



The President's Take

In my March/April column to accompany [CrisisWatch](#), our unique conflict tracker, I ask if it is time to include the United States on our list and flag escalating crises in Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Israel-Palestine. [Read more ...](#)

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Global Overview MARCH 2018

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March saw Israeli forces respond with deadly force to the largest Palestinian marches in years at the Gaza-Israel border fence, killing fifteen protesters in one day. Violent confrontations risk increasing in the coming weeks, as protests continue in the lead-up to Palestinians' commemoration of their expulsion from Israel. Sri Lanka faced its worst outbreak of anti-

MY READING LIST

TEXT ONLY



Muslim violence since 2014, while tensions flared between Kosovo and Serbia, and Turkmenistan saw protests over food shortages. In West Africa, jihadists launched their best organised and most sustained attacks yet on Burkina Faso's capital, and central Mali, on top of ongoing jihadist violence, witnessed a rise in attacks between Fulani and Dogon communities. In Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency, herder-farmer killings and rural banditry together pushed the monthly death toll to at least 300. On a positive note, surprise talks between Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga created an opening for dialogue and political reform. In North East Asia, tensions increased between Taiwan and China, while on the Korean peninsula an inter-Korean summit in late April and planned talks between U.S. President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in May offer an opportunity to make progress on security issues.

Trends for Last Month

March 2018

Deteriorated Situations

Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria,
Taiwan Strait, Sri Lanka, Kosovo,
Turkmenistan, Israel/Palestine

Improved Situations

None

Outlook for This Month

April 2018

Conflict Risk Alerts

Israel/Palestine

Resolution Opportunities

Kenya, Korean Peninsula

Trends and Outlook

The **Israel-Palestine** conflict veered toward greater violence as Israeli forces used live fire, rubber-coated bullets and tear gas to push back tens of thousands of Palestinian protesters massing at the border fence dividing Gaza and Israel, killing fifteen. The toll could rise in April as Palestinians plan to keep up the protests – demanding the right to return to Israel – until 15 May when Palestinians mourn the *nakba*, the expulsion of some 750,000 Palestinians from their homes in Israel during the 1948 war. **As we explained**, the protests are an attempt by Palestinians – disillusioned with international mediation initiatives – to take matters into their own hands. Beyond alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, to reduce the risk of

escalation, protest organisers should do their utmost to keep the marches peaceful and Israel must cease responding with deadly and disproportionate force.

Jihadist attacks in **Burkina Faso**'s capital Ouagadougou on 2 March targeting the military headquarters and French embassy marked an **alarming escalation**. The assailants were better organised, armed with heavier weapons and their assault more sustained than anything the Sahelian country has seen so far. More worrying still, information suggests they had help from members of the security forces. If confirmed, this could further divide an already fragile army. **Mali**'s knotted conflict saw an uptick in violence in the central region, with an intensification of attacks by ethnic militias against their rivals – between Fulani and Dogon in particular – and jihadist attacks on both soldiers and civilians.

Three strains of deadly violence saw the monthly death toll in **Nigeria** rise to at least 300. Boko Haram insurgents kept up attacks, including on a military base and a camp for people forced to flee their homes. Retaliatory killings between herding and farming communities continued to spiral and spread to new areas in the south, leaving at least 190 dead. Banditry in Kaduna and Zamfara states also flared.

Sri Lanka was rocked by its worst outbreak of anti-Muslim violence since 2014 in the central Kandy district in early March, leading the government to declare a ten-day state of emergency and impose unprecedented restrictions on social media. In **our commentary** looking at the factors behind this violence, we call for the government to act urgently to enforce laws against hate speech and prosecute those involved in organising the attacks.

Tensions between **Kosovo** and Serbia rose after Kosovo police detained a Serbian politician visiting ethnic Serb majority northern Mitrovica, claiming he had entered the country without permission. Further reports emerged from **Turkmenistan** of acute food shortages and rationing prompting small-scale protests and violence. These developments occurred amid a new low in relations between Russia and the West, as Britain alleged that Russia was behind the poisoning of a defected former Russian intelligence officer using military-grade nerve agent on UK soil in early March.

In North East Asia, tensions increased across the **Taiwan Strait**, with China strongly critical after President Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act,

which formally encourages visits between U.S. and Taiwanese officials, saying it violated the One-China policy that has been the foundation of U.S.-China relations for decades, and sends a “seriously wrong signal”. A rare opportunity opened up for diplomacy on the **Korean peninsula** as Seoul and Pyongyang agreed to hold an inter-Korean summit in late April – the first since 2007 – and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and President Trump agreed to meet for direct talks in May. **As Crisis Group has noted**, although caution is warranted, continued talks among the three parties could extend the current détente and create a stable forum for longer-term dialogue on vital security issues, potentially including North Korea’s weapons program.

In **Kenya**, President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga met for the first time since last year’s disputed presidential election and agreed to work together to end cycles of violence. But, far from a done deal, the meeting has created an opportunity to embark on **the tough path ahead**: starting dialogue to build consensus on concrete steps to prevent further bloodshed. Priorities include investigating police killings, police reform, reopening space for civil society and the media and, critically, political reforms that aim to reverse Kenya’s winner-takes-all politics.

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Latest Updates

Africa

Burundi MARCH 2018

President Nkurunziza 18 March set date of constitutional referendum for 17 May; his decree also stipulated that absolute majority (50% plus one vote) would be needed to amend constitution, that parties and individuals must register with electoral commission by 6 April to take part in campaigning and that campaign will begin two weeks before vote. Opposition denounced double standards as ruling party CNDD-FDD has been campaigning for months and dozens of opposition supporters arrested. Main opposition coalition in exile CNARED, civil society activists and journalists gathered in Belgium 9-11 March to found “Forum Citoyen” platform to block referendum. CNDD-FDD bestowed on Nkurunziza

title of "eternal supreme guide" during meeting in Buye, Ngozi region 9-10 March. In run-up to referendum, regime maintained intimidation of potential "no" voters, with reports of violence, imprisonment and killings. Security officers detained president of opposition group RANAC (National Gathering for Change) in Gitega 26 March, released him next day. UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi 13 March reported restrictions on civil liberties, harassment by public officials and members of Imbonerakure (CNDD-FDD youth wing), as well as arrests, executions and disappearances between Sept 2017 and March 2018. Court 8 March sentenced three civil rights activists to ten years in prison for planning human rights workshop which prosecutor considered "likely to disrupt security". Following presidential pardon end 2017, govt 16 March freed 740 prisoners including 450 imprisoned for taking part in mid-2015 uprising against Nkurunziza after he said he would run for third term.

→ Cameroon MARCH 2018

Violence in Anglophone regions left at least eighteen people dead as Boko Haram continued attacks in Far North. Separatists 7 March killed gendarme in Batibo, Northwest; security forces 8 March shot dead motorbike rider in Buea, Southwest. Three gendarmes reportedly shot dead in Ashong-Batibo, Northwest 11 March. Separatist armed group Ambazonia Restoration Army 13 March attacked gendarme post in Nguti, Southwest and reportedly killed three officers. Separatist armed group Ambazonian Tigers 15 March abducted construction company workers (two Tunisians and two Cameroonians) in Kumba-Isangele, Southwest; in military operation to rescue them 20 March, one Tunisian killed, others freed; \$95,000 ransom reportedly paid. Unidentified separatist group in Lebialem, Southwest 18 March abducted professor, later released him after payment of \$40,000 ransom. Unidentified separatist group 23 March killed govt official in Lebialem, Southwest. Separatists 31 March killed one soldier in Badje, injured five soldiers in Ekombe and killed gendarme in Konye, all Southwest. President Biya appointed two Anglophones as ministers of secondary education and territorial administration 2 March, both considered pro-govt and unpopular in Anglophone area. Municipal councillors voted in senatorial elections 25 March including in Anglophone regions: separatists attacked Bangem polling station, Kupe Manenguba division in Southwest, security forces said four separatists killed and several police officers wounded. In Far North, Boko Haram (BH) operations remained at low ebb: in Logone-and-Chari region, militants abducted chief of Chabak 14 March and army killed two BH in Sagme 17 March. BH 25 March killed two civilians in Gassama, Logone-and-Chari and one in Kerawa Mafa, Mayo Tsanaga; 27 March attacked Fotokol, Logone-and-Chari killing one soldier.

→ Central African Republic MARCH 2018

Violence involving armed groups continued, especially in centre. Near Bambari in centre, anti-balaka fighters clashed early March with ex-Seleka factions Union for Peace in the Central African Republic and Popular Front for the Central African Renaissance for control over mining sites. Other clashes from 21 March in Bambari, its periphery, Seko and Alindao left at least thirteen civilians dead including religious leader. In Bangassou in east, assailants looted NGOs' equipment and facilities mid-March forcing several to suspend their activities. In Bria in east, UN mission in CAR (MINUSCA) arrested and handed over to authorities anti-balaka leader Jean-Francis Diandi 16 March for involvement in attack on UN peacekeepers in Dec. Facilitation panel of African Union-led African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR held further round of consultations with armed groups late month. Following allegations of sexual abuse and misbehaviour by its troops, Gabon 4 March said it would withdraw from

MINUSCA its 450-strong force in June. Parliament 9 March elected its new leadership, including Jean-Symphorien Mapenzi, close ally of President Touadéra, to position of national assembly vice president.

→ Chad MARCH 2018

Over 1,000 people from pro-govt parties and civil society organisations attended national forum on institutional reform in capital N'Djamena 19-27 March, opposition boycotted. Forum recommended, among other measures, increasing presidential term limit from five to six years, abolishing PM position and reducing number of MPs. Committee of jurists to be appointed to review proposals before referendum on constitutional changes. Govt and trade unions 14 March signed agreement ending seven-week public sector strike. Two Sudanese delegations discussed with President Déby joint security concerns 3 and 5 March. Security forces clashed with Boko Haram fighters on island in Lake Chad 23 March, twenty insurgents and one soldier reportedly killed. Armed forces of de facto leader of eastern Libya Khalifa Haftar said their warplanes attacked Chadian rebels in south Libya 23-25 March.

