

MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

MARCH 2025

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MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

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The *Monthly Security Forecast* gives managers insight into our assessment of significant events and any likely changes to the risk outlook in the coming month, globally.

It covers key indicators or drivers of deterioration being tracked by our regionally based security specialists and provides recommendations on how you can prepare, factoring in any planning constraints we have identified.

Our *Monthly Security Forecast*, like our Insight Reports, is part of our broader Premium Workforce Resilience offer. It complements our *Regional Security Forecasts*, available weekly to all subscribers.

Legend	
Indicator & definition	Action required
Low likelihood of substantive change in reporting period (30 days unless specified)	None
Some likelihood of change; no substantive deterioration	Requires vigilance
Significant likelihood of substantive change	Increased readiness to adapt risk management plans
Critical change imminent	Action required to update or implement plans
Unpredictable high-impact, low-likelihood event	Be prepared to respond at short notice to account for workforce and/or amend plans

If you have any questions about the recommendations or assessments in this forecast, please call your nearest Assistance Centre.

CONGO (DRC)

- The March 23 (M23) rebel group is now in control of areas surrounding Lake Kivu, having captured both Goma (North Kivu province) and Bukavu (South Kivu province).
- The rebels have met little resistance, with both the Congolese and their allied Burundian troops retreating instead of engaging in battle.
- Further advances, including the likely capture of Uvira (South Kivu), could trigger large-scale and potentially unruly demonstrations in the capital Kinshasa.

Situation

The conflict in eastern Congo (DRC) between the Rwanda-backed M23 and the Congolese army (FARDC) began in late-January and continues to escalate. M23 is firmly in control of Goma and Bukavu, as well as their respective airports. The group has also made significant advances towards Uvira and is likely to succeed in capturing the city **in the coming days or weeks**.

At the regional level, an extraordinary summit was held in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) on 8 February. The event was attended by leaders of regional blocs, as well as DRC and Rwandan leaders. It marked a positive development in the possible peaceful resolution to the conflict, with all actors commenting positively on the talks. Regional army

chiefs agreed to create a security roadmap detailing a way to de-escalate the situation.

Domestically, delegations of Congolese church leaders have conducted direct, in-person discussions with M23 in Goma, as well as Rwandan authorities in Rwanda's capital Kigali, in the hope of driving peace accords. Such meetings were seemingly held without the approval of President Felix Tshisekedi or his government, who have repeatedly warned against direct negotiations with the rebel group.

On 13 February, the EU Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resolution calling for the suspension of a minerals agreement between the EU and Rwanda, as well as the suspension of military and security assistance to the Rwandan armed forces. However, the resolution, in which MEPs condemned the current situation as a breach of Congo (DRC)'s sovereignty by Rwandan forces and M23 rebels, is non-binding.

Implications

Despite attempts at negotiation, fighting will likely persist in the coming weeks. M23 appears to have the capabilities to seize Uvira as evidenced by its relatively straightforward capture of both Goma and Bukavu. Local sources have reported that many FARDC and Burundian troops have begun withdrawing from Uvira ahead of the anticipated advance, signalling that the group will be faced with limited resistance. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Wazalendo self-defence militia could engage in fighting, potentially resulting in violent clashes. Uvira is strategically important and located just 16 miles (27 km) from the Burundian city of Bujumbura. Any fighting in Uvira is therefore likely to prompt the Burundian authorities to close the Kavimvira border crossing to prevent any spillover from the conflict.

M23's current battlefield success has, for the most part, come amid a lack of international condemnation. However, the EU Parliament's denunciation of the group and the support it receives from Rwanda marks

a notable paradigm shift in terms of foreign intervention, albeit merely verbal. Should these resolutions be taken further and lead to the withdrawal of funding for Rwanda and its army, the government in Kigali may reconsider providing M23 with additional manpower or weaponry. In this scenario, the FARDC may resist M23 from capturing additional territory.

Despite this, if criticism fails to go beyond verbal castigation and does not have a material impact on Rwandan finances, it is unlikely the Rwandan Defence Force will reduce its support to M23. Given FARDC weaknesses, underlined by recent reports of soldiers fleeing ahead of M23 advances, Uvira would likely come under M23 control. In this instance, we assess that large-scale and potentially violent protests could emerge in Kinshasa.

