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## CrisisWatch 2024 – February Trends and March Alerts

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# Asia

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## North East Asia

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➔ **China/Japan** China maintained naval activity in East China Sea as U.S. and Japan held joint exercises in wider region.

*Beijing continued maritime presence.* As of 28 Feb, Japan spotted 106 Chinese vessels in Japan's contiguous zone, while four vessels were detected within Japan's territorial sea. Japan's Coast Guard 6 Feb urged the four Chinese vessels to leave its territorial waters, which after almost two hours sailed northward. According to Japanese officials cited by media, Chinese authorities have ships constantly stationed north west of disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in East China Sea, which Japan claims as its territorial waters.

*Japan and U.S. held joint exercises.* U.S. and Japan 1 Feb conducted joint military exercises in Philippine Sea, demonstrating their ability to respond to contingencies across regional waters; exercises involved dozen warships, including two U.S. aircraft carriers. Japanese Self-Defense Forces and U.S. military 2 Feb identified China as hypothetical enemy in their joint command post exercise for first time, reflecting growing concerns over potential future invasion of Taiwan by Beijing.

*Japan sought to deepen maritime cooperation across region.* Reports mid-month indicated Japan is drawing up new ten-year plan to improve maritime capabilities of four nations in Southeast Asia that are struggling to resist growing encroachment into their territorial waters by China.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** Ahead of U.S.-South Korea military drills in March, North Korea tested missiles and maritime tensions persisted with Seoul, while Moscow publicly flouted UN sanctions in sign of eroding enforcement and adherence.

*North Korea tested missiles in east amid maritime tensions in west.* South Korea 14 Feb said North Korea had fired multiple cruise missiles in waters off its eastern port of Wonsan. North Korean state media next day confirmed leader Kim Jong Un supervised "evaluation test-fire of new-type surface-to-sea missile Padasuri-6". After Kim in Jan announced north would no longer recognise de facto maritime boundary in West Sea known as Northern Limit Line, state media 15 Feb quoted Kim accusing Seoul of frequently violating north's sovereignty by insisting on boundary, warning "if the enemy violates what we consider as our maritime border lines, we will take that as a violation of our sovereignty and an armed provocation", vowing to "defend our maritime sovereignty by force of arms and actions".

*U.S. and South Korea prepared for March's military drills.* North Korea is expected to respond to alliance military exercises – set to begin 4 March – but it is not clear whether Pyongyang is keen to be, by its standards, highly provocative at this moment, given that it is focused on relations with Russia.

*Russia gifted luxury car to Kim, violating UN sanctions.* In sign of deepening ties between Russia and North Korea, President Putin 18 Feb gifted Kim luxury car – violating UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea. After South Korea and U.S. criticised move, Moscow retorted: “If Seoul has concerns about the ‘adherence to U.N. sanctions’ regarding North Korea, then it should address it directly at the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee, rather than rushing to the microphones”. Episode underscores lack of security council unity in enforcing and adhering to sanctions resolutions. Meanwhile, South Korea 26 Feb said Pyongyang had shipped 6,700 containers carrying millions of munitions to Russia since July.

*Seoul established formal relations with Cuba.* In unanticipated step, South Korea and Cuba 15 Feb forged diplomatic ties, marking apparent setback for North Korea that has historically emphasised fraternal socialist connections with Caribbean island.

➔ **Taiwan Strait China commenced regular law enforcement patrols in Kinmen waters to challenge Taiwan's jurisdiction after drowning of two Chinese fishermen; U.S. and China continued talks to manage competition.**

*Beijing seized maritime incident to challenge Taipei's authority in Kinmen waters.* Two Chinese fishermen 14 Feb drowned as result of chase by Taiwan's Coast Guard off coast of Taiwan's Kinmen Island, located close to China's mainland, after Chinese vessel allegedly sailed approximately one nautical mile off Kinmen's coast. Chinese officials 17 Feb denied existence of prohibited and restricted waters around Kinmen, declared by Taiwan, and 18 Feb announced regular patrols around Kinmen, which began next day. Chinese coast guard vessel 19 Feb briefly boarded Taiwanese tourist boat. Taiwan's coast guard 20 Feb said it had expelled Chinese coast guard vessel in waters near Kinmen by verbally telling vessel to leave. Five Chinese coast guard vessels 26 Feb entered Kinmen's prohibited or restricted waters. China 28 Feb said Taiwan's ruling party lied about drowning incident, called on Taipei to meet demands of, and apologise to, victims' families.