→ Democratic Republic of Congo MARCH 2018

In step toward elections planned for Dec, govt 26 March presented to electoral commission (CENI) list of over 600 registered political parties and coalitions. Opposition politician Moïse Katumbi in exile in South Africa confirmed 11 March his intention to stand for president and creation of new coalition, Together for Change, comprising opposition G7 alliance, Alternance pour la République (AR) alliance and other small parties and associations. Felix Tshisekedi 31 March elected president of Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS) and designated party's candidate for presidential poll; rival UDPS factions contested his election. Parliament speaker 1 March agreed to UDPS's request to place on parliamentary agenda replacement of UDPS representative in CENI, in line with Dec 2016 Saint Sylvester agreement's provision to refresh CENI, and announced possible adjustment of electoral law adopted in Dec. Mixed commission of inquiry comprising govt and civil society with African Union support 10 March submitted final report on human rights abuses during 31 Dec and 21 Jan protests, confirming that security forces killed fourteen people and injured 46. Violence between Lendu and Hema ethnic groups in Djugu area in Ituri province left around 30 people dead 1-2 March, and 39 to 41 people 12-13 March; UN patrol 17 March killed two presumed militia members. Military 24 March said it had killed thirteen militiamen and one soldier had also been killed during clashes in Jemi and Penyi, Ituri province. Alleged members of Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) armed group 3 March killed seven people near Eringeti in North Kivu; suspected ADF 27 March killed at least eleven civilians in Beni, North Kivu.

→ Ethiopia MARCH 2018

Ruling coalition Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front 27 March elected Abiy Ahmed as

its chairman, paving way for him to become PM, replacing Hailemariam Desalegn who announced resignation in Feb. Parliament 2 March approved state of emergency, prompting general strikes in towns across Oromia regional state early March, during which protesters clashed with security forces, several reportedly killed. Army 10 March killed at least nine civilians in Moyale town on border with Kenya after mistaking them for rebels; following incident over 8,500 people reportedly crossed from Ethiopia into Kenya; authorities 15 March arrested senior official from Oromia regional state who criticised killings. Authorities 25 March arrested some twelve opposition figures, including recently released politicians and journalists, in capital Addis Ababa for reportedly displaying prohibited version of national flag. State media 31 March said 1,107 people had been arrested under state of emergency.

→ Kenya MARCH 2018

President Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga held surprise talks 9 March – their first meeting since disputed 2017 elections – creating opportunity in April to begin dialogue and reduce tensions. They pledged to work together to unify country, including by creating joint office to tackle political divisions. During visit to Nairobi same day, then U.S. Sec State Rex Tillerson said govt should not threaten independence of media or courts. Immigration officials at Nairobi airport 26 March denied entry to prominent opposition lawyer Miguna Miguna whom govt 6 Feb deported for being “prohibited immigrant”. High court 27 March ordered authorities to allow Miguna to leave airport and enter country. After authorities failed to release Miguna, high court 28 March found interior minister and police inspector general in contempt of court, and next day fined them and immigration minister for ignoring ruling. Miguna 29 March said officials had put him on plane to Dubai late 28 March after beating and drugging him. Al-Shabaab attacks continued near border with Somalia; 2 March attack on police camps in Mandera county in north east left four police officers and reservists dead. Clan-related violence 27 March left six people dead in Banisa, Mandera county, following killing of two Garre clansmen in Ethiopia previous day.

- **BRIEFING: After Kenya’s Leaders Reconcile, a Tough Path Ahead**

→ Somalia MARCH 2018

Al-Shabaab maintained attacks in rural areas and capital Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab 2 March captured Balcad town, Middle Shabelle region, from army and African Union mission (AMISOM), but withdrew next day after counteroffensive by Somali forces. Improvised bomb laid by Al-Shabaab killed five soldiers in Afgooye in Lower Shabelle region 2 March; same day Al-Shabaab militants conducted cross-border attack on police camps in Kenya, killing four police officers and reservist. Army 17 March said it had killed 32 Al-Shabaab militants near Mahas, Hiraan region, in clashes sparked by Al-Shabaab attempts to tax local residents 16 March. Al-Shabaab militants 1 April conducted large-scale attack involving two suicide car bombs against AMISOM base in Bulamarer town, Lower Shabelle region, and attacked surrounding villages; Ugandan army said its soldiers had killed 22 Al-Shabaab militants and that four Ugandan troops had been killed, unconfirmed local reports said some 46 Ugandan soldiers killed. In Mogadishu, Al-Shabaab claimed 22 March car bombing outside hotel which killed at least fourteen people; Al-Shabaab claimed 25 March car bombing at checkpoint near parliament which killed three people. Lower parliament 12 March rejected Berbera port deal between Emirati shipping line DP World and breakaway region Somaliland and banned DP World from operating in Somalia; senate 15 March

passed similar legislation. Somaliland President Abdi 25 March confirmed Somaliland had suspended talks with Somalia, which had been due to restart 19 March. MPs loyal to PM Khayre 14 March tabled motion of no confidence against speaker of federal parliament's lower house; Khayre sent security forces to secure parliament ahead of vote expected 31 March. President Farmajo 31 March postponed parliamentary session without setting new date.

→ Somaliland MARCH 2018

Somalia's lower parliament 12 March rejected Berbera port deal between Emirati shipping line DP World and Somaliland; Somalia's senate 15 March passed similar legislation. President Abdi 25 March confirmed suspension of talks with Somalia, which had been due to restart 19 March.

→ South Sudan MARCH 2018

Regional grouping Intergovernmental Authority on Development 26 March scheduled next round of peace talks for 26 April, announced it would place targeted sanctions on ceasefire violators, referred ceasefire monitors' findings to African Union, and said rebel leader and former Vice President Riek Machar could be released from house arrest in South Africa if he renounced violence, but that he would not be allowed back to Horn of Africa or any country neighbouring S Sudan. Following sexual exploitation scandal involving UN police, govt 9 March announced suspension of UN peacekeeping mission's (UNMISS) Radio Miraya for allegedly violating media laws; disputed by UNMISS. Govt forces clashed with rebels at Kajokeji, Central Equatoria near Ugandan border 28 March and limited fighting reported in several places in former Upper Nile region. Govt and Egypt signed memorandum of understanding in Juba 12 March to increase cooperation and held consultations on S Sudan joining Arab League; Egypt reiterated its support for govt's national dialogue and provided financial support.

→ Sudan MARCH 2018

Govt and Egypt took steps to reduce tensions, which flared late Dec-early Jan, but points of contention remained. Govts 2 March exchanged detainees arrested for illegally crossing disputed border areas. Sudanese ambassador to Egypt – recalled to Khartoum early Jan – returned to Cairo 5 March. Sudanese and Egyptian security chiefs in Khartoum 10 March discussed border security and terrorism, and Egypt's alleged lobbying of Gulf states not to grant Khartoum financial relief. President Bashir and Egyptian President Sisi in Cairo 20 March discussed issues including status of disputed border region Halayeb, Sudan's position on Ethiopia's dam under construction on Nile river, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and alleged Sudanese support for Egyptian Islamist opposition groups, particularly Muslim Brotherhood. However, countries still hold divergent positions on key issues in GERD dispute – Khartoum wants to increase its use of Nile waters – and changes in leadership in Ethiopia adds

...team wants to increase its use of force ... and changes in leadership in Europe ... uncertainty. Economic situation continued to worsen.

→ Tanzania MARCH 2018

Police 21 March said they had arrested two people for comments on social media criticising govt repression and urging others to participate in anti-govt protests called for 26 April. Police 27 March arrested Freeman Mbowe, head of main opposition party Chadema, along with five other party members on several charges, including inciting hatred and rebellion at 16 Feb protest during which police killed bystander.

→ Uganda MARCH 2018

President Museveni 4 March replaced unpopular police chief General Kale Kayihura, under whose tenure crime and insecurity increased, with Kayihura's deputy. Govt 20 March said that five petitions against bill removing presidential age limit of 75 will be aggregated into one, and will be heard by constitutional court in Mbale 9 April.

→ Mozambique MARCH 2018

Three main parties – ruling Frelimo, armed opposition Renamo and Democratic Movement of Mozambique – 27 March agreed on “consensus document” containing proposed constitutional changes that would advance decentralisation, measures critical to shoring up peace between govt and Renamo; proposals to be debated in parliament. Security forces 24 March detained 29 people in Nampula province, north east who allegedly intended to join Islamist extremists in Cabo Delgado province in north.

→ Zambia MARCH 2018

Opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) 22 March filed motion seeking President Lungu's impeachment, accusing him of breaching constitution; motion received signatures of one third of MPs, but will need backing of two-thirds to pass. Parliament 28 March delayed debate; UPND

spokesman said debate would be in next parliamentary session in June.

➔ Zimbabwe MARCH 2018

President Mnangagwa 17 March announced general elections would be held in July. MP Ambrose Mutinhiri, former general and ally of former President Mugabe, 2 March resigned from ruling ZANU-PF party citing military intervention that deposed Mugabe, and 4 March said he had created new opposition party, New Patriotic Front (NPF); NPF said it would challenge legality of Mnangagwa govt in constitutional court. Mugabe 15 March gave first television interviews since he left office, accused Mnangagwa of taking power illegitimately. Following death of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai in Feb, dispute over leadership of his party Movement for Democratic Change-Tsvangirai (MDC-T) continued: supporters of Nelson Chamisa, appointed party leader in Feb, clashed with supporters of party's Co-Vice President Thokozani Khupe at party offices in Bulawayo 4 March. Khupe 20 March notified electoral commission that she would represent MDC in presidential election; Chamisa's faction 23 March expelled her from party. U.S. extended sanctions on Zimbabwe for another year on 2 March. U.S. Senate 22 March introduced bill setting out criteria Zimbabwe would need to meet for U.S. to lift sanctions, including army refraining from involvement in politics, economic reforms, release of biometric voter registration roll and reconstitution of electoral commission.

➔ Burkina Faso MARCH 2018

Jihadist coalition Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) claimed attacks on military headquarters and French embassy in capital Ouagadougou 2 March, at least sixteen people killed, including nine assailants. JNIM said operation was in retaliation for French airstrike 14 Feb in north-eastern Mali that killed several of its leaders. Eight Burkinabe nationals arrested in following days for involvement in attacks, including two soldiers and one former soldier. Gunmen 15 March killed forest warden in Nassougou village in east. Gunman mid-March attacked customs officers in Di in west, 280km from Ouagadougou, wounded one before being killed by police.

- **COMMENTARY: Burkina Faso's Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence**

➔ Côte d'Ivoire MARCH 2018

Ruling coalition Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace won 50 of 66 seats in country's first senatorial elections 24 March, opposition boycotted vote. Security forces 22 March blocked

demonstration in Abidjan by opposition platform Together for Democracy and Sovereignty (EDS) against electoral commission, which it accused of bias. Two civilians reportedly killed 13 March in Bangolo area in west in unclear circumstances after armed individuals attacked military checkpoint. Amid rise in child

kidnappings and ritual killings, body of fourteen-year-old girl found 5 March in M'Bahiakro in centre; civilians calling for justice 6 March ransacked police station there. President Ouattara 7 March condemned ritual killings.

➔ **Gambia** MARCH 2018

Police 21 March said they had arrested ten former National Intelligence Agency officers on suspicion of involvement in death in detention of opposition activist Solo Sandeng in April 2016; two reportedly granted bail and eight remained in custody. Police 26 March said they had arrested former National Intelligence Agency security chief in same case.