Although there were positive signs of progress during the summit in Tanzania, additional diplomacy and further security agreements will be needed to result in a tangible change to the security situation. Key issues remain unresolved, namely the Congolese government's refusal to negotiate with M23. Despite overtures from church leaders, it is unlikely their discussions will pacify hostilities. However, if they assess the authorities in Kinshasa are failing to alleviate the situation and obtrusively blocking any attempts at de-escalation, they could call on supporters to protest. Religious figures have significant influence in driving anti-government rallies.

Recommendations

Managers with workforce in Congo (DRC) should engage in scenario planning, proactive stakeholder engagement and exposure mapping to best safeguard their workforce.

Make the necessary preparations to enable the evacuation of workforce from both North and South Kivu as soon as feasible. Check that evacuees have up-to-date passports, feasible means to arrive at evacuation-assembly areas and that manifests are up to date and on hand. Notify workforce of evacuation plans and necessary individual preparedness. Manage expectations with respect to timeframes for any potential departure from the provinces. Evacuees should be on short notice to move.

Establish reliable means of communication with workforce to ensure access to updated and accurate information. Internet and other telecommunication methods may be disrupted due to damage to key infrastructure. Ensure that workforce has access to several means of communication (including a satellite phone) and a communications plan established with key stakeholders inside and outside the country.

If unrest breaks out in urban centres, foreign nationals should minimise all movement and shelter in place until the situation has stabilised.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of security partners. However, their ability to operate in certain areas may be affected by the security situation at the time.
- **Services offered:** From ground transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-72 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Available in urban centres, such as Goma, Bukavu, Kinshasa, Kolwezi (Lualaba province) and Lubumbashi (Haut-Katanga province).

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
M23 captures Uvira	This is highly likely given the current trajectory of the conflict, which has seen M23 seize key cities with little resistance. This is likely to prompt the closure of the Kavimvira border crossing to neighbouring Burundi, severely limiting evacuation options.
The continued loss of territory in the east prompts large-scale demonstrations in Kinshasa and other key cities	This is particularly likely should influential groups, including Congo's church leaders, denounce the perceived inaction of the authorities and call for protests. Such demonstrations are likely to target Western embassies due to their perceived support for Rwanda.
Reports of Burundian troops amassing at the border due to fighting in Uvira and nearby areas	This remains unlikely at this stage. However, any mass deployment of troops to South Kivu to protect the border would result in a further deterioration of the security environment.

ETHIOPIA

- Various drivers of domestic instability require close monitoring by organisations operating in Ethiopia.
- These include the rising cost of living, ongoing conflicts in Amhara and Oromia states, political tensions in Tigray state, and bilateral tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea.
- There are also natural hazard concerns related to regular seismic activity in areas bordering Afar state, Amhara and Oromia.

Situation

Ethiopia has experienced significant inflation over the past year, leading to a notable increase in the cost of living. In 2024, the inflation rate was approximately 23% and is expected to remain elevated. The introduction of new taxes, such as the 25% property tax law announced in January, has further strained households. Rising living costs have come amid already-high poverty rates. Multiple shocks, including floods, droughts, locust infestations, conflicts, and major global health and security events, have driven high poverty rates in recent years. The combination of these developments has contributed towards a deterioration in living standards for many locals

and a subsequent increase in criticism of the government, including by opposition figures.

Meanwhile, regular clashes persist between the Ethiopian National Defence Forces and the Fano militia in Amhara. Most violence continues to occur in EXTREME-risk administrative zones (East Gojam, North Shewa, North Wollo and West Gojam), though HIGH-risk zones are occasionally affected. Thus far, Agew Awi, Central Gondar, South Gondar and South Wollo have been the most-impacted HIGH-risk zones this year. Fighting continues to include drone strikes, gun battles and kidnappings targeting government and security officials by Fano. Despite sustained clashes, there have been efforts in recent weeks to reach a peace agreement with one of two major Fano factions active in North Shewa. However, other factions remain resistant to peace talks.

