



CrisisWatch 2024 – March Trends and April Alerts

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** China maintained naval presence in East China Sea as Japan labelled Beijing’s expanding power “serious concern”, while Tokyo continued to deepen defence ties with U.S. and broader region.

Beijing continued maritime presence. As of 31 March, Japan spotted 121 Chinese vessels in Japan’s contiguous zone with ten vessels in its territorial sea over four days. Tokyo 9 and 10 March scrambled fighter jets in response to Chinese military aircraft with anti-submarine and maritime surveillance capabilities patrolling Western Pacific waters and crossing Miyako Strait – strategic outlet for Chinese navy and key international waterway. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi 5 March said that China’s rapidly expanding military power was “serious concern”.

U.S. and Japan conducted joint exercises. U.S. and Japan late Feb commenced Resilient Shield 2024, utilising computer simulations of ballistic missile defence envelope for both nations. U.S. marines and Japanese troops held three-week amphibious training exercise “Iron Fist 24” 27 Feb-19 March amid concerns about Chinese military activity around Japan and Taiwan. Reports during March indicated Japan’s interest in cooperating with Australia, U.S. and UK security partnership dubbed “AUKUS” on advance capabilities, such as artificial intelligence and underwater technologies.

Tokyo deepened regional security cooperation. Japan’s FM Yoko Kamikawa and Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar 7 March pledged to enhance cooperation in Indo-Pacific in response to China’s growing military and economic influence. Japan 19-20 March hosted multilateral meeting with defence ministers of fourteen South Pacific island nations, aiming to strengthen its involvement in regional security issues.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** U.S. and South Korea conducted military drills as North Korea resumed missile testing, while Russia vetoed renewal of UN panel tasked with monitoring sanctions compliance.

Following seasonal alliance military drills, Pyongyang launched missiles. U.S. and South Korea 4-14 March held annual Spring exercises, which passed off without dramatic North Korean response; this may indicate some form of distress inside North Korea – with domestic media focused on agricultural challenges – but there is chance North Korea may respond more forcefully to drills in coming months. Following exercises, leader Kim Jong Un 18 March supervised live-fire drill of multiple rocket launchers and Pyongyang same day fired three short-range ballistic

missiles into waters off peninsula's east coast. State media 20 March reported successful test of solid-fuel engine for intermediate-range hypersonic missile.

Russia wielded veto to block renewed mandate for UN Panel of Experts. Vote on renewal of UN Panel of Experts on North Korea sanctions – tasked with monitoring compliance with sanctions – was delayed and thrown into doubt after Russia 12 March proposed changes, including sunset clause for sanctions and reducing reporting period from every six months to annual. U.S. and its allies remain steadfast in opposition to alterations to sanctions or reporting framework, arguing sustained pressure on North Korea is essential. Russia 28 March vetoed renewal, ensuring panel's mandate will expire 30 April; U.S. accused Russia of silencing body because it began reporting on "Russia's blatant violations of the UN Security Council resolutions". In further sign of Russia's lack of sanctions enforcement and compliance, *Financial Times* 26 March reported that Russia 7 March began "first documented direct seaborne deliveries" of oil to North Korea in contravention of 2017 UN sanctions, possibly in part payment for munitions deliveries.

South Korea issued stern warning against Pyongyang's provocations. Speaking at ninth West Sea Defence Day, which commemorates North Korean provocations in West Sea, South Korean President Yoon 22 March cautioned Pyongyang against reckless provocations and emphasised resolve of South Korea govt and military to push back against aggression; Yoon also pledged to further enhance trilateral security cooperation with U.S. and Japan.

➔ **Taiwan Strait Dispute between Taiwan and China over jurisdiction of waters around Kinmen Islands persisted as Beijing maintained military activity around Taiwan and U.S. continued support for Taipei.**

Tensions persisted with Beijing around Kinmen Islands. Following 14 Feb incident in which two Chinese nationals drowned off coast of Taiwan's Kinmen Islands, Chinese vessels continued patrols in restricted and prohibited waters around islands. Negotiations between China and Taiwan early March faltered, with Taiwan's coast guard stating Chinese officials made demands incompatible with Taiwan's legal system. Taiwan and China 14 March jointly conducted rescue mission after fishing vessel capsized near Kinmen; China 17 March rescued two fishermen, reportedly with Taiwan's assistance. Four Chinese coast guard ships 15 and 16 March entered Kinmen's waters, reportedly loitering for hours on 16 March; Taiwan's coast guard patrol shadowed the vessels and broadcast warnings until they left.