*China continued military activity.* As of 28 Feb, Taiwan detected 275 Chinese military aircraft around island, of which at least 84 either crossed unofficial “median line” or were seen in Taiwan's de facto air defence identification zone; Taiwan spotted 256 Chinese naval vessels in surrounding waters. According to Japanese officials cited by media, China has four warships constantly deployed around Taiwan, aiming to pressure Taipei and prevent U.S. ships from approaching in case of regional conflict.

*U.S. and China continued diplomatic engagement.* China's top diplomat Wang Yi 16 Feb emphasised one-China principle in his meeting with U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken, stating that stability in Taiwan Strait depends on U.S. not supporting “Taiwan independence”; meeting followed another between Wang Yi and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan late Jan, where pair agreed to prevent relationship from veering into conflict.

*Beijing emphasised progress toward peaceful unification.* In annual meeting on Taiwan, senior Chinese leader Wang Huning 23 Feb stated China “must resolutely combat” Taiwan independence and “further grasp the strategic initiative to achieve the complete reunification of the motherland.”

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## **South Asia**

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➡ **Afghanistan** UN reconsidered political process after failure of Sec-Gen’s meeting in Qatar that exposed international divisions, while World Bank resumed development funding after long pause.

*UN convened international actors to discuss how to engage with Afghanistan.* UN Sec Gen Antonio Guterres 18 Feb convened meeting in Qatari capital Doha to discuss path forward following UN Security Council resolution 2721 (2023), which called for appointment of UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan. Taliban boycotted meeting after UN rejected its demand to attend as sole representatives of Afghanistan; opposition groups – including National Resistance Front, Afghan Freedom Front and others – had prior to meeting issued joint statement contesting Taliban’s claim to be legitimate govt. Doha meeting disappointed UN officials who had hoped to draw Taliban into high-level talks, and exposed widening gap between regional and Western actors, with most regional states seeking to forge ahead with closer engagement as Western states hope to alter Taliban behaviour through isolation; Guterres said that more work is required on political process “in order to make it attractive from the point of view of the Taliban.”

*World Bank restarted projects in major step, amid regional economic coordination.* In significant move, World Bank 15 Feb announced “Approach 3.0”, which will provide support for basic services and economic revival; package allows for resumption of Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000), \$1.2bn project to bring electricity from Central Asia to Pakistan via Afghanistan. Underlining growing economic coordination with regional actors, Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoub 1 Feb also met Uzbekistan’s chief of intelligence to discuss border issues and implementation of development projects, and FM Amir Khan Muttaqi 25 Feb visited Turkmenistan to discuss economic activities. Meanwhile, energy authority 6 Feb announced it had paid off all loans, totalling \$627mn, and prepaid future electricity imports. Deputy PM Salam Hanafi 15 Feb asserted govt was paying salaries to some 1.2mn public servants.

*In another important development.* UN Sanctions Monitoring Team 29 Jan assessed Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) retained capacity to conduct external operations. Still, ISKP related fatalities remained at historic lows.

➡ **Bangladesh** Political tensions appeared to ease following Jan election, signs of communal conflict surfaced in Chittagong Hill Tracts, and conflict in Myanmar imperilled border and displaced more Rohingya.

*Authorities released two senior opposition leaders.* Court 15 Feb released two senior Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) officials on bail more than three months after they were detained, possibly signalling softer position from ruling Awami League

(AL) toward opposition after it dominated parliament following 7 Jan flawed election. Internal fighting continued to wrack AL as rival factions of Chittagong University branch 14-16 Feb clashed, injuring four including police officer.

*Tensions rose in Chittagong Hill Tracts in south east.* Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) – which claims to represent six Kuki-Chin subgroups, largest of which is Bawm – 7 Feb briefly detained six Marma minority group residents in Bandarban’s Ruma Upazila. Marma leaders accused KNF of shooting Marma man in Ruma Upazila on 13 Feb; local Marma protests next day turned against several Bawm people-owned homes and shops in Ruma. KNF accused rival insurgent group Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) of being behind protests, raising prospect of clashes.