➔ **Guinea** MARCH 2018

Protests and clashes with security forces over teachers' demands for salary raises and results of 4 Feb local elections continued, at least thirteen killed in Feb-March. Opposition supporters contesting victory of ruling party Rally for the Guinean People (RPG) protested and erected barricades in capital Conakry and mining towns of Boké and Kamsar 12-14 March, three killed 14 March in Conakry. Teachers 14 March suspended five-week strike after govt said it would increase their salaries.

➔ **Guinea-Bissau** MARCH 2018

Prosecutor General Bacari Biai 13 March sent letter of complaint to regional bloc Economic Community of West African States for applying sanctions early Feb on nineteen politicians and businessmen, including himself, loyal to President Vaz and thus allegedly undermining efforts to implement Oct 2016 Conakry agreement.

➔ **Liberia** MARCH 2018

UN peacekeeping mission (UNMIL) 30 March withdrew last remaining personnel after fifteen years' presence.

→ Mali MARCH 2018

Inter-ethnic violence and suspected jihadist attacks escalated in centre, as ethnic militias pursued operations against jihadists in Mali-Niger border area with French military support. In centre, armed men reportedly attacked Dogon villages of Sabéré Darah and Diankabou in Koro area, Mopti region 9 March. Dogon hunters 11 March reportedly killed two Fulani herders and set fire to several Fulani-owned houses in Madougou, Mopti region. Fulani and Dogon communities clashed around Koro 18 March, at least eight killed and Sabéré Darah village burnt down. President of Fulani association Tabital Pulaaku 13 March said Dogon militias had killed at least 25 Fulani civilians in past eight days. Armed groups continued to attack govt troops, international forces and civilians in centre and north. Assailants attacked army contingent after its vehicle hit improvised mine in Mopti region 8 March, four soldiers killed. Unclaimed improvised mine killed three civilians in Mondoro, Mopti region 19 March. Jihadist coalition Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) claimed 22 March mortar attack on UN camp in Kidal in north that wounded five French soldiers. Gunmen 28 March attacked hotel in Bandiagar, Mopti region, one soldier and one assailant killed. In north east, Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), splinter from rebel Coalition of Azawad Movements (CMA), and Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA), Platform coalition member, confronted assailants in Tinzouragan and Tawraghen, Ménaka region 6-7 March, killing five and arresting ten. Following ambush of MSA-GATIA-Barkhane convoy carrying fifteen prisoners near Ménaka 6 March, coalition 12 March launched operation in area, killing seven alleged jihadists. MSA and GATIA 9-10 March killed about fifteen militants and arrested two in Indelimane and Tinzouragan areas, Ménaka region. French military 15 March said operations in Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border area had “neutralised” 60 jihadists since Nov 2017. Ahead of presidential election scheduled for 29 July, main members of ruling coalition 10 March said they would support President Keita’s candidacy. Mayor of Sikasso Kalfa Sanogo and Aliou Boubacar Diallo from Democratic Alliance for Peace (ADP-Maliba) announced their candidacies 10-11 March respectively.

→ Niger MARCH 2018

Malian ethnic militias and French forces stepped up joint operations against suspected jihadists in Mali-Niger border region: Self-Defence Group of Imrad Tuareg and Allies (GATIA) and Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and French Barkhane forces crossed border into western Niger several times in pursuit of suspected jihadists, handed over prisoners to Nigerien security forces (FDS) reportedly from 6 March. GATIA fighters 11 March accidentally clashed with FDS near Mangaize in Tillaberi region, one FDS reportedly killed. Armed individuals 12 March attacked gendarmerie position in Goubé village, Tillaberi region, 40km from capital Niamey, killing three gendarmes. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara 4 March claimed responsibility for 4 Oct 2017 ambush in Tongo Tongo village near border with Mali that killed four U.S. Special Forces and five FDS. U.S. military 14 March said its Special Forces had killed eleven suspected Islamic State (ISIS) militants in Diffa region 6 Dec 2017. Thousands 11 March marched in Niamey against 2018 tax bill, civil society representatives vowed to demonstrate until repeal of “unjust law”. Further protest against bill 25 March led to clashes with security forces and arrest of civil society representatives.

📌 Nigeria MARCH 2018

Deadly violence including Boko Haram (BH) insurgency, herder-farmer killings and rural banditry escalated, leaving at least 300 dead. In Borno state in north east, BH attacked military base, displaced persons' camps and civilians in rural areas and state capital Maiduguri killing at least 23 people. In Adamawa state, BH attacked Mildu and Kaya villages 1 March, killed a woman, at least one insurgent also killed; 21 March returned over 100 girls abducted from Dapchi town 19 Feb, still held one, five missing. Herder-farmer violence continued leaving at least 194 people dead, despite military operation in Benue, Taraba, Kogi, Nasarawa, Kaduna and Niger states. In Taraba state, at least 29 people killed in Sardauna area; armed men 15 March attacked five villages in Takum and Ussa areas, killing at least seven. In Benue state, suspected herders 4-5 March killed at least 31 in Umenger and Omusu Edimoga villages, killed eight in Guma area 14 and 25 March. In Plateau state, violence between Fulani herders and Irigwe farmer communities escalated: clash 5 March left three dead in Bassa area; suspected herders 7-9 March killed at least sixteen in Bokkos area and 12 March killed 25 in Dundu village; herders 14 March attacked Miango area, two soldiers and at least 23 civilians killed; suspected herders 22 March killed three in Dong. Herder-farmer violence spread southward: clash in Onunwakpu community, Ebonyi state 12 March left at least four dead; suspected herders attacked Dekina and Omala areas, Kogi state 13-14 March killing at least 32 and attacked villages in Omala area 18-19 March, killing eleven. Bandits 20 March killed eleven soldiers in Birnin Gwari area, Kaduna state, north central; 27-28 March attacked Bawar-Daji village, Zamfara state, killing at least 63; 29 March attacked Bakin Kogi village in Kaduna state, killing six. In other violence, intra-gang feud in Zamfara state 7 March left prominent bandit Buhari Tsoho and eight gang members dead; clash over land in Boki area, Cross River state 9-10 March left eleven dead.

➔ Sierra Leone MARCH 2018

Presidential run-off vote took place 31 March; results yet to be announced end-month. In first round 7 March, opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) candidate Julius Maada Bio took 43.3% of vote, while ruling party All People's Congress (APC) candidate Samura Kamara took 42.7%. Electoral process largely peaceful but low-level violence and inflammatory tribal rhetoric increased ahead of second round. Skirmishes erupted in capital Freetown 7 March after SLPP spokesman said police had come to search party's offices without warrant, at least one wounded. Joint military and police patrols deployed 13 March in Koquima town, Kono district in east after APC and SLPP supporters clashed 12 March, several reportedly wounded and eighteen arrested. APC and SLPP supporters reportedly also clashed 15 March in Bo town in south east, SLPP stronghold. Following legal request by APC member and allegations of electoral fraud, electoral commission postponed second round, initially planned for 27 March, by four days.

➔ Togo MARCH 2018

Talks between gov't and opposition facilitated by Ghanaian President Akufo-Addo resumed 23 March after month-long pause; Akufo-Addo met first with ruling party and then with opposition.

Asia

➔ China (internal) MARCH 2018

Gov't statistics revealed public spending on security and surveillance in Xinjiang region rose by 92% in 2017, compared with 11.4% increase in rest of country; and grew tenfold in last decade. Radio Free Asia reported that Chinese authorities had detained relatives of several of its reporters covering Xinjiang, in retaliation for its coverage of crackdown on ethnic Uighurs.

➔ China/Japan MARCH 2018

Japanese media 27 Feb reported Japan plans to deploy anti-ship missiles on Okinawa's main island, covering entire Miyako Strait, one of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)'s principal routes to reach Pacific Ocean. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang 19 March said he would consider formal visit to Japan and hopes to see continuing improvements in relations. Ahead of planned trilateral Japan-China-South Korea summit early May, Chinese FM Wang Yi scheduled to visit Japan mid-April.

➔ 🇰🇷 Korean Peninsula MARCH 2018

Month saw extensive South Korean shuttle diplomacy to push forward inter-Korean dialogue, and ended with Chinese state media confirming that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un paid "unofficial visit" to Beijing 25-28 March, where he pledged commitment to denuclearising Korean peninsula and confirmed he would meet with South Korea and U.S. leaders in April and May. South Korea 5 March sent two envoys to Pyongyang with aim to discuss U.S.-North Korean talks "aimed at denuclearisation" and inter-Korean relations. Surprising many observers, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un opted to lead talks with five-person South Korean delegation, and, together with his wife Ri Sol-ju, hosted dinner that was later broadcast on state TV. South Korean side reported that Kim said Pyongyang was willing to denuclearise under certain circumstances and offered to meet U.S. President Trump; Kim also requested South Korea send delegation of musicians and athletes to Pyongyang 31 March-3 April; inter-Korean summit slated for 27 April. South Korean envoys visited Washington 8 March, where Trump agreed to meet Kim Jong-un "by May"; and Beijing and Tokyo 12-13 March, where they sought leaders' support for negotiation

process. Chinese data released late month showed drastic reduction in Chinese exports of petroleum products, coal and other materials since late 2017. Separately, Japan offered to cover expenses for denuclearisation verification measures if an agreement is reached. North Korean and Swedish foreign

ministers met 16-18 March, reportedly discussed fate of three Americans currently detained in North Korea; South Korean media suggested sides agreed on their release, but U.S. denied. North Korean foreign ministry's deputy director general for North American affairs subsequently flew to Helsinki to lead track 1.5 discussions with former diplomats and researchers from South Korea and U.S., joined by North Korean permanent representative to UN. China 30 March said it would soon end informal economic sanctions it has imposed on South Korea over its deployment of THAAD U.S. anti-missile system.

- **COMMENTARY: China Moves Centre Stage in Korean Peninsula Peace Efforts**

✈ Taiwan Strait MARCH 2018

U.S. President Trump 16 March signed Taiwan Travel Act on 16 March, formally encouraging all levels of officials of both govts to visit each other; only second piece of U.S. legislation passed on Taiwan since they severed formal diplomatic relations in 1972, increasing tensions with Beijing. China expressed strong dissatisfaction, said law violates "One-China" policy and sends "seriously wrong signal". China's President Xi struck assertive tone on Taiwan in address to National Peoples' Congress 20 March, warning that any efforts to divide China would be doomed and separatism would meet the "punishment of history"; speech seen as warning to U.S. and to Taiwan's independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party; and as Xi's most public expression yet of long-held ambition to reunite Taiwan and mainland. China's Taiwan Affairs Office 28 Feb unveiled slate of 31 measures designed to deepen economic and social integration with Taiwan; Taiwan's Premier William Lai 6 March said measures were intended to cause brain drain and increase dependence. Two former presidents of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian, 28 Feb backed campaign for island to hold referendum on independence in 2019.