China maintained military activity around Taiwan. As of 31 March, Taiwan detected 470 Chinese military aircraft around island, of which at least 172 crossed unofficial "median line" or entered Taiwan's de facto air defence identification zone; Taiwan spotted 270 Chinese naval vessels in surrounding waters. Taiwan's Defence Ministry 8 March clarified that any intrusion by China across Taiwan's territorial borders is considered act of aggression. *USS John Finn* 5 March completed its second transit of Taiwan Strait in 2024.

U.S. continued diplomatic and military support to Taiwan. U.S. President Biden 7 March made his first reference to Taiwan during a State of Union address, emphasising U.S. commitment to peace and stability in Taiwan Strait; White House 11 March allocated \$100mn for Taiwan's military assistance, marking first standalone mention of island in budget report. Taiwan 14 March confirmed U.S.

Army Special Forces are stationed on Taiwan's outlying islands for training and exchange purposes. Meanwhile, Australia and Malaysia 5 March issued joint statement recognising importance of peace in Taiwan Strait. South Korea's envoy in Taiwan 6 March announced visits from significant South Korean figures to Taiwan are expected to increase. Russian President Putin 18 March claimed Taiwan is part of China, triggering prompt refutation by Taiwan.

South Asia

↓ **Afghanistan Taliban and Pakistan engaged in first serious military confrontation as Islamabad launched cross-border strikes in response to deadly militant attack, prompting heavy Taliban fire.**

Pakistan launched airstrikes, raising risk of armed conflict with Taliban. Amid mounting tensions between Islamabad and Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, six militants 16 March rammed explosive-laden vehicle into military checkpoint in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province before conducting suicide bombings, killing seven soldiers (see Pakistan); Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) Hafiz Gul Bahadur affiliate claimed responsibility. Blaming Taliban for arming and hosting militants and "being involved in incidents of terrorism", Pakistan 18 March launched retaliatory airstrikes, claiming targets were TTP groups in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces (east); strikes marked first time Pakistan has acknowledged carrying out attack on Afghan territory since Taliban takeover in 2021 (previously suspected cross-border attacks as in April 2022 were unclaimed). Taliban forces same day retaliated by firing heavy weaponry into Pakistan's Kurram district, killing Pakistani captain. While relative calm late March returned to border, risk of resumption of hostilities remained high, particularly if TTP launches another major attack in Pakistan; statements by Pakistani officials vowing to deport Afghan citizen card holders from 15 April also bode ill for bilateral relations.

Resistance groups and Islamic State staged attacks. After National Resistance Front (NRF) 26 Feb reportedly fired rockets at Kabul airport, allegedly targeting Taliban military installation, group continued its attacks, including ambush 27 March on Taliban checkpoint in capital Kabul in which NRF claimed three Taliban members were killed. Afghanistan Freedom Front 11 March declared month-long Ramadan ceasefire. In Kandahar city (south), Islamic State's local branch (ISKP) 21 March claimed explosion inside bank allegedly targeting Taliban members, killing three by Taliban estimates and as many as 21 according to BBC; Taliban-affiliated media reported attacker underwent training in Pakistan's Balochistan province, which it claimed had become key staging ground for ISKP. Suspected ISKP terror attack in Russian capital Moscow 22 March killed scores (see Russia).

In another important development. Uzbekistan's FM Bakhtiar Saidov 12 March met senior Taliban in capital Kabul to discuss trade; Taliban media suggested Uzbekistan may soon accept Taliban ambassador (see Uzbekistan).

➔ **Bangladesh Govt faced mounting economic challenges as opposition activity remained in lull, Myanmar's conflict continued to spill over border, and peace talks in Chittagong Hill Tracts resumed with ethnic armed group.**

Economic hardship persisted as opposition mobilisation remained subdued. Activity of opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies remained at low ebb due to difficulties of mobilising during Ramadan, although BNP may attempt to resume large-scale anti-govt demonstrations from late April or May, potentially prompting renewed crackdown. Govt meanwhile faced challenges of high inflation and rapidly increasing food prices: PM Sheikh Hasina 6 March instructed Rapid Action Battalion to intensify campaigns against food hoarders and 15 March fixed prices for 29 agricultural products. Due to depleted foreign currency to pay for energy imports, power shortages continued and could increase in summer amid higher temperatures.