*Hostilities in Myanmar spilt over border, Rohingya refugees faced violence in camps.* As Arakan Army consolidated control along Myanmar-Bangladesh border (see Myanmar), shells crossed border and 6 Feb killed two civilians, prompting evacuation of hundreds. Conflict could force more Rohingya to flee. Govt 14 Feb rejected UN request to permit entry to 900 refugees. As of mid-Feb, thousands of Rohingya waited in small boats on Myanmar side of Naf River, with security forces pushing back hundreds who attempted to cross. Meanwhile, Rohingya in refugee camps continued to endure high levels of violence. Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army 6 Feb killed member of rival Rohingya Solidarity Organisation. Ten masked men 11 Feb shot dead Rohingya refugee, with another stabbed to death 17 Feb. Security forces 6 Feb detained 23 armed Rohingya at border in Cox’s Bazar’s Ukhiya district. Refugees sought to flee camps: authorities 14 Feb voluntarily transferred 1,500 to Bhasan Char island in Bay of Bengal, marking largest transfer since March 2022.

➔ **India Ethnic conflict in Manipur in far north east continued, Maoists staged attacks in centre and relations with China remained under strain amid border dispute.**

*Manipur continued to be roiled by deadly unrest.* Separate shootings 13 Feb killed three in Imphal East and Kangpokpi districts. Mob same day broke into camp of paramilitary force 5th Indian Reserve Battalion in Chingarel district, looting arms and ammunition. Following suspension of police constable from Kuki-Zo tribal community, mob 15 Feb stormed govt complex housing senior police in Churachandpur district, killing two and injuring 30. Around 200 members of radical Meitei group Arambai Tenggol 27 Feb abducted senior police officer after he had arrested six members of group in Imphal East district. After Manipur Chief Minister 3 Feb met Union Home Minister in capital New Delhi, home minister announced decision to suspend Free Movement Regime with Myanmar under which hill tribes can cross border with relative ease, citing need to “ensure internal security” and “maintain demographic structure”; move reflects Chief Minister’s inflammatory rhetoric that Kuki-Zo are illegal immigrants.

*Maoist militants continued attacks in centre.* After over 500 Maoists 30 Jan killed three police members in Chattisgarh state (centre) in bid to resist deployment to security camps established by authorities, two Maoists 18 Feb hacked to death armed forces officer in Chattisgarh’s Bijapur district. IED blast 25 Feb killed security forces member in Bijapur. Security forces 27 Feb killed four Maoists in Bijapur.

*Relations with China remained under stress.* Marking first meeting in more than six months, FM S. Jaishankar 17 Feb met Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on sidelines of Munich Security Conference. Indian and Chinese corp commanders 19 Feb held 21st round of talks over disputed boundary known as Line of Actual Control; India said discussions sought “complete disengagement” in eastern Ladakh, referring to two remaining friction points at Demchok and Depsang. Defence secretary 21 Feb referred to China as “a bully”.

*In another important development.* Farmers from Punjab state (north) 13 Feb commenced protest march to New Delhi to demand guaranteed minimum crop prices, following last round of protests in 2021; authorities 21 Feb deployed force to prevent farmers marching on capital, killing young farmer.

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Militants staged first deadly attack this year on non-local residents in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), while PM Narendra Modi claimed “progress” in region despite signs of mounting local anger.**

*Militants killed two non-local labourers in J&K.* Marking first killing of non-local residents in Kashmir Valley in 2024, militants 7 Feb shot dead two carpenters from Punjab in Srinagar city; militants have regularly targeted non-local workers in valley since J&K’s special status was scrapped in 2019. Former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah same day said continued attacks in heart of Srinagar city are proof that situation is not normal as govt claims. Meanwhile, security forces 2 Feb busted militant hideout in Jammu’s Poonch district and 15 Feb arrested militant associate in North Kashmir’s Kupwara district. Security forces 12 Feb shot down drone allegedly entering Poonch district from Pakistan.