➔ Afghanistan MARCH 2018

International community expressed support for President Ghani's unprecedented 28 Feb offer at Kabul peace conference to recognise Taliban as legitimate political entity, along with path to ceasefire, prisoner release and constitutional revision; international and regional support to offer was reiterated in follow-up peace conference in Uzbekistan 27 March. Taliban offered no official response, though Taliban media dismissed proposal and demanded direct talks with U.S.. Afghan govt 19 March threatened to close Taliban's Qatar office if it does not respond positively. U.S. Defense Secretary Mattis during unannounced visit to Kabul 13 March said some Taliban factions had shown interest in peace talks, said U.S. defines victory not as military but as political reconciliation. Ghani 18 March invited Pakistani PM Abbasi to initiate "comprehensive" dialogue to improve bilateral relations; Abbasi to visit Kabul 6 April. Amid continuing hostilities on all sides, start of spring seen as likely to bring more intense fighting; govt announced new Operation Nasrat starting 21 March. Taliban further tightened control around capital of western Farah province, killing at least 24 Afghan forces (ANSF) in Bala Buluk district 10 March, and 12 March briefly taking control of Anar Dara district. In Kabul, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) claimed responsibility for 9 March bomb which killed ten, mostly police; and 21 March suicide attack which killed 31 during celebrations to mark Persian new year, Nowruz. Unclaimed car bomb near

Australian embassy 2 March killed one; Taliban claimed car bomb that killed at least three 17 March. IS-KP claimed two deadly attacks in eastern Jalalabad 7 and 19 March. In north, Taliban 9 March killed

sixteen ANSF in Takhar province's Khwaja Ghar district. Taliban attacks in south included coordinated assault 12 March on ANSF checkpoints along Kandahar-Uruzgan highway; security forces repelled attack after U.S. military reportedly carried out "massive" airstrikes. Officials in eastern Nangarhar province 17 March accused govt forces in partnership with NATO advisers of killing at least eight farmers in Chaparhar district. Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor 22 March agreed to step down from post, ending standoff with Ghani. Election commission 30 March announced parliamentary and district council elections, initially scheduled for July, now set for 20 Oct.

- **OP-ED: The U.S. Needs to Talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan**

➔ Bangladesh MARCH 2018

Opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) continued its agitation campaign over Feb conviction of its leader Khaleda Zia for corruption. BNP early March held demonstrations demanding her release in all divisional headquarters, including Dhaka; police 6 March arrested several BNP activists including BNP student wing leader Jakir Hossain Milon, who died in custody 12 March. BNP leaders and Milon's family 18 March staged protests against his death, claiming he had been tortured. High court 12 March granted Zia four months' bail in orphanage trust case, though she was not released from custody due to separate ongoing case into Feb 2015 alleged arson attack. In response to petitions from govt and Anti-Corruption Commission, Supreme Court stayed bail order 14 and 19 March; Dhaka prison authorities 28 March failed to produce Zia before Comilla court hearing on arson case. Hundreds of Rohingya refugees 28 Feb fled makeshift camp in "no man's land" area along border with Myanmar and crossed into Bangladesh after Myanmar soldiers allegedly threatened them through megaphones; more refugees entered from Myanmar 1 March after Myanmar reportedly deployed troops at Tombru border crossing, prompting protest from Bangladeshi govt. Islamist student Foyzur Rahman 3 March stabbed academic Muhammad Zafar Iqbal at Sylhet district university in alleged assassination attempt; police reportedly found evidence linking Rahman to Ansarul Islam group, responsible for spate of murders of secular bloggers in 2015.

➔ India (non-Kashmir) MARCH 2018

In Chhattisgarh state, clash between security forces and Maoist rebels in Bijapur district 2 March killed some ten suspected Maoists and a police officer; suspected Maoists 5 March killed former police constable in Bastar district; at least nine paramilitary soldiers killed in Sukma district 13 March when their vehicle denoted suspected Maoist landmine. Security forces 25 March killed four suspected Maoists during clash in Koraput district, Odisha state. Rebels killed several civilians they suspected of being police informers during month.

➔ Kashmir MARCH 2018

Pakistan 6 March claimed to have shot down Indian spy drone which it said was crossing Line of Control (LoC); next day Pakistani and Indian border security forces shelling killed five people on both sides of LoC. Indian security forces reported several clashes with militants in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, including: 12 March clash in Anantnag district in which India said its forces killed three militants; 16 March gunfight in Srinagar in which two suspected militants were killed; clashes 20-22 March during cordon-and-search operation in Kupwara district, during which five security personnel and five reported Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) militants were killed; and clash 25 March in Budgam district in which one LeT militant was killed and a girl injured. Pakistan 10 March lodged formal protest with India over alleged harassment of New Delhi-based Pakistani diplomats and their families in series of incidents which began 7 March, and accused Indian authorities of complicity; Pakistan 15 March said it had recalled its high commissioner to India for “consultations” over alleged harassment of Pakistani diplomats and families by Indian security agencies, returning 22 March. Amid broader push against terror financing and money laundering by Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa authorities mid-March seized assets and closed properties belonging to Jamaat-ud-Dawa (charity front of radical group anti-India Lashkar-e-Tayyaba) (see Pakistan).

➔ Maldives MARCH 2018

Police 16 March arrested 139 opposition supporters for staging protest in capital Malé in defiance of state of emergency introduced in Feb after govt defied Supreme Court (SC) order to release political prisoners, provoking political crisis. Court 21 March charged former President Gayoom, two SC judges and judicial administrator, all arrested in Feb, with terrorism; all four face up to fifteen years’ jail. President Yameen 22 March lifted 45-day state of emergency citing “effort to promote normalcy”, despite remaining “diminished threat to national security”. Exiled former President Nasheed said Yameen lifted state of emergency because he no longer needed it, accused him of introducing “full dictatorship”. India welcomed end of emergency rule but stated concerns “remain to be addressed”; China foreign ministry welcomed return of “social order”. Opposition delegation led by former Foreign Minister Ahmed Naseem met U.S. officials in Washington 15 March, called for U.S. to act. Opposition Maldivian Democratic Party 28 March said 32 people arrested during emergency rule are still detained.

➔ Nepal MARCH 2018

New Communist Party of Nepal (UML)-led govt secured support from three-fourths of lower parliamentary house – including from two main Madhesi parties – in constitutionally-mandated 11 March vote of confidence. Despite 7 March announcement about joining govt, Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum-Nepal (SSF-N) – a Madhesi party with sixteen MPs – 18 March decided a written commitment to amend 2015 constitution would be required first. SSF-N’s discussions on joining govt alienated Rastriya Janata Party-Nepal (RJP-N), the other Madhesi party in parliament and SSF-N’s ruling coalition partner

in the Madhes-only Province 2. PM Oli planning state visit to India 6-8 April to focus on economic ties; political issues taking backseat amid efforts to repair bilateral relationship. Govt strongly criticised EU Election Observation Mission’s 20 March report on parliamentary and provincial elections for undermining Nepal’s sovereignty; report recommended removing controversial electoral quotas for well-

represented Khas-Arya community. In report's aftermath, UN briefed diplomats 21 March to outline govt's foreign policy priorities and emphasised nationalism as major pillar of his govt; foreign ministry asked diplomatic missions and UN agencies to seek prior approval before meeting state or local authorities. Chief Justice Gopal Prasad Parajuli resigned 15 March following Judicial Council termination of his term for exceeding retirement age of 65.

→ Pakistan MARCH 2018

Targeted killings and attacks continued in Balochistan province in west, including 7 March killing of police official guarding Hazara neighbourhood in Quetta, and 15 March bomb in Qila Saifullah district which killed seven people. In east, suicide attack on police checkpoint in Lahore killed six policemen 14 March. Amid broader push against terror financing and money laundering, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa authorities mid-March seized assets and closed properties belonging to Jamaat-ud-Dawa (charity front of radical group anti-India Lashkar-e-Tayyaba). Balochistan police 13 March registered criminal cases against Manzoor Pashteen, leader of Pashtun Tahaffuz (protection) movement which began sit-ins in Jan against extrajudicial killings and has developed into major nonviolent civil society campaign; group organiser Aftab Mehsud found dead in Dera Ismail Khan late Feb. Police 21 March arrested suspended superintendent wanted for 13 Jan killing which triggered sit-ins. Ahead of 3 March indirect senate elections, Election Commission 28 March removed former PM Nawaz Sharif as president of ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party following Supreme Court's 21 Feb ruling that he could not continue as party president after his July 2017 disqualification from office of PM; court's judgement widely criticised by legal community as judicial overreach. PML-N selected Sharif's brother and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif as party president. PML-N won fifteen seats in 3 March elections overtaking Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as largest party in senate, though PML-N's candidates were officially elected as independents in line with Electoral Commission ruling.

→ Sri Lanka MARCH 2018

Country rocked by worst outbreak of anti-Muslim violence since 2014 in several small towns in central Kandy district 4-8 March, which began when Sinhala crowds attacked Muslim shops and houses following death of Sinhala man beaten by four Muslim men ten days earlier. Scores of Muslim businesses and houses burned or badly damaged, over two dozen mosques attacked. Large crowds of militant Buddhist activists, including prominent militant leaders and many from outside district, gathered 5 March to demand release of those arrested for previous day's violence. Widespread attacks on Muslim shops, houses and places of worship followed 5-6 March, prompting President Sirisena to declare state of emergency until 17 March. Despite curfews and deployment of thousands of military personnel, violence continued until 8 March; police eventually arrested more than 200 suspected of planning and participating in violence, including apparent Mahasohon Balakaya leader. Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, EU, U.S. and UN issued statements condemning violence and urging govt to hold perpetrators accountable. Govt imposed unprecedented restrictions on social media 7 March in response

to its use in organising violence, blocking Facebook and WhatsApp; ban widely criticised for harming small businesses while failing to stop hate speech. Govt criticised for response to violence, particularly PM Ranil Wickremesinghe, temporarily serving as law and order minister; and Sirisena, who visited Kandy to meet religious leaders but not victims. No-confidence vote in parliament against PM originally scheduled for first week of March postponed to early April. Cabinet 17 March approved PM's proposal to

scheduled for first week of March, postponed to early April. Cabinet 15 March approved PM's proposal to establish office of reparations to compensate those affected by war-related crimes and damages, meaning bill will now be drafted. PM agreed 27 March to withdraw draft amendments to Voluntary Social Service Organisations Act that would have severely restricted independence of NGOs and civil society organisations.