Hostilities in Myanmar spilt over border, raising prospect of new refugee influx. Myanmar's military 5 March carried out airstrikes close to border, causing panic among Bangladeshi residents. Over 175 Myanmar Border Guard Police members 12 March crossed into Bangladesh's Bandarban district to escape Arakan Army's offensive in Rakhine state (see Myanmar). Conflict continued to raise prospect of new influx of Rohingya fleeing violence as hundreds, possibly thousands, gather in boats along Naf River; Dhaka, however, insisted no new refugees will be accepted and detained over 400 Rohingya. Authorities 1 March relocated 1,141 Rohingya from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char island, which now hosts 30,000. Rohingya continue to die at sea trying to flee: boat carrying estimated 150 Rohingya 20 March capsized off Indonesia's Aceh, with only 75 rescued.

Peace talks resumed in Chittagong Hill Tracts in south east. Govt delegation and Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) – which claims to represent six Kuki-Chin subgroups, largest of which is Bawm – 5 March held face-to-face talks after first round in Nov. KNF issued six demands, including establishing Kuki-Chin territorial council; two sides reportedly agreed to meet in April, while KNF pledged to refrain from conducting attacks in meantime. If govt rejects KNF's demands, communal tensions between Bawm and Marma communities could escalate, risking deadly clashes and further involvement of army or other armed groups.

➔ **India Opposition parties decried crackdown ahead of national polls starting in April, ethnic conflict in Manipur in far north east rumbled on and tensions with China surfaced over disputed territory in north east.**

Concerns rose about unlevel playing field ahead of election. Election Commission 16 March announced dates for national polls, which will be held in seven phases from 19 April to 4 June. Signs emerged raising concern that polls may not be entirely free and fair. Notably, federal investigative agency 21 March arrested leader of opposition Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for allegedly accepting bribes in exchange for granting licenses to alcohol contractors; AAP claimed no wrongdoing and accused govt of attempting to weaken opposition ahead of elections, as protesters rallied in capital New Delhi. Opposition Congress Party 21 March alleged govt agencies had frozen all of its bank accounts, making it impossible to fight election, calling it “assault on democracy”.

Insecurity in Manipur state persisted. Security forces 8 March rescued junior army officer abducted in Thoubal district. Ahead of national elections, Manipur's chief electoral officer 16 March said no special voting arrangements had been made for estimated 10,000 displaced in neighbouring Mizoram state and some 60,000 displaced in Manipur's relief camps. Indigenous Tribal Leaders forum 26 March pleaded with Kuki-Zo tribal people not to comply with state govt's order to deposit licensed arms ahead of national elections, asserting necessity to defend "our right to life and land".

Security forces targeted Maoist militants. In Chhattisgarh state (centre), security forces 15 March killed three Maoists and 27 March killed six Maoists in Bijapur district. In Maharashtra state (west), security forces during 25-hour operation 19 March killed four Maoists in Gadchiroli district.

India-China relations remained tense. During visit to Arunachal Pradesh state (north east), PM Narendra Modi 9 March remotely inaugurated strategically-important tunnel close to disputed border known as Line of Actual Control. China, which claims sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, 11 March issued statement saying it "strongly deplores" visit. India 19 March asserted state "was, is and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India".

➔ **India-Pakistan (Kashmir) Harsh weather curtailed militant activity in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) as PM Modi visited for first time since 2019, praising region's "progress" while local parties reiterated demands for long-overdue elections.**

Militant attacks and security operations remained at low ebb. Due to inclement weather amid snowfall and avalanches in higher reaches of region, militant activity remained subdued during March but may step up once weather improves ahead of national elections (see India). Low-intensity blast 26 March occurred in Poonch town; police arrested two suspects.