*PM Modi visited Jammu, claiming progress in development.* Ahead of national elections due to be held by May, PM Modi 20 Feb visited Jammu and kickstarted construction of numerous projects in several sectors, including education, health, aviation, roadways and railways; Modi’s claim that “In the past, only sad news, like bomb blasts, kidnappings and separatism, would emerge from Kashmir” but now “J&K is on the path of progress and development” appeared to contrast with feelings of widespread alienation, anger and frustration among local population.

*Authorities prevented chief cleric of J&K addressing Friday prayers.* After local authorities 9 Feb blocked chief cleric of J&K, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, from delivering special sermon meant to mark Islamic celebration Shab-e-Mehraj at Srinagar’s Jamia Masjid, Farooq approached High Court challenging continued restrictions on his religious duties; reports indicated govt is concerned cleric may address Israel-Palestine conflict and spark protests, which could morph into political mobilisation on other local issues.

*In another important development.* Locals in Ladakh 3 Feb held large-scale protest and observed complete shutdown in Leh city to demand constitutional safeguards, protection of cultural identity and statehood for union territory created in 2019.

**↓ Pakistan Disputed national election results triggered protests and deepened political crisis, as surge in militant attacks in provinces bordering Afghanistan killed dozens.**

*Election results triggered fraud allegations and protests.* Voters 8 Feb went to polls as govt imposed communication blackout nationwide, citing security threats, which raised widespread concerns that vote was neither transparent nor fair. Election Commission, after some delay, announced no party won simple majority (169 seats) but in shock result, candidates backed by former PM and imprisoned leader of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Imran Khan secured largest bloc with 93 seats, while Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) came second with 75 seats and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) won 54. PTI disputed results, insisting it had won 190 seats but was deprived victory in federal and Punjab parliaments through electoral fraud, and called for vote recount as party lodged appeals with courts and election commission; PTI held public protests alongside other parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami. U.S. 9 Feb noted “undue restrictions on freedoms” and called for investigations into “claims of interference or fraud”, while UK and EU raised questions about vote’s “credibility” and “lack of fairness”.

*PML-N sought to lead new govt.* Amid protests in various provinces over results, PML-N and PPP 21 Feb struck agreement on forming coalition govt with PML-N nominating Shehbaz Sharif as PM; with its credibility damaged by deeply flawed elections, govt is set to govern over deeply-fractured polity, with political polarisation undermining its ability to address crises, including on economic front.

*Militants ramped up deadly attacks around election, killing dozens.* In bid to disrupt voting, Baloch militant groups and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) conducted over 50 attacks in run up to vote on political rallies, election offices, and homes of candidates in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces. Notably, militants 1 Feb conducted at least ten bomb and grenade attacks across Balochistan. Militant attack on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s Dera Ismail Khan district 5 Feb killed ten police officers. In deadliest attack of month, bomb blasts outside election offices in Balochistan’s Pishin and Qila Saifullah districts 6 Feb killed 28 and injured over 50.

**➔ Sri Lanka Opposition challenged President Wickremesinghe’s pursuit of authoritarian legislation, as speculation grew over potential delay to presidential election and govt touted economic recovery.**

*Opposition challenged govt and parliamentary Speaker over constitutionality of recent actions.* Main opposition party Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) 26 Feb, later joined by other parties, began effort to bring no-confidence motion against Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana for his decision to certify enactment of widely-criticised Online Safety Act (OSA) on 24 Jan, pointing to law’s failure to incorporate amendments required by earlier Supreme Court judgment. Supreme Court 29 Feb dismissed Tamil parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran’s “fundamental rights” petition challenging law’s validity on same grounds; govt 13 Feb had announced plans to amend law without specifying how. Parliament 20 Feb received Supreme Court ruling approving constitutionality of main thrust of proposed Anti-Terrorism Act, while requiring amendment of some clauses. Other legislation likely to restrict political freedoms remained in pipeline, including tighter controls on NGOs and community groups. Meanwhile, SJB leader Sajith Premadasa 26 Feb challenged

validity of Constitutional Council's appointment of Deshabandu Tenakoon as head of Police Service, arguing Speaker had no right to cast decisive vote.