In Oromia, violence related to the conflict between the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and the rebel Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) has decreased significantly since December 2024 after the federal government reached a peace agreement with a splinter faction of the OLA. OLA fighters under that faction were mostly active in West Shewa and South Shewa administrative zones (both Oromia), and hundreds of them have since entered rehabilitation camps. However, fighting with other OLA factions has persisted, including the main faction led by Kumsa Diriba (also known as Jaal Marro). This year, most fighting has occurred in the EXTREME-risk zones of East Shewa, East Wellega and West Wellega. Additionally, communal violence persists. Between 2 and 5 February, an unconfirmed number of people were killed in Bale zone during clashes between armed groups from Somali regional state and Oromia over a territorial dispute.

Tensions within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) remain elevated. Following the end of the conflict between the TPLF and the federal government in 2022, factionalism emerged within the party over various disagreements related to navigating the post-conflict era. A rift has since emerged between the TPLF's chairman, Debretsion Gebremichael, and its former deputy chairman, Getachew Reda, who also serves as the current president of the Tigray Interim Administration (TIA). The disagreement has recently been made worse

after mid-ranking Tigrayan military officials sided with the faction led by Gebremichael, deviating from their previously neutral stance. Delays to the full implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement (CoHA) between the TPLF and federal government have further complicated matters.

More broadly, bilateral tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea persist. These have been driven by high rates of mutual distrust and over various other issues, including reports of Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) retaining a presence in Tigray despite calls for their departure and allegations of both countries providing support to rebel groups. In mid-February, Ethiopia's former president Mulatu Teshome (in office 2013-18) accused Eritrea of trying to incite conflict in the region. This was followed by unconfirmed reports of plans by the Eritrean embassy in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa to shut down. This marked the latest in a series of escalating events between the countries. In September 2024, Eritrea suspended Ethiopian airlines flights to its capital Asmara over operational disagreements.

Meanwhile, since late December 2024, the country has experienced more than 150 earthquakes of various magnitudes in parts of Afar, Amhara and Oromia. Tremors have also been reported in Addis Ababa. A magnitude 6.0 earthquake struck on 14 February near Metahara town (Oromia), becoming the most significant of the recent seismic events. The earthquakes are related to increased activity near Mount Dofan (Afar) and Mount Fentale (Oromia), located around 95 and 75 miles (153km; 120km) east of Addis Ababa, respectively. The authorities have warned that volcanic eruptions at the mountains are possible. The announcement has prompted civilian evacuations from areas around Dofan and Fentale.

Implications

We expect economic pressures to persist and contribute to growing government criticism and anti-government sentiment. This will increase the risks of related protests by civilians or opposition figures. However, gatherings will be difficult to stage as the security forces are liable to pre-emptively increase measures in main urban centres to prevent and respond to any planned protests. This would likely include increased police deployments in affected locations and arrests of protest organisers. Any physical gatherings will carry high risks of being forcibly dispersed, including with tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. In addition to protest risks, deteriorating living conditions risk fuelling conflict as some civilians are likely to be inspired to join armed rebellions, such as those active in Amhara and Oromia.

Despite efforts to reach a peace agreement with Fano, conflict risks will remain elevated in Amhara while other factions of the militia remain active. If a peace agreement were reached with the North Shewa faction, a reduction in fighting in the zone would follow. Key issues that reportedly still need to be resolved before an agreement is reached include the faction's demands for an immediate stoppage of drone strikes, the withdrawal of the ENDF from major towns and a reassessment of Amhara's representation within the federal government. Demands for the ENDF to withdraw will be the most challenging to address. Meanwhile, remaining Fano factions will likely step up attacks in response to a peace agreement, likely escalating conflict risks in other areas in Amhara. There is also potential for new Fano factions to emerge in other parts of the country with sizeable ethnic-Amhara populations.

In Oromia, the reduced tempo of clashes between the ENDF and the OLA is likely to persist while the peace agreement with the disarmed faction remains intact. However, remaining factions will continue to operate in other parts of the state, with most activity focused within EXTREME-risk zones. Periodic violence in HIGH-risk zones will nonetheless persist. It will remain difficult to reach a peace agreement with the OLA's main faction given the federal government's reluctance to accede to the OLA's previous demand to being incorporated into the ENDF and represented within the federal government. Communal violence will also remain a serious concern, with many longstanding territorial and resource disputes remaining unresolved.