PM Modi addressed region in rare visit amid demands for overdue polls. Ahead of national elections in April-June, PM Narendra Modi 7 March visited Kashmir valley for first time since abrogation of Article 370 in 2019. During his address, Modi claimed "Kashmir is touching new heights of progress and prosperity after the abrogation of Article 370", while Lieutenant Governor asserted that "the ecosystem of [militancy] has been dismantled". Despite govt's claim of new era of peace in J&K, delayed elections are contributing to local frustration and unrest. J&K's regional parties, National Conference and Peoples Democratic Party, 12 March urged Chief Election Commissioner to hold regional and national elections simultaneously in union territory; Election Commission ruled it out on security grounds. Home Minister Amit Shah 20 March said elections would be held before 30 Sept deadline set by Supreme Court.

Authorities permitted Chief Cleric to lead prayers for first time in months. J&K administration 6 March told High Court that Chief Cleric Mirwaiz Umar Farooq was "a free man" and not under house arrest, permitting Farooq to lead prayers at Jama Masjid in Srinagar city on 8 March for first time since Oct when he was placed again in detention. At a sermon, Farooq 15 March requested authorities to "unconditionally release thousands of Kashmiri political prisoners".

Protests in Ladakh continued. Protesters in Ladakh 6 March held rally calling for granting of statehood and its inclusion in Sixth Schedule of the Constitution for safeguards, after talks between Ladakh's representatives and New Delhi 4 March failed to make any progress.

↓ **Pakistan Military launched first acknowledged airstrikes in Afghanistan since Taliban takeover after deadly militant attack, triggering Taliban retaliation.**

Military launched airstrikes in Afghanistan, raising risk of armed conflict. Amid mounting tensions between govt and Afghanistan's Taliban rulers, six militants 16 March rammed explosive-laden vehicle into military checkpoint in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province's North Waziristan before conducting suicide bombings, killing seven soldiers; Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) Hafiz Gul Bahadur affiliate claimed responsibility. Blaming Taliban for arming and hosting militants and "being involved in incidents of terrorism", Pakistan 18 March launched retaliatory airstrikes, claiming targets were TTP groups in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces (east); strikes mark first Pakistan has acknowledged carrying out on Afghan territory since Taliban takeover in 2021 (previously suspected cross-border attacks such as in April 2022 were unclaimed). Taliban authorities same day retaliated by firing heavy weaponry into Pakistan's Kurram district, killing Pakistani captain. While relative calm late March returned to border, risk of resumption of hostilities remained high, particularly if TTP launches another major attack in Pakistan; statements by Islamabad vowing to deport Afghan citizen card holders from 15 April also bode ill for relations. Meanwhile, suicide bombing on bus carrying Chinese engineers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bisham sub-district 26 March killed five.

Political turmoil continued following disputed elections in Feb. Formation of new govt following 8 Feb elections was accompanied by claims of widespread electoral manipulation by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by imprisoned former PM Imran Khan. Security forces 3 March detained scores of PTI supporters staging protests countrywide against "theft of the public mandate"; Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) same day won PM election in national assembly. Election Commission 4 March ruled that newly-formed Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) party – which PTI-backed independent parliamentarians joined in mid-Feb – was not eligible for dozens of reserved seats; after seats were redistributed, PML-N tally in parliament rose to 123 seats, overtaking PTI as largest party. U.S. Assistant Sec of State Donald Lu 20 March said if election commission fails to investigate irregularities, it would "retard our ability to have the type of relationship we want" with Pakistan.

➔ **Sri Lanka As elections lingered on horizon, govt's authoritarian legislation faced opposition and communal tensions persisted in Northern Province; govt secured next portion of International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan.**

Political jockeying intensified as elections appeared increasingly likely. With presidential elections required by mid-Oct, and parliamentary elections possible before or soon after, negotiations for possible electoral alliances intensified. President Wickremesinghe held discussions with leaders of current ruling party, Sri

Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), even as quiet efforts continued to reconcile Wickremesinghe and former allies in opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). Frontrunner, leftist National People's Party (NPP), held series of rallies countrywide.

Govt's anti-democratic laws met opposition at home and abroad. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk 1 March expressed concern over new or proposed laws to severely restrict rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression. UN Human Rights Council "Core Group" 4 March warned of Online Safety Act's potential "chilling effect on freedom of expression" and cautioned gov't on proposed "Commission on Truth, Unity and Reconciliation", calling for "inclusive participatory process to build trust in advance of any legislation". Civil society organisations 14 March met with Wickremesinghe to explain opposition to draft Non-Governmental Organisations Act, which permits authorities to monitor, collect information and restrict activities.