- **COMMENTARY: Buddhist Militancy Rises Again in Sri Lanka**

➔ Cambodia MARCH 2018

Phnom Penh Municipal Court 5 March extended pre-trial detention of jailed opposition leader Kem Sokha for up to an additional six months; Sokha was arrested in Sept 2017 and charged with treason. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein 7 March told Human Rights Council he is "seriously concerned at increasing moves to repress dissent and close political and civil society space" in Cambodia. UN special rapporteur on human rights in Cambodia, Rhona Smith, 14 March called on govt to repeal Nov 2017 ban on opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP). At UN Human Rights Council in Geneva 22 March, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Kate Gilmore described "serious deterioration" of human rights in Cambodia. Australia, Canada, EU, France, Norway, Sweden, U.S. and several NGOs also expressed concern and decried intimidation of govt critics, while China and Venezuela defended Cambodia. 45 countries endorsed statement 21 March expressing "deep concern about the recent serious decline of civil and political rights in Cambodia".

➔ Malaysia MARCH 2018

Authorities reported seven Malaysian men suspected of being part of Islamic State (ISIS) cell planning terrorist attacks arrested between late Feb and mid-March in operations in Johor state (south), and one Filipino terror suspect arrested in Sabah (east). Ahead of general election due by 24 Aug, parliament approved controversial legislation redrawing some constituency boundaries, prompting protests and outcry from opposition, who said move would favour ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

➔ Myanmar MARCH 2018

At UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva early March, UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein 7 March said he strongly suspected "acts of genocide" may have taken place against Rohingya in northern Rakhine since Aug 2017 and called for body to prepare prosecutorial files to facilitate criminal prosecutions; 9 March called for allegations of atrocities to be referred to International Criminal Court. Report of UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee 9 March called for international efforts to focus on accountability for individuals and govt, said events in Rakhine bore hallmarks of genocide. Fact-finding Mission presented interim report 12 March, noted it had "hundreds" of accounts pointing to "crimes

mission presented interim report 12 March, noted it had "hundreds" of accounts pointing to "crimes under international law" for which it will "attribute responsibility where it is due". Amnesty International report 12 March highlighted evolving situation in northern Rakhine, with deserted villages being bulldozed (including some that were not burned), new road, electrical and security infrastructure being rolled out, and beginnings of resettlement of non-Muslims, making return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to villages of origin more unlikely. As repatriation of refugees remained stalled, Bangladesh's foreign ministry 1 March said it summoned Myanmar ambassador to call for "immediate pullback of Myanmar security forces along with military assets" from border zone where thousands of Rohingya were sheltering; Myanmar removed its heavy weapons and sides agreed to carry out periodic coordinated patrols of border. In Kachin state, govt forces clashed with Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) troops in Tanai and Putao townships. In northern Shan state, govt forces clashed with Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) in Namtu Township; and TNLA and Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) clashed in Namtu, Kyaukme and Namhsan townships, displacing more than 800 villagers; two people killed in bomb blast by unknown group in Lashio 21 Feb. In northern Kayin state, govt forces and Karen National Union (KNU) clashed in Hpapun township. In Tanintharyi region (south), New Mon State Party (NMSP) and KNU clashed early March in dispute over illegal logging. President U Htin Kyaw resigned, replaced by U Win Myint, previously speaker of House of Representatives.

➔ Philippines MARCH 2018

As Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) warned of growing frustration in Mindanao due to delay in passage of Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), needed to implement March 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and set up regional govt, senate and House leaders 13 March told President Duterte they hope to pass BBL by 30 May. Presidential adviser to peace process Jesus Dureza reported President Duterte, in Davao City 27 March, assured MILF leaders of his support for BBL and willingness to exercise "administrative directives" should congress fail to pass it. Military early March reported that surviving Islamic State (ISIS)-linked militants from 2017 Marawi city siege were regrouping and setting up new base in southern Philippines. Officials also reported that ISIS had appointed new emir in South East Asia, "Abu Dar" from Lanao del Sur. Army 11 March reported at least 44 suspected members of ISIS-linked Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters killed in clash in southern Maguindanao 8-9 March. In western Mindanao operations continued against ISIS-linked Abu Sayyaf group, still believed to number several hundred despite some 200 surrenders since start of year. Duterte 26 March said surrendered Abu Sayyaf should receive same reintegration assistance as those from Communist Party of the Philippines' (CPP) armed wing New People's Army (NPA). Senior Abu Sayyaf member Nurhassan Jamiri reportedly surrendered to authorities in Basilan province 28 March. Media reported that govt has filed petition to declare more than 600 alleged members of CPP and NPA "terrorists". Dureza 29 March said govt remains open to reviving peace talks with CPP provided there is an "enabling environment", after CPP leader said group wanted to resume negotiations and over 60 legislators called for renewed talks. Civilians displaced by fighting in Marawi protested 18 March against construction of military camp and military abuses, urged govt to end martial law. Govt 16 March informed UN secretary-general of its decision to withdraw from International Criminal Court.

➔ South China Sea MARCH 2018

Media 23 March reported that Vietnam, pressured by China, stopped oil exploration project in block of South China Sea (SCS) licensed to Spanish company. Report: China's Rejected Liberation Army

South China Sea (SCS) licensed to Spanish energy company Repsol. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy conducted large drill week of 26 March involving aircraft carrier Liaoning and at least 40 ships and submarines off Hainan island in SCS. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi 8 March called U.S. naval activities greatest disturbance to peace and stability in SCS. U.S. aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson 5 March made historic five-day visit to Vietnamese port Da Nang, before conducting joint anti-submarine drills with Japanese Maritime Self-defence Force in South China Sea 11 March. U.S. navy destroyer conducted "freedom of navigation" operation near Mischief Reef in Spratly islands 23 March. U.S. 29 March said it had delivered \$20mn of coastguard patrol boats and equipment to Vietnam. Philippines 2 March said it is considering joint development with China of two offshore oil and gas blocks inside its exclusive economic zone, one involving plan to explore block of disputed Reed (Recto) Bank, which is potentially inconsistent with Philippines' legal position and 2016 decision of Law of the Sea Tribunal. Philippines Supreme Court justice Antonio Carpio ruled that such a deal would be illegal unless China acknowledges relevant Philippine sovereignty. Media 14 March reported that Philippines had received unmanned aerial system from U.S. for deployment on Palawan, near disputed Spratly archipelago, which would improve military's maritime domain awareness capabilities. Vice president of China's Academy of Military Sciences, Lt Gen He Lei 8 March told journalists that China should build defensive structures on SCS features it controls to underline its sovereignty. China 5 March announced at opening of its National Peoples' Congress (NPC) that its defence budget will grow by 8.1% this year, and its spending on diplomacy by 15.6%.

→ Thailand MARCH 2018

Eight-member delegation of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) visited Bangkok and southernmost provinces Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala 27 Feb-1 March; expressed support for peace dialogue process with MARA Patani and affirmed that security measures imposed by govt do not disproportionately affect Muslims in region. Commander of Fourth Army Region Lt Gen Piyawat Nakwanich, responsible for southern provinces, 28 Feb made comments to media casting doubt on dialogue process between Bangkok and MARA Patani, which responded 23 March with statement expressing concern over Piyawat's remarks, affirming its commitment to solving conflict through dialogue and noting that talks remain at technical level and nothing, including "safety zone" announced in mid-February, has been finalised. National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) faced continued public demonstrations demanding general election, and growing pressure from political parties for end to ban on political activity. PM Prayuth Chan-ocha told reporters 27 Feb that an election will take place in February 2019, provided right conditions are in place including maintenance of peace and order; previous five promises to hold elections have been broken. National Legislative Assembly 19 March forwarded organic law on senate selection to Constitutional Court, which opens possibility that law could be struck down and redrafted, further delaying general election. Election Commission opened registration for new political parties 2 March. Deputy PM Prawit Wongsuwon 29 March said that ban on political activities will be lifted in June.

Europe & Central Asia

→ Kosovo MARCH 2018

Tensions increased with Serbia after Kosovo special police briefly detained and later deported head of

Tensions increased with Serbia after Kosovo special police briefly detained and later deported head of Serbia's Kosovo office Marko Đurić while he was addressing a gathering in northern city Mitrovica, saying he had entered country without required permission. Police fired stun grenades to disperse crowd protesting arrest; several people injured in clashes with police. Serbs set up roadblocks and ethnic Serb politicians responded by walking out of govt; Serbian President Vučić called arrest "brutal provocation". EU and U.S. called for sides to remain calm and preserve dialogue. Earlier, Kosovo and Serbian presidents met in Brussels 23 March for resumed EU-led talks on normalisation; first such meeting since Aug 2017; no progress reported. U.S. Asst Sec of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Wess Mitchell during visit to region reaffirmed to officials in Serbia U.S. support for establishment of a Kosovo army, opposed by Belgrade; after meeting with Mitchell, Serbian President Vučić 14 March said Serbia ready to discuss compromises. Speaking in Pristina 12 March, Mitchell warned Russia "playing an increasingly destructive role" in Balkans, "undermining democratic institutions". Parliament 21 March ratified long-delayed border agreement with Montenegro, required for Kosovo to gain visa-free travel to EU; vote proceeded despite opposition MPs again releasing tear gas in chamber to disrupt proceedings. Tensions with Turkey after Kosovo authorities 29 March arrested and deported six Turkish citizens wanted in Turkey for alleged links to Gulen movement which it blames for July 2016 coup attempt; PM Haradinaj sacked interior minister and intelligence chief for not informing him of arrests.

➔ Macedonia MARCH 2018

Macedonian and Greek foreign ministers met in Skopje 23 March to discuss solution to ongoing dispute over Macedonia's name and reported making progress, days after govts exchanged proposals on name; met again in Vienna 30 March with UN mediator Matthew Nimetz, who reported "difficult issues" still need to be resolved but talks "moving in the right direction". Estimated 10,000 people rallied in Skopje 4 March protesting against compromise on proposals to change name. Parliament 14 March passed law for a second time extending Albanian as official language across whole country, after President Ivanov vetoed bill passed in Jan. Opposition, which had tried to submit 34,000 amendments to bill and disrupt vote, said process was unconstitutional. Ivanov said he would again refuse to sign legislation, despite constitutional requirement to do so. Govt expelled Russian diplomat in solidarity with Britain over Skripal poisoning case, in which London claimed Russia was responsible for deploying deadly nerve agent against former Russian spy in the UK (denied by Russia), provoking angry response from Moscow.