The situation in Tigray will be increasingly volatile as tensions persist. Several attempts by domestic and international actors to ease the tensions have been unsuccessful. Although both Gebremichael and Reda have publicly maintained their intention to avoid conflict over their rift, the risks of conflict will grow if more members of the military take sides. Any related conflict would occur within Tigray and risks threatening the CoHA if the ENDF is to become involved. Meanwhile, the tensions will continue to undermine the TIA's ability to effectively govern Tigray and address other issues facing the state, including dire humanitarian and socio-economic conditions, as well as rising crime. Increasingly regular protests over these issues are also likely in the state capital Mekelle, though we anticipate they will remain orderly.

Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea will continue to carry risks of conflict between the countries. As direct conflict will remain less desirable, indirect conflict is more likely. Indirect conflict would likely take the form of either country supporting rebel activity against the rival state or engaging in other subversive acts against the rival government. Several escalatory triggers would be observed prior to the emergence of the conflict, including either or both countries cutting diplomatic ties, the expulsion of nationals of either country, or an increase in overtly hostile rhetoric between the countries.

Further seismic events of varying scale are likely in Afar, Amhara and Oromia **over the coming weeks to months**. Administrative Zone 3 (Afar), North Shewa (both in Amhara and Oromia) and East Shewa are likely to be the most affected. Significant damage to roads (including the A1 highway), rail (including the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway) and other infrastructure remains a risk. Although it is rare for earthquakes to trigger volcanic eruptions in Ethiopia, the situation remains unpredictable and requires high levels of preparedness by organisations operating in the country.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of ground transport providers. Our providers have countrywide operations and access to security information to inform road moves. However, their ability to operate in certain areas may be affected by the security situation at the time.
- **Services offered:** From ground transport services to assisting with evacuations, where feasible.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Recommended hotels assessed by International SOS in Addis Ababa and Hawassa (Southern Nations, Nationalities Peoples state).

Recommendations

Travel to Ethiopia may be possible, depending on the nature of travel and subject to an individual risk assessment of the current situation. Defer all travel to EXTREME-risk administrative zones in Amhara and Oromia states (East Gojam, North Shewa, North Wollo and West Gojam; East Shewa, East Wellega, Horo Guduru, North Shewa, West Shewa and West Wellega) and areas bordering these zones due to heightened conflict risks. Defer all travel to Tigray state and areas of Afar state bordering it due to the risk of a resumption in hostilities. Consider departing and relocating workforce located in these areas if it is safe and feasible to do so, determined in conjunction with local contacts and on-the-ground information.

Organisations with continued operations in EXTREME-risk areas should have the ability to rapidly extract themselves from these areas in the event of a sudden deterioration of the security environment. This is due to restrictions for security providers to operate and the limited abilities of local logistics providers to conduct evacuations during fighting. Plans should consider the possibility that external support, particularly for workforce based outside major urban centres, will be limited. Ensure plans are rapidly implementable for both foreign and domestic workforce, and address risks for domestic workforce with different profiles, including ethnicities.

Adjust business-continuity and crisis-management plans to fit current and potential scenarios. Regularly assess the requirement of all international assignees and travellers to remain in HIGH travel risk areas, with the understanding that there is a credible possibility of the security environment deteriorating further with little warning. Ensure workforce understands whom to contact and how in the event of a security or medical emergency. Reconfirm that emergency communications protocols remain activated and in-country workforce can operate amid unreliable communications systems.

Closely monitor developments through reliable local and international media sources, paying attention to the potential for biased reporting and misinformation. Regularly review organisation-specific escalatory triggers and ensure escalation plans are updated to reflect the latest situation.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
An increase in militia violence in HIGH-risk zones in Amhara or other states	A broadening of the conflict will pose increased risks to people.
The peace agreement with the splinter OLA faction breaks down	A reintensification of the conflict in Oromia will occur, mostly in EXTREME-risk zones.
Increasingly hostile rhetoric from Tigrayan leaders, including threats of conflict	Such a deviation, alongside other triggers, would increase the risk of conflict in Tigray.
Increased frequency and scale of socio-economic protests	Protests will likely be forcibly dispersed. Expect telecommunications outages and other logistical disruption in this scenario.

AFRICA: ON WATCH

Mozambique: Protests over socio-economic grievances, including the high cost of living, will persist. These gatherings will be disruptive, likely including barricades on main roads, and will carry underlying risks of confrontations with the police. The frequency and scale of election-related protests will remain diminished until **27 April**, when opposition leader Venancio Mondlane's deadline for his demands to be implemented expires.