Communal tensions persisted in north. After "Core Group" 4 March noted "with concern reports of increased tensions around land seizures" in North and East, police 8 March arrested eight Tamil Hindus at worship site in Northern Province's Vavuniya district despite court order permitting prayer ceremony; police 19 March released them amid reports of mistreatment in detention. Gov't 4 March announced bill aimed at "formally managing the discovery and preservation of the nation's antiquities and archaeological heritage", likely through granting even stronger powers to Archaeology Department, which has seized land used by Tamils and Muslims in north and east.

Gov't secured next part of IMF loan. IMF 21 March announced new staff level agreement with gov't, paving way for disbursement of third instalment of \$300mn loan; gov't figures 16 March showed economy grew by 4.5% in last quarter of 2023, despite overall negative economic growth of -2.4% in 2023.

South East Asia

➔ **Myanmar** China brokered talks between regime and ethnic armed groups in northern Shan state aimed at resuming border trade, while regime lost more territory to Arakan Army in west and Kachin Independence Army in far north.

In north, regime and Three Brotherhood Alliance engaged in talks. As 11 Jan ceasefire held in Shan state (north), regime negotiators early March met Three Brotherhood Alliance in Kunming city, China, for further negotiations on reopening China-Myanmar border trade worth billions annually, which mostly ceased after alliance's Oct offensive; sticking points include sharing of revenue between sides. In southern Shan state, after Pao National Liberation Army aligned with resistance in Jan, regime 3 March launched destructive offensive to recapture Hsihseng town from group.

In Rakhine state (west), Arakan Army continued to capture regime positions. Arakan Army 4 March captured Ponnagyun town, barely 30km from state capital Sittwe, and 7 March claimed Ramree town – its first in central Rakhine state – located close to major Chinese infrastructure projects in neighbouring Kyaukpyu

township, including oil terminal, twin gas and oil pipelines, and proposed deep-sea port and Special Economic Zone. Arakan Army also continued attacks in northern Rakhine, including in Rathedaung, Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships, and 17 March seized Rathedaung. Group 12 March seized Aung Thapyay Border Guard Police post in far northern Maungdaw, prompting 179 regime personnel to flee into Bangladesh. Regime shelling 9 March killed five Rohingya residents in Aung Mingalar ward.

In Kachin state (north), Kachin Independence Army stepped up offensive. After embarking on wave of attacks late Feb against regime positions that for over decade have encircled its Laiza headquarters, Kachin Independence Army-led forces 7-9 March seized total twenty camps in Momauk and Waingmaw townships, and assassinated head of regime-aligned Lisu People's Militia Force. KIA offensive could impact already-strained communal relations between Jinghpaw majority, which leads KIA, and minority groups in Kachin state, including Shanni and Lisu.

Regime's conscription drive sparked tensions and recruitment race. Regime's decision in Feb to enforce dormant military service law reportedly triggered killings of at least dozen local officials tasked with overseeing process, and sparked conscription race with ethnic armed groups, as latter reported increase in recruits.

➡ **Philippines Security operations and militant attacks persisted in south, while military battled Communist insurgents.**

Insecurity persisted in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). In Maguindanao del Sur province, soldiers from army's 1st Brigade Combat Team 9 March clashed with Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) during operation to apprehend BIFF commander Kagi Karialan (who evaded capture) in Datu Saudi Ampatuan town, killing two suspected BIFF members. Militant ambush 17 March killed four soldiers in Datu Hoffer; military blamed jihadist group Daulah Islamiyah, but BIFF 19 March claimed attack in retaliation for 9 March security operation. Region 27 March marked anniversary of signing of Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro, which could boost momentum for implementation of key parts of peace deal.

Clashes continued between Communist rebels and military. Hostilities between security forces and communist rebels in Luzon (Quezon, Batangas) in north, Mindanao (Bukidnon/Lanao del Sur) in south and Visayas (Panay island) in centre during March claimed five civilian and combatant fatalities, and two injuries. Interior and Local Government Secretary Benjamin Abalos Jr. 18 March declared Surigao del Norte province insurgency-free after its provincial govt and law enforcement agencies dismantled remaining forces of Communist militant group New People's Army (NPA).