➔ Armenia MARCH 2018

In 19 March interview President Sargsyan, widely expected to be selected as new PM by National Assembly in April, said he could change his mind about previous decision to step down and might stay in power to mitigate threats to Armenia's security and stability coming from Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and domestic turbulence caused by war veterans and political radicals. Under new constitution, all main presidential powers will shift to new prime minister position. National Assembly 2 March elected new President Armen Sarkissian, former scientist and UK ambassador with extensive business contacts in Russia, Central Asia and the West. Yerevan court 20 March sentenced opposition politician Zhirayr Sefilian to 10.5 years' jail for planning mass disorder; Sefilian, who was arrested in June 2016 with six supporters who were also sentenced, said charges were politically motivated. Armenia 1 March formally nullified 2009 Zurich Protocols signed to normalise relations with Turkey, which were never ratified; no official reaction in Ankara.

➔ Azerbaijan MARCH 2018

Foreign ministers of Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey and Georgia 15 March established new cooperation format in Baku to explore possible areas for cooperation, including on transit to connect Black Sea to Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. Ahead of early 11 April presidential election, opposition parties staged rallies 10 and 31 March calling for boycott of poll, which incumbent President Aliyev is widely expected to win.

➔ Georgia MARCH 2018

Geneva International Discussions 27-28 March failed to conclude with statement on non-use of force, which could have represented most serious breakthrough since Geneva talks were launched in 2008. Outcry continued over Feb death in de facto South Ossetian custody of ethnic Georgian Archil Tatumashvili. Georgian parliament 21 March adopted resolution condemning continued Russian military presence in “occupied regions”, calling for more international presence in conflict zone and introducing sanctions – so-called “Tatumashvili-Otkhazia list” –for those directly responsible for Tatumashvili’s death or other crimes against ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Despite continued requests from Tbilisi, backed by West, de facto South Ossetian authorities continued to refuse to hand over body, citing need for post-mortem by Russian experts; body returned on 20 March, about a month after reported death. De facto Abkhazia and South Ossetia showed record turnout in voting at Russian presidential elections 18 March, with local authorities organising vote and campaigning for Putin; Tbilisi condemned polls in de facto. Russia 19 March launched large-scale military exercises including in Abkhazia and South Ossetia involving some 8,000 troops. Parliament speakers from Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine 2 March issued joint statement saying their countries were “profoundly concerned” about presence of Russian troops in Moldova and “Russian occupation and other forms of military intervention” in parts of Georgia and Ukraine (see Moldova).

➔ Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) MARCH 2018

Situation remained calm along Line of Contact (LoC), with sides reporting regular exchange of sniper fire and overflights of drones. HALO Trust demining charity 29 March reported death of three of its local staff members, and two injured, by accidental detonation of anti-tank landmine in Martakert region. Both Azerbaijan and de facto Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) army conducted military exercises 12-17 March and 12-13 March respectively; Baku showcased large numbers of troops and biggest ever number of rocket launchers, prompting Armenian protest and complaint over lack of advance notice of exercises. De facto NK leader mid-March visited U.S. Congress for the first time since 1999, prompting Baku to send official protest to U.S..

➔ Russia/North Caucasus MARCH 2018

Russian presidential election 18 March, which incumbent Putin won by landslide with 77% of vote to enter fourth term, saw particularly high turnout in North Caucasus, with over 90% in Chechnya and Kabardino-Balkaria republics. Local media reported incidents of electoral violations and fraud, including psychological pressure on voters in Chechnya, physical assaults on observers in Dagestan capital Makhachkala, and state employees being forced to vote in Sochi. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov said no violations registered. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observers reported “overly controlled environment, marked by continued pressure on critical voices”. Head of Dagestan office of Memorial human rights group Sirazhudin Datsayev attacked by unknown assailants 28 March. Chechen court 6 March extended pre-trial detention of Oyub Titiyev, Memorial Chechnya director, until 9 May; Titiyev, arrested in Jan, is being held on drug possession charge which he denies; Western govts have called for his release. Federal security services 6 March reported it had detained five people suspected of recruiting for Islamic State (ISIS) in Makachkala, also seized arms and explosives.

- **COMMENTARY: ISIS Returnees Bring Both Hope and Fear to Chechnya**

➔ Belarus MARCH 2018

Police 25 March arrested more than 30 opposition activists planning unsanctioned rally in Minsk on annual “Freedom Day”; EU next day called for immediate release of those still detained.

➔ Moldova MARCH 2018

Parliament speakers from Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine 2 March issued joint statement saying their countries were “profoundly concerned” about presence of Russian troops in Moldova and “Russian occupation and other forms of military intervention” in parts of Georgia and Ukraine; criticised what they called Russia’s “coordinated foreign support for separatist movements”; and reaffirmed their commitment to the EU.

➔ Ukraine MARCH 2018

Violence in conflict zone decreased significantly after Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and representatives of separatist regions 2 March agreed on comprehensive, unlimited ceasefire, which took effect 5 March and saw violations fall from average of 202 per day late Feb to 21 by 11 March, rising again to 39 mid-March, accompanied by decrease in casualties on both sides and among civilians; TCG recommitted to ceasefire 30 March. OSCE official 14 March said violence at lowest levels of past two years; OSCE also reported sides have still not withdrawn forces or hardware, remain in close proximity, and regularly deploy heavy weapons. OSCE monitors reported continued denial of access in separatist-controlled territories, especially at parts of border with Russia. As sides continued to comment on possibility of a peacekeeping mission in eastern Ukraine and conditions attached, EU 12 March determined that no changes in sanctions regime against Russia were justified and extended measures for another six months. U.S. special envoy Kurt Volker 10 March said Moscow had not responded to Washington's last round of proposals regarding scope and mandate of mission. U.S. 1 March released statement announcing approval for delivery of \$47mn package of 210 Javelin anti-tank missiles and 37 launch units, noting it "will not alter the basic military balance in the region"; U.S. officials repeated that weapons would be stored away from front line. President Poroshenko late Feb submitted national security bill to align armed forces with NATO standards, including democratic oversight of special services and consolidating command structures. Parliament 1 March approved in first reading long-awaited draft bill on establishing Anti-corruption Court, but critics say legislation fails to ensure impartial selection of independent judges. Police 3 March removed anti-govt protest camp in front of parliament, briefly detaining 112 and injuring thirteen, including two seriously; public outcry muted.

- **COMMENTARY: To Reunite Ukraine, Kyiv Must Overcome Its Own Prejudices**

➔ Cyprus MARCH 2018

Tensions over hydrocarbons deposits in Eastern Mediterranean intensified following Turkey's 11 Feb obstruction of drillship contracted by Greek Cypriot govt off the coast of Cyprus. Turkish Cypriot officials said they would start their own explorations if unilateral Greek Cypriot gas exploration continues. Turkish media 7 March reported Turkish PM Yildırım's response to news about ExxonMobil vessels expected to reach Cyprus to drill, which he said would be met with "appropriate response". After two ExxonMobil vessels arrived at port in Limassol mid-March, Turkish President Erdoğan 22 March said he would not let Greek Cypriots exploit reserves. Turkey condemned EU statement 28 March asking it to respect sovereign rights of Cyprus to explore and exploit its natural resources. U.S. navy denied that increased deployment in Eastern Mediterranean was aimed at protecting ExxonMobil's gas explorations and deterring Turkish obstruction. Athens and Ankara exchanged threatening rhetoric early March after Turkish coastguard vessel 17 Feb collided with stationary Greek patrol boat near Kardak/Imia islets in Aegean Sea, which countries fought over in 1996.

➔ Spain MARCH 2018

Catalan parliament 22 March failed for third time to elect new regional president due to insufficient support for pro-independence candidate Jordi Turull; faces prospect of new elections if it cannot select a new president by 22 May. Spain's Supreme Court 23 March ruled 25 Catalan pro-independence

non-president of Spain's Supreme Court 23 March faced 20 Catalan pro-independence politicians will be tried for rebellion, embezzlement or disobeying state, and ordered five of them to be detained pending trial, including Turull. German authorities 25 March detained former Catalan leader Puigdemont, who has been in self-imposed exile in Belgium since Nov evading arrest warrant.

→ Turkey MARCH 2018

Military operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants in south east continued, mostly in rural areas of Diyarbakır province. Military 1 March carried out cross-border airstrikes targeting PKK positions in northern Iraq, after PKK militants reportedly opened fire at Turkish military post at Iraq border. Turkish military together with Syrian Sunni rebels 18 March took control of Afrin centre in north west Syria from Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and 24 March announced it had taken entire region. President Erdoğan said Turkey would next target Kurdish fighters in Manbij, prompting concerns over possible confrontation with U.S. troops; Erdoğan 25 March said Ankara was ready to launch an operation in Iraq's northern Sinjar region, where he said PKK was creating a new base. Amid continued strained relations, U.S. and Turkey held first working-level meeting of three bilateral technical committees established to improve relations in Washington 8-9 March, discussing issues including operations in Syria and Iraq. Parliament 12 March passed bill overhauling election law, which inter alia allows authorities to relocate ballot boxes from "insecure areas" and enables law enforcement officials to directly monitor voting process, heightening concerns about election irregularities particularly in south east. Ankara 7 March submitted position paper to European Commission detailing seven steps to fulfil remaining criteria for lifting Schengen visa requirements for Turkish citizens, including minor change to anti-terror law. At EU-Turkey summit 26 March, both sides agreed on need for better relations and increased cooperation, though with no concrete progress on key issues. European Commission 14 March officially proposed to mobilise funds for second €3bn tranche for Facility for Refugees in Turkey. Tensions increased with Greece over hydrocarbon reserves off Cyprus (see Cyprus) and Turkey's early March detention of two Greek soldiers who Ankara accused of "espionage", while soldiers claimed they had accidentally strayed into Turkish territory during a patrol.

- **COMMENTARY: Turkey's Siege Mentality**

→ Kazakhstan MARCH 2018

Four Central Asian presidents and representative from Turkmenistan met in Astana 15-16 March, in first meeting in this format in a decade, also notable for not being attended by Russia or China. Opening proceedings, Kazakh President Nazarbayev thanked Uzbek President Mirziyoyev for suggesting meeting. All parties made positive noise about increased cooperation, committing to coordination on use of water resources, increased trade and consultation on security matters. Next meeting of presidents will take place in Uzbek capital Tashkent in March 2019. Nazarbayev visited Uzbekistan's Samarkand 21 March to mark Nowruz holiday with Uzbek President Mirziyoyev.

- **COMMENTARY: End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia**

➔ Kyrgyzstan MARCH 2018

U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Gen Joseph L. Votel 27 Feb told U.S. House Armed Services Committee that Kazakhstan is now lost to Russian influence, with its leadership showing little interest in cooperation with CENTCOM compared with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Russia's foreign ministry reacted angrily to Votel's testimony, stating on 3 March that U.S. is anti-Russia and Central Asian countries have right to choose their partners.