*Uncertainty rose regarding upcoming presidential election.* Feb saw renewed public speculation that govt may postpone presidential election – mandated by constitution between 18 Sept and 17 Oct. Former president Maithripala Sirisena 11 Feb claimed Wickremesinghe had convened group of lawyers to advise him on options for abolishing executive presidency. In response, Wickremesinghe's media division 13 Feb asserted election will be held within mandated period. Public concern about possible postponement of election comes in wake of opinion polls showing Wickremesinghe receiving support from just 9% of those polled in Dec 2023.

*Wickremesinghe boasted of economic progress.* Wickremesinghe 7 Feb gave strikingly upbeat assessment of economy in speech to parliament, citing improvements in multiple macroeconomic indicators, even as govt 28 Feb announced plans to expand beneficiaries of its flagship welfare program to nearly 40 percent of population; speech laid out ambitious agenda for deep structural changes to economy unlikely to be accepted easily by powerful constituencies. U.S. Assistant Sec of State Donald Lu 15 Feb praised country's "historic comeback" from economic crisis.

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## South East Asia

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► **Myanmar** **Arakan Army won string of victories against regime in Rakhine state, while ceasefire in Shan state permitted regime to reclaim territory in centre as it activated conscription law amid battlefield losses.**

*In Rakhine state, Arakan Army maintained battlefield momentum.* Following its capture of towns and military camps in Jan, Arakan Army evicted military from several key strongholds and gained control over four more towns, as well as seizing huge quantities of arms and ammunition. Notably, Arakan Army 8 Feb captured Mrauk-U town – marking highly symbolic victory given town's status as capital of Rakhine kingdom until 18th century. Group now enjoys firm grip on much of northern and central Rakhine state, with state capital Sittwe possibly within reach. Hostilities in Rakhine raised prospect of spillover into Bangladesh, including thousands of Rohingya fleeing from Myanmar (see Bangladesh). Likewise, India's foreign ministry 1 Feb voiced "concern over deteriorating situation in Myanmar", with hundreds of regime soldiers having fled into India to escape Arakan Army.

*Limited ceasefire held in Shan state, as military turned focus to central Myanmar.* Military, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army all largely observed 11 Jan ceasefire during Feb, while Kachin Independence Army continued attacks in region. Military launched offensives in country's centre to recapture several towns lost to resistance forces since early Nov. Notably, regime 10 Feb recaptured Kawlin town – largest to come under resistance control – after week of heavy fighting.

*Regime activated old conscription law.* Regime 10 Feb announced it had put into effect People's Military Service Law more than decade after it was enacted, enabling men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 to be conscripted for five years; measure

raises questions about military's troop levels given heavy losses it has endured in recent months and difficulties it has faced recruiting since coup. Activation of law caused panic, with thousands of young men trying to flee country, despite regime claims that it would only conscript 5,000 per month out of 10mn people potentially eligible for service.

*In another important development.* UN Security Council 5 Feb held closed-door meeting with ASEAN Special Envoy following his Jan visit to Myanmar.

➔ **Philippines Peace process remained on track in south amid low-level violence, while govt forces continued to clash with Communist rebels.**

*Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).* Peace process remained on track as govt and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace delegations 10 Feb met for first time since Aug 2023, but no major agreement on vital issues was reached; sides, however, committed to continuation of peace process and general agreement on compensation packages for demobilised guerrilla fighters. Meanwhile, in Lanao del Norte province, military operation 19 Feb left state soldiers and three suspected Maute Group/Daulah Islamiyah militants dead in Munai municipality. Authorities 15 Feb arrested 32-year-old woman, suspected of facilitating transfer of funds to Islamic State (ISIS), in Sulu province.

*Clashes continued between Communist rebels and military.* Fighting between govt forces and Communists in Luzon Island (Camarines), Mindanao Island (Misamis and Surigao) and Visayas Islands (Leyte and Negros) killed at least nineteen combatants and civilians, and injured at least seven, in Feb. After govt and communist group New People's Army struck agreement in Norway to restart talks, both sides continued constituting panels to launch dialogue.