Nigeria: Monitor developments linked to a potential strike and protests by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) over a 50% government-approved mobile tariff hike. Following unsuccessful negotiations with the government, the NLC has threatened nationwide action from **1 March**. The union stated it intends to shut down the operations of telecommunications companies across the country. Avoid all protests as a precaution.

Uganda: The ongoing detention of opposition figure Kizza Besigye over treason and other allegations could prompt protests in the capital Kampala and other main urban centres by people calling for his release. All demonstrations will carry credible risks of being forcibly dispersed by the security forces. Solidarity protests are possible at Ugandan embassies in regional countries.



ARGENTINA

- The Argentine government's designation of Resistencia Ancestral Mapuche (RAM) as a terrorist organisation will fuel an elevated risk of social unrest and nationwide protests.
- Patagonia region, which has the highest concentration of Mapuche people, is likely to see an increase in associated violence over the short term.
- Related security operations could be accompanied by increased crime as criminal cells are forced to seek alternative illicit activities to maintain revenues.

Situation

The Argentine government designated RAM a terrorist organisation after accusing the armed indigenous group of deliberately starting multiple wildfires in Patagonia. As of 11 February, wildfires had reportedly burned around 116 sq miles (200 sq km) of woodlands in Argentina's central-southern region. The fires have prompted hundreds of residential evacuations. They are likely to continue doing so amid the end of the summer season, which has so far experienced record-breaking high temperatures.

Tensions between the Mapuche and the government are being driven by environmental concerns and

land disputes. Some Mapuche activists have resorted to direct action during related protests, including occupations of farmland and arson attacks targeting crops and the assets of logging companies. Local news outlets have previously reported numerous cases where the Mapuche have been blamed for starting fires in southern provinces, including Chubut, Neuquen, Rio Negro, Santa Cruz, and Tierra del Fuego. In response, the government has deployed security force personnel to indigenous areas, periodically resulting in violent crackdowns on Mapuche activists. This trend is likely to escalate over the coming month as the interests of the government and the Mapuche continue to come into opposition.

Implications

Chubut will see the largest deployment of emergency and security force personnel to safeguard against the further spread of wildfires over the coming weeks.

RAM's designation as a terrorist organisation is likely to foment increased levels of social unrest over the coming month. Related security operations will exacerbate tensions between the Mapuche and local communities in southern provinces. This will be driven by perceived insecurity and damage resulting from associated violence. Wildfires, demonstrations and road checkpoints are also likely to disrupt ground transport networks in these provinces.

Additionally, the development could engender a collective public sentiment of the Mapuche as an insider threat. This comes as the government seeks to advance its agenda of opening the southern provinces to industrial activity.

Significant roadblocks and potential security operations in southern provinces will likely affect operations, transport and travel schedules throughout the region. A heightened security force presence can be expected, particularly near government buildings and established protest routes. The police are liable to employ harsh

measures, including tear gas and water cannon, to disperse any unruly gatherings. This is especially likely in the event demonstrators block key roads or bridges and refuse to allow the passage of vehicles. Demonstrators may retaliate by throwing stones, Molotov cocktails or other objects.

Associated disruption is likely along the Ruta Nacional 40 (RN40) and Ruta Nacional 3 (RN3) highways over the coming weeks. The RN40 notably connects the south with the country's central and northern provinces, while the RN3 connects the southern provinces with the capital Buenos Aires. Furthermore, both highways pass through the whole extension of the Mapuche territories.

Security operations may also be accompanied by a rise in criminal activity over the coming month. Local criminal cells will experience an interruption in their day-to-day operations and could pivot to different illicit activities to cover potential economic losses. Due to their involvement in larger-scale operations throughout the region, the security forces will have limited capabilities to respond to a potential increase in local opportunistic crime. Additionally, their resources will likely be focused on mitigating further wildfires as the summer season comes to an end.

Business travellers, as well as main commercial and business centres, are unlikely to be targeted by crime. Nonetheless, criminals could target sites that have been evacuated or damaged by fires, such as warehouses, industrial zones and residential areas.