↓ **South China Sea Maritime encounters and stern warnings heightened tensions between Philippines and China in South China Sea (SCS); Manila proactively engaged U.S. and regional countries.**

Manila and Beijing engaged in war of words amid maritime incidents in SCS. Philippines 5 March accused China of "dangerous manoeuvres and blocking" that led to collision between one of its ships and Chinese Coast Guard vessel during Philippine resupply mission to *BRP Sierra Madre* on disputed Second Thomas

Shoal, injuring four Philippine sailors. U.S. same day denounced China's "provocative" and "dangerous" moves and reiterated that its Mutual Defence Treaty with Philippines extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, including Coast Guard, anywhere in SCS. Philippine Senate 7 March passed bill to align country's maritime zones with 2016 award of Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal that invalidated Beijing's vast territorial claims in SCS; China protested that act violates its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights. Philippines 11 March reported spotting about 50 Chinese vessels within its Exclusive Economic Zone in SCS, many surrounding disputed Scarborough Shoal. In another maritime incident, China Coast Guard vessel 23 March used water cannon on civilian boat supplying Philippine troops on Second Thomas Shoal, damaging vessel and injuring crew; Manila 25 March summoned China's envoy to protest "aggressive actions". China's defence ministry 24 March warned Philippines to "stop making any remarks" that could lead to escalation or risk China's "resolute and decisive measures". President Marcos 28 March announced plans for counter-measures against China Coast Guard's "illegal, coercive, aggressive, and dangerous" actions.

Manila courted ties with Washington and regional states. Philippine FM Enrique Manalo 4 March called on regional neighbours to uphold rule of law in SCS, referring to Manila's victory in Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling. Marcos 19 March met U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken to discuss cooperation and security matters amid heightened tensions with China; Blinken called U.S. security commitment to Philippines "ironclad". China's foreign ministry responded that U.S. "has no right to intervene" in SCS issues. India's FM S. Jaishankar 26 March called for defence cooperation with Philippines. South Korea 26 March expressed "grave concern" over China's use of water cannons in SCS.

➡ **Thailand Election Commission proceeded with its bid to ban Move Forward Party (MFP), while peace process between govt and main southern separatist group awaited next step amid violence in deep south.**

Election-winning party faced prospect of dissolution. After Constitutional Court 31 Jan ruled that election-winning MFP must desist from attempting to amend Thailand's lèse-majesté law, Election Commission 12 March requested Constitutional Court to disband MFP and 18 March submitted petition to court in that vein. Constitutional Court next day asked Election Commission to submit further documents. If court eventually accepts case and dissolves MFP, party's executives will be banned from politics for ten years. MFP's dissolution could trigger protests, considering ban of MFP's progenitor, Future Forward Party, sparked months-long nationwide demonstrations in 2020.

Deep south peace process technical talks continued. Following first meeting in Feb in over a year between delegations of govt and main southern separatist armed group Barisan Revolusi Nasional, four expert observers of dialogue 2 March issued public statement, identifying themselves for first time, "to underscore the significance of commitments achieved thus far between the main parties"; sides 20 Feb and 7-8 March held technical-level talks. Thai delegation 24 March said talks remain on track in spite of continued violence, with technical talks expected late April.

Violence continued in deep south. Notably, militants 9 March detonated 25kg IED targeting car transporting three rangers in Cho Airong district, Narathiwat province. Militants 10 March threw pipe bombs targeting Subdistrict Administration

Organisation chief at café in Thung Yang Daeng district, Pattani province; motorcycle-borne militants 18 March shot and killed deputy chief of Subdistrict Administration Organisation in same district. As authorities 14 March surrounded two militants in apartment who refused to surrender, pair engaged in 30-minute gun battle that left both dead in Saiburi district, Pattani province. Militants 22 March staged 45 IED and arson attacks across Pattani, Narathiwat, Songkhla and Yala provinces; one female migrant worker from Myanmar was killed by shrapnel in Mayo district, Pattani.

Pacific

↑ **Papua New Guinea** Tribal factions struck temporary ceasefire to calm deadly hostilities.

After tribal clashes in Feb in restive Highlands Region killed over 40 people, two warring tribal factions – known as Yopo Alliance and Palinau Alliance – from Enga province 13 March struck three-month unconditional ceasefire after negotiations in capital Port Moresby; agreement reportedly acknowledged that long-running hostilities had caused “displacement of thousands of people” and precipitated “humanitarian crisis”.