- **COMMENTARY: End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia**

➔ Tajikistan MARCH 2018

Uzbek President Mirziyoyev visited Dushanbe 9-10 March for historic meeting with President Rahmon, who had poor personal relationship with Mirziyoyev's predecessor, Islam Karimov. Rahmon and Mirziyoyev signed 27 bilateral agreements and made joint statement recognising that Tajik hydropower plants benefit region, and that Uzbekistan is ready to participate in construction of Rogun dam. Also agreed on 30-day visa-free regime for their citizens and re-opening of ten border checkpoints. Govt 26 March denied U.S. claims that Tajikistan is being used to transit Russian arms to Taliban in Afghanistan.

- **COMMENTARY: End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia**

✚ Turkmenistan MARCH 2018

Increasingly acute food shortages and rationing led to further small-scale protests and violence. Flour shortages continued in Dashoguz with videos surfacing of people scrambling for animal food to consume themselves. Violent protests spread to south-eastern province Mary by early March, where protesters blocked roads and beat up local govt officials before breaking into govt-run food store and distributing flour. Reports suggest food shortages have hit capital Ashgabat as well, where long queues to state food shops are now normal; shortages also reported in Akhal provinces and Gokdepe. Other measures also suggest country is in severe economic crisis, including Turkmen banks mid-Feb suspending operations of Visa cards, and restrictions on international wire transfers. President's son Serdar Berdymukhammedov appointed deputy foreign minister 30 March.

➔ Uzbekistan MARCH 2018

President Mirziyoyev visited Tajik capital Dushanbe 9-10 March for historic meeting with President Rahmon, during which they signed 27 bilateral agreements and made joint statement recognising that Tajik hydropower plants benefit region, and that Uzbekistan is ready to participate in construction of Rogun dam (see Tajikistan). Also agreed on 30day visa-free regime for their citizens and re-opening of ten border checkpoints. Arrests and detentions of high-ranking security personnel and members of judiciary on charges including abuse of power and bribery that began late Feb continued. Zakir Almatov, who as former head of interior ministry was in charge of troops who opened fire on protesters in Andijan in May 2005, appointed as adviser to interior minister 27 Feb. Mirziyoyev 14 March signed law reforming and renaming National Security Service.

- **COMMENTARY: End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia**

Latin America & Caribbean

→ Colombia MARCH 2018

Right-wing parties opposed to peace agreement between govt and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) performed well in 11 March congressional elections, maintaining their relative power in Congress. In two primaries held same day to select candidates for 27 May presidential election, leader of Centro Democrático party (most critical of peace process) Iván Duque won nomination for centre-right coalition with four million votes (67%); for left-wing coalition, Colombia Humana's candidate Gustavo Petro, former guerrilla fighter, senator and mayor of Bogotá, won nearly three million votes (85%). National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group announced unilateral ceasefire around election day 9-13 March; govt noted "coherence" in announcement and ELN's implementation of ceasefire; both parties 15 March renewed negotiations. Army 6 March bombed guerrilla camp killing ten ELN fighters and capturing three in Cáceres, Antioquia (north west), in retaliation for two ELN attacks in Tibú, Norte de Santander (north east) late Feb. Several fighters died in clashes between ELN and Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) in Norte de Santander starting mid-March, hundreds of civilians displaced. Several civilians reportedly killed in armed confrontations between FARC dissident factions in Tumaco (south west). Security forces 13 March captured alias Cachi, financial leader of Oliver Sinesterra dissident group, in Pereira (west); group 20 March killed three Ecuadorian soldiers and wounded seven in Mataje, Ecuador, along Colombian border; took over Gente del Orden dissident group in Tumaco; kidnapped two journalists and driver in Esmeraldas, Ecuador 26 March. Govt 18 March bombed FARC dissident camp killing nine including alleged second-in-command of first front in Guaviare (south east). Govt forces 28 March also killed Aristides Manuel Mesa Páez, alias Indio, third-in-command of Gaitan Self-defence Forces (AGC) in Montelíbano, Córdoba (north west).

→ Venezuela MARCH 2018

Electoral commission 1 March announced that 22 April election would be postponed to 20 May.

Announcement followed negotiations between govt and minor parties that agreed to take part in vote, which resulted in agreement ostensibly to guarantee better conditions, including through presence of international observers, notably from UN; opposition Democratic Unity (MUD) alliance 5 March asked IIN to refrain from participating in "fraudulent" elections. Polls indicate Henri Falcón from Avanzada

Progresista, who split with MUD to launch candidacy, could beat Maduro if turnout is above 50%; but also suggest most opposition supporters will boycott elections. Govt moved against perceived opponents in armed forces, both active and retired, detaining nineteen including former interior minister Miguel Rodríguez, arrested by intelligence agency 13 March; another two dozen retired officers either stripped of their ranks or expelled from armed forces. Govt's international isolation continued to deepen. Peru 19 March reiterated its refusal to invite Maduro to mid-April Summit of the Americas in Lima despite Bolivia and Nicaragua's calls to reconsider. U.S. 19 March extended sanctions program on four additional officials and banned all dealings in Venezuelan govt's new "petro" cryptocurrency, which is seen as a vehicle for obtaining fresh loans and evading financial sanctions. Ten countries at G20 finance ministers' meeting 19 March agreed to ask International Monetary Fund for funds to help Venezuelan migrants and looked into possible forms of pressure on Maduro govt. Radical opposition wing Soy Venezuela 12 March called for "humanitarian intervention by democratic countries of the world and international organisations".

- [VIDEO: Video: Containing the Shock Waves from Venezuela](#)

→ Guatemala MARCH 2018

Media 16 March revealed recently appointed Minister of Governance Enrique Degenhart's alleged links to Guatemala City Mayor Álvaro Arzú, an opponent of Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Degenhart forced to backtrack on removal of eleven members of intelligence service from CICIG, but sacked police chief and three senior police officers supportive of campaign against corruption. U.S. Ambassador to UN Nikki Haley emphasised support for CICIG during official visit 27-28 Feb.

→ Honduras MARCH 2018

UN-backed dialogue to promote cross-party consensus following late 2017 electoral crisis began to take shape. Ruling National Party and opposition group's Liberal Party and Alliance against Dictatorship 14-18 March agreed on appointment of single mediator, protocol to prevent violence in political marches, commission to investigate human rights abuses during post-electoral violence, and decree to confer legal validity on final agreement; sides did not address key issues regarding reforms in electoral and accountability institutions. UN human rights office 13 March released report on human rights abuses during post-election period accusing security forces of "excessive force, including lethal force" leading to "killing and wounding of protesters"; registered at least 23 people killed during protests. EU Election Observation Mission 5 March presented its final report, including technical recommendations regarding vote count, invited all parties to take part in further political dialogue. Group of lawmakers 20 March presented appeal to Supreme Court alleging presence of Support Mission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) violates constitution; court admitted appeal. Alleged instigator of 2016 murder of environmental activist Berta Cáceres arrested 2 March.

➔ El Salvador MARCH 2018

Ruling Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) performed poorly in 4 March legislative and local elections with worst electoral result since 2003, securing only 23 lawmakers. Opposition parties gained control in twelve out of fourteen regional capitals. National Civil Police 2 March announced 25% year-on-year increase in homicides in Jan and Feb. Security forces 1 March unearthed fifteen bodies in clandestine grave in La Paz department attributed to gang killings. Police 16 March launched “Operación Libertad” to dismantle MS-13 gang’s finances. Death of MS-503 spokesman in Mexico City 1 March provided new evidence of expansion of gangs to Mexico.

➔ Haiti MARCH 2018

Dominican Republic 6 March announced repatriation or non-admission of 7,598 Haitians during Feb, in addition to 230,000 returned or deported since June 2015. Dominican Republic 1 March dispatched 900 soldiers in addition to 4,500 already deployed on Dominican-Haitian border, as part of new security plan to control illegal migration launched 27 Feb.

➔ Mexico MARCH 2018

As campaigning began for 1 July elections, political violence continued and appeared to escalate in Guerrero state (south west), and Veracruz and Puebla states (south); as of 17 March, 70 candidates murdered since campaigning started in Sept. Victims include Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) candidate Homero Bravo Espino and Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate Gustavo Martín Álvaro Gómez, murdered in Guerrero 2 March and Puebla 16 March. Amid focus on public security and “war on drugs” ahead of vote, NGO Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal 6 March released report identifying five Mexican cities among world’s ten most violent big cities in countries not affected by armed conflict. NGO Article 19 on 20 March reported 1,986 journalists attacked during President Peña Nieto’s tenure, with 2017 most violent year in last decade. Killings related to drug trafficking, organised crime and attacks on activists continued. Activist Mireles Valverde 4 March declared over 100 homicides in Michoacán (centre) late Feb-early March had not been reported by local authorities and media. At least 37 executions registered in Jalisco 1-5 March; pickup truck found with six mutilated bodies in Guadalajara (west) 6 March; authorities in Sonora state (north west) 17-19 March reported twelve extrajudicial killings.

Middle East & North Africa

🔥 Israel/Palestine MARCH 2018

Violence between Palestinians and Israeli forces escalated in March, including during protests at Gaza-Israel border, and could rise further in April as Palestinians in Gaza plan to continue protests, and large numbers of religious Jews and Palestinians plan to visit Jerusalem for religious holidays of Passover in early April and in lead-up to start of Ramadan in May. Tens of thousands of Palestinians 30 March began mass protests at five sites along border of Gaza with Israel demanding right to return to Israel, protests planned to continue for six weeks; most protesters were peaceful, while minority threw stones at Israeli troops across border. Israeli forces suppressed protests with tear gas and live rounds, killing at least fifteen protesters 30 March. Separate from protests, Israeli forces 30 March killed two Hamas militants as they approached border. In West Bank, Palestinians 16 March killed two Israeli soldiers in Barta'a, and, 18 March, one Israeli civilian in Jerusalem. Separately, Israeli forces killed four Palestinians: one in Khan Yunis 3 March, one in Hebron 9 March, one near Nablus 10 March and one in Jerusalem 18 March. In Gaza, explosive device detonated next to convoy of Palestinian Authority (PA) PM Hamdallah and intelligence chief Majed Faraj 13 March, neither injured; PA blamed Hamas, which condemned attack. PA President Abbas 19 March called U.S. ambassador to Israel "son of a dog" because of his support for Israeli settlers in West Bank.

➔ Jordan MARCH 2018

Govt 29 March accepted new Israeli ambassador to Jordan, whom Israel appointed in Feb; normal relations interrupted following July 2017 killing of two Jordanians by Israeli embassy guard at Israel's embassy in Amman.

➔ Lebanon MARCH 2018

PM Hariri 15 March announced plans to increase military presence along southern border with Israel. Lebanese media 25 March reported Israeli air force struck Hizbollah positions near Baalbek city, in north east; denied by Hizbollah.

