monarchy.

Malaysia appointed new dialogue facilitator amid attacks in deep south.
Malaysian govt 10 Jan announced appointment of former military chief Zulkifli Zainal Abidin as chief facilitator of peace dialogue between Thai govt and main separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), replacing Abdul Rahim Noor. Meanwhile, violence persisted in deep south. In Narathiwat province, militant IED attack followed by small arms fire 11 Jan targeted motorcycle-borne defence volunteers in Si Sakhon district, killing one and wounding two. Also in Si Sakhon, security forces 20 Jan killed three militants in gun battle.