➔ **South China Sea Tensions persisted in South China Sea (SCS) between Philippines and China, while Manila signed off on expanding defence budget and continued to deepen cooperation with U.S.**

*China continued presence near disputed feature, stoking tensions with Manila.* Chinese military 9 Feb announced it conducted routine patrols in SCS. China's coast guard 22 Feb said it drove away Philippine govt vessel for "illegally intruding" into waters near Scarborough Shoal; Manila same day called claim "inaccurate". Manila 27 Feb reported patrol of Chinese aircraft near Scarborough Shoal for first time in recent years. Philippine President Marcos Jr 28 Feb labelled China's presence in SCS "worrisome". During state visit to Australia beginning 29 Feb aimed at deepening security ties, Marcos Jr vowed to resist "any attempt by any foreign power to take even one square inch of our sovereign territory". Meanwhile, *USS John Finn* and *USS Gabrielle Giffords* 8 Feb conducted trilateral operations with Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and Royal Australian Navy in SCS.

*Manila continued to bolster defence posture and ties with Washington.* Marcos Jr 1 Feb approved third phase of military's modernisation plan, which includes purchase of country's first submarine, to defend its maritime sovereignty in SCS; plan is estimated to cost 2 trillion pesos (\$35.62 bn), reflecting shift in strategy from internal to external defence. Philippine Navy mid-Feb deployed *BRP Emilio Jacinto*,



an upgraded patrol vessel, to waters off Palawan province in effort to bolster its forces. Media reports indicated U.S. and Philippines plan to hold meeting between top officials in coming months to address Beijing's aggressive actions in SCS; meeting aims to reaffirm U.S. commitment to defend Philippines under their mutual defence treaty, amid China's disruptive tactics against Philippine military's resupply mission to Second Thomas Shoal.

➔ **Thailand Govt and main southern separatist group resumed dialogue after more than year, amid surge in attacks in deep south; Move Forward Party (MFP) faced prospect of dissolution, which could spark resurgence of 2020 protests.**

*Peace process with main southern separatist group resumed amid surging attacks.* In first meeting in over a year, delegations of govt and main southern separatist armed group Barisan Revolusi Nasional 6-7 Feb held seventh round of talks in Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur; two sides discussed revised "Joint Comprehensive Plan towards Peace", submitted by Thai delegation. Although Malaysian facilitator 7 Feb described outcome as "major breakthrough", sides appeared only to agree in principle to peace plan, with more technical talks scheduled 7-8 March. Meanwhile, militants in deep south stepped up attacks. Notably, gunmen 2 Feb killed former assistant village headmen in Saiburi district, Pattani province. Former insurgent leader, Wae Ali Copter Waeji, was found shot dead 3 Feb in Reuso district, Narathiwat province. Militants 6 Feb threw grenade at police apartments and killed officer in Reuso district. Six militants 18 Feb killed two defence volunteers in Tak Bai district, Narathiwat.

*Possible ban of election-winning party raised spectre of major street unrest.* After Constitutional Court 31 Jan ruled that election-winning party MFP's proposal to reform lèse-majesté constituted effort to overthrow Thailand's "system of government", former senator 1 Feb filed petition with Electoral Commission seeking MFP's dissolution via Constitutional Court; chairman 16 Feb said commission was examining case. MFP's dissolution could trigger mass protests, considering ban of MFP's progenitor, Future Forward Party, sparked months-long nationwide demonstrations in 2020. Pathumwan District Court 5 Feb sentenced MFP leader Pita Limjareonrat and Future Forward Party founder Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit to four months in prison, suspended for two years, for violations in connection with protest in 2019.

*Authorities freed former PM Thaksin Shinawatra.* After six-month stay in police hospital upon returning to Thailand after fifteen years in exile, authorities 18 Feb released former leader of Pheu Thai party Thaksin on parole; release appears to result from undisclosed deal with military and royalist establishment set on confronting MFP challenge.

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## **Pacific**

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### **↓ Papua New Guinea Tribal clashes in restive Highlands Region killed over 40 people.**

Police commander in Enga province, in Highlands Region, reported that two tribes and their respective allies 18 Feb clashed with reported automatic and heavy weaponry in Middle Lai area, killing at least 49 by some estimates, likely marking deadliest upsurge in tribal violence in region in recent years; police said Amublin tribe had set up ambush on rival Sikin tribe after allegedly anticipating planned attack. Enga Governor Peter Ipatas claimed as many as seventeen tribes were involved in long-running escalation in region, describing it as “probably the biggest tribal fight we’ve ever had”.