➔ Syria MARCH 2018

Turkish forces took control of Kurdish-held Afrin in north west and regime military pressure forced most rebels to withdraw from their last remaining stronghold in greater Damascus. In north west, Turkish forces and allied Syrian rebels extended control in Afrin enclave, entering Afrin city 18 March after Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) had withdrawn, encouraging civilians to leave and vowing to

continue to resist Turkish-backed forces; some rebels looted private property and YPG facilities. Unidentified assailants killed YPG leader Omar Alloush at his home in Tel Abyadh on Turkish border 15 March, Alloush had been instrumental in enhancing governance in Raqqa. Roadside bomb in Manbij 29 March killed two soldiers, one from U.S. and one from UK; negotiations between Turkey and U.S. continue over whether and how YPG should withdraw from contested city as per unimplemented 2016 U.S. promise. In Idlib area, fighting between regime and rebels remained halted due to Turkish deployment in Feb and establishment of observation points, but infighting among rebels continued. Jihadist alliance Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), after securing support of Turkestan Islamic Party, 1 March launched counter-attack against newly formed alliance Front for the Liberation of Syria, comprising Islamist groups Ahrar al-Sham, Nouredine al-Zenki and several smaller groups; talks during 9-11 March ceasefire collapsed and fighting resumed. In greater Damascus, regime forces and Russia continued ground and air offensive against Eastern Ghouta splitting rebel-held area into three non-contiguous parts each controlled by different rebel faction; two of them, Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham, struck deals with regime to withdraw to opposition-held areas in north west and rebels and families began evacuating 24 March, but third, Jaish al-Islam, end-month was negotiating deal to withdraw most of its forces to Turkey's zone of influence north of Aleppo. Islamic State (ISIS) reportedly killed dozens of pro-regime fighters in two separate offensives, seizing T2 oil-pumping station in east and al-Qadam neighbourhood in Damascus outskirts mid-March.

- **COMMENTARY: Russia Should Go Beyond Humanitarian Corridors in Syria**

➔ Bahrain MARCH 2018

Govt 3 March arrested 116 alleged members of network planning attacks on govt, said group was trained and supported by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Civil aviation authority 27 March said two Qatari planes same day entered Bahraini airspace without permission.

➔ Iran MARCH 2018

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action joint commission met for eighth time in Vienna 16 March; chairman highlighted 22 Feb report by International Atomic Energy Agency indicating Iran's full compliance with 2015 nuclear agreement. U.S., French, German and UK representatives met in Berlin 15 March to discuss changes to agreement demanded by Trump administration; Europeans reportedly indicated willingness to sanction Iran's ballistic missile program and involvement in Syria, but it remained uncertain whether talks could find solution that could satisfy White House without violating deal before Trump's 12 May deadline. President Trump 12 March extended by one year national emergency regarding Iran. Iranian security forces claimed to have killed four members of Jaish al-Adl, Sunni-Balouchi militant group, in clashes in south east near border with Pakistan 11 March.

➔ Iraq MARCH 2018

Following negotiations between federal govt and Kurdistan Regional Govt (KRG), PM Abadi agreed to reopen airports in Erbil and Suleimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan in time for Kurdish New Year 20 March having closed them in wake of Sept Kurdish independence referendum. Abadi 6 March reiterated federal govt would pay salaries of KRG civil servants; payment would be first since 2013. Federal parliament 3 March passed 2018 budget; Kurdish leadership boycotted vote to protest proposed reduction in KRG allocation. International Monetary Fund criticised budget for not allocating enough funds to KRG. Fatah Alliance, coalition of parties linked to govt-aligned Shia militias Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), criticised budget for being unfair in allocation of pay and pensions to armed forces and PMU. Insecurity persisted in Kirkuk and Nineveh provinces. In Hawija district, Kirkuk province, govt forces and PMU continued to fight Islamic State (ISIS) in some areas. Turkish military 1 March carried out cross-border airstrikes targeting Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) positions in northern Iraq, after PKK militants reportedly opened fire at Turkish military post at Iraq border. Following threats by Turkey that it would launch operation against PKK in northern Iraq, Kurdish forces 23 March said they were withdrawing from Sinjar, Nineveh province.

➔ Qatar MARCH 2018

National Counterterrorism Committee 22 March published names of 28 people and entities on terrorism blacklist, including Qatari nationals on other Arab countries' blacklists. Govt denied Bahraini and Emirati claims that Qatari fighter jets 27 March intercepted civilian planes in Bahraini airspace.

➔ Saudi Arabia MARCH 2018

Saudi forces claimed to have shot down seven missiles fired from Yemen into Saudi Arabia 25 March, three over Riyadh and four others fired at Najran, Jizan and Khamis Mushait in south; shrapnel from one missile killed Egyptian resident of Riyadh, first casualty of Yemen conflict in capital. Saudi-led coalition claimed to have shot down two other Huthi missiles, one fired at Jazan 29 March and another fired at Najran 31 March. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman travelled in inaugural overseas tour to Europe and U.S.. Cabinet 14 March approved civilian nuclear policy; bin Salman 15 March said Saudi Arabia would build nuclear bomb if Iran did.

- **OP-ED: Saudi Arabia's Leader Could Tell a Better Story if He'd End His Vicious, No-win War**

➔ Yemen MARCH 2018

Fighting continued between Huthis and anti-Huthi forces including around Hodeidah port on Red Sea

coast, Taiz city and al-Baydah town in south, and Nehm and Saada in north, and Huthis escalated missile launches into Saudi Arabia. Saudi forces claimed to have shot down seven missiles fired from Yemen into Saudi Arabia 25 March, three over Riyadh and four others fired at Najran, Jizan and Khamis Mushait in south; shrapnel from one missile killed Egyptian resident of Riyadh, first death caused by conflict in Saudi capital. Saudi-led coalition claimed to have shot down two other Huthi missiles, one fired at Jazan 29 March and another fired at Najran 31 March. Airstrike by Saudi-led coalition in Saada province 22 March killed ten civilians. Car bombing on military kitchen in Aden in south 13 March, claimed by Islamic State (ISIS), killed seven people. Suspected member of al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula killed nine soldiers of UAE-backed Hadrami elite forces at checkpoint outside Mukalla city in south east 28 March. Saudi Arabia 15 March reportedly renewed its promise to deposit \$2bn in Central Bank of Yemen to shore up currency. UN Security Council presidential statement 15 March called for all ports, including Huthi-controlled Hodeidah and Saleef, to remain fully open to humanitarian and commercial shipments and for increased access to Sanaa airport. Former UK diplomat Martin Griffiths began as new UN special envoy 20 March. U.S. Senate 20 March voted against bi-partisan bill that would have ended U.S. support for Saudi-led military intervention; supporters of bill argued President Trump did not have authorisation from Congress to support intervention.

- **OP-ED: Saudi Arabia's Leader Could Tell a Better Story if He'd End His Vicious, No-win War**

→ Algeria MARCH 2018

Ruling party National Liberation Front (FLN) 18 March called on President Bouteflika to run for fifth term in 2019. Opposition party Jil Jadid 10 March encouraged opposition parties to agree on common program for political transition. Representatives of local civil society and community leaders, especially Tuaregs, gathered in Tamanrasset in south 17 March to denounce marginalisation of region. Protests by doctors and teachers demanding improvements in working conditions slowed down. International Monetary Fund 13 March urged govt to avoid quantitative easing measures put in place in 2017 and resort instead to international borrowing.

→ Egypt MARCH 2018

Presidential election held 26-28 March, preliminary results suggested President Sisi would be re-elected with over 90% of votes; widespread allegations of vote-buying and state campaigning for Sisi. Military trial of former Armed Forces Chief of Staff Sami Anan started 22 March; charges include announcing presidential candidacy without required permissions from military. Major military operation against Islamic State (ISIS) in Sinai launched early Feb continued: military 19 March said four soldiers and over 30 Islamist militants killed in intense fighting 11-18 March; defence ministry 19 March said up to twenty troops killed in Sinai operation since early Feb; military 1 April said two soldiers and six Islamist

militants killed in preceding week. Bombing in Alexandria in north west killed two police 24 March; govt said attack targeted city's security chief, police said Hassm movement, reportedly Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, responsible and 25 March killed six Hassm militants. Days before Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Cairo, Supreme Constitutional Court 3 March ruled transfer of two Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia legal.

→ Libya MARCH 2018

Inter-tribal fighting fuelled by national rivalries continued in south, while security and humanitarian situation worsened in Derna in east. Fighting resumed early March in southern city of Sabha between militias composed of Awlad Suleiman Arabs and affiliated to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and Tebu ethnic minority militias affiliated with Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA); clashes 6 March left three dead. Delegation from south, including members from Sabha, 12 March met UN envoy Ghassan Salamé in Tripoli to try to end violence and protect civilians. LNA's 21-month siege on Derna in east to wrest control of city from coalition of Islamist militants known as Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC) sparked further violence. LNA 4 March shelled Sayeda Khadija neighbourhood, wounding four civilians. DMSC 19 March attacked LNA's Kersa checkpoint in western Derna, killing two. Suicide car bombings claimed by Islamic State (ISIS) on LNA checkpoints near Ajdabiya in east reportedly wounded one LNA and two civilians 9 March and killed at least eight, including civilians, 29 March. U.S. airstrike in coordination with GNA in outskirts of Ubari city in south west 24 March killed two, including Musa Abu Dawud, described by U.S. Africa Command as high-ranking figure in jihadist group al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb. Al-Feel oil field in south east remained shut after National Oil Corporation imposed force majeure 23 Feb because guards had withdrawn from site to demand better pay and other benefits. Gunmen 29 March briefly detained Tripoli Mayor Abdelraouf Beitelmal in what general prosecutor's office said was legal arrest but others described as militia abduction.

→ Morocco MARCH 2018

Protests to demand development and jobs in Jerada in north east, initially sparked by death of two brothers trying to extract coal from abandoned mines in Dec, escalated following arrest of movement leaders 10 March. Protesters clashed with police 14 March, at least nine arrested, several protesters and security forces wounded. Thousands marched again 16 March. Opposition leaders 30 March denounced repression, said 70 protesters had been arrested in Jerada since mid-March.

→ Tunisia MARCH 2018

Police tracked down two suspected Islamic State (ISIS) militants in Ben Guerdane region in south near Libyan border 19 March, shot one dead, other blew himself up. Security forces 31 March killed leader of ISIS-affiliated group Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), Chawki Fakraoui, in Kasserine province in centre west. Signatories of 2016 Carthage Agreement – including Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and main political parties in governing coalition Nida Tounes and An-Nahda – 13 March agreed to create commission to draft new economic and social roadmap. President Essebsi 20 March called for reform of election law before 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections. MPs 28 March voted not to

extend for another year mandate of Truth and Dignity Commission responsible for transitional justice process; vote challenged on numerous procedural grounds, including that it did not meet quorum as less than one third of MPs voted.

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