Recommendations

Travel to and operations in Argentina can continue. Managers with workforce in southern provinces should advise them of potential disruption and localised disturbances and ensure they know how to mitigate their exposure. Workforce should be advised to avoid related demonstrations and quickly leave an area at the first sign of unrest. Additionally, managers should consider allowing flexible working arrangements, including working from home, for workforce whose commutes will be impacted or for organisations with offices in areas likely to be affected by demonstrations.

Managers should assess the anticipated impact of social instability and potential clashes between the security forces and the Mapuche or their sympathisers. Workforce should be provided with constant monitoring of the situation's development, flexibility and resources to ensure they can activate a contingency plan in situations with potential, yet unlikely, deterioration. They should also provide access to timely and reliable local information and follow official directives.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** A strong network of accredited security providers with nationwide operational capabilities.
- **Services offered:** Meet-and-greet, secure ground transportation, executive protection, security site assessments, evacuations, security consulting and training, 24/7 threat monitoring, security and medical alerts, medical information, advice and assistance.
- **Activation time:** 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of request. Shorter in major urban centres, such as Buenos Aires and Cordoba (Cordoba province).
- **Secure accommodation:** Available in most major cities; hotels vetted by International SOS in Buenos Aires and Rosario (Santa Fe province).

Workforce should also ensure access to open lines of communication with managers and security teams to report any security concerns.

Managers should evaluate business travel to Chubut, Neuquen, Rio Negro, Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego over the coming weeks. Travel in these provinces should only be undertaken after ensuring they have thorough situational awareness of the latest developments of the situation through International SOS' security alerts. Managers are also encouraged to liaise with trusted local contacts to remain abreast of developments and related eventualities in their points of interest.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Roadblocks occur on main highways, including the RN3 and RN40, impeding travel	Such roadblocks and road closures are likely due to potential demonstrations and further wildfires throughout the southern provinces.
Violence increases in the wake of RAM's terrorist designation, primarily in Chubut, Neuquen, Rio Negro, Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego	This outcome is possible, though a radical escalation in violence is unlikely over the coming weeks.
Major security operations target the Mapuche, regardless of their suspected allegiance to RAM. This triggers increased social instability and generalised violence that could result in the displacement of the Mapuche. It may also portend further actions against indigenous groups in Argentina	This outcome is unlikely as President Javier Milei's administration has carefully managed security strategies for responding to social unrest.

ECUADOR

- Political polarisation is likely to increase ahead of the **13 April** presidential runoff election between President Daniel Noboa and challenger Luisa Gonzalez.
- Campaign events are expected to be well attended and could result in localised disturbances.
- Crime will continue to be a focal point in the campaign. However, a significant increase in election-related violence is unlikely.

Situation

Ecuador's presidential runoff campaign is expected to intensify over the coming month ahead of the 13 April second-round vote. In the first round on 8 February, incumbent President Daniel Noboa obtained 44.2% of the vote, a mere 0.2% ahead of his primary challenger, centre-left Luisa Gonzalez. Noboa began his short interim presidency in November 2023 with high popularity following a declaration of a state of internal conflict and a large-scale security deployment to tackle organised crime. However, his tenure in recent months has been negatively affected by prolonged nationwide power shortages and persistently high crime rates.

Nevertheless, polls prior to the first round projected Noboa would lead the first-round vote by a comfortable margin, possibly by enough to secure a first-round victory. Opposition challenger Gonzalez's performance has come as a surprise and re-energised her campaign. Gonzalez only obtained 33.6% of the vote in the first round in the 2023 election and lost the runoff to Noboa by nearly four percentage points.

After first-round results were announced, Noboa made controversial allegations of irregularities in the election. He accused criminal groups of pressuring voters, particularly in HIGH-risk coastal provinces, into voting for Gonzalez. Furthermore, he alleged that her party would harbour criminals and fail to adequately address the country's security challenges. Gonzalez has rejected the allegations, calling them an attempt by Noboa to distract voters.

Implications

The close result of the first round is likely to drive increased polarisation leading up to the runoff. On one hand, Noboa retains popularity due to his efforts to fight the country's crime wave but has experienced some rejection among the public due to the energy crisis, persistent crime and administrative scandals. On the other hand, Gonzalez represents the party of controversial former president Rafael Correa (in office 2007-17) and thus maintains a strong support base, but also considerable rejection. Campaign events for both candidates can be expected to be well attended and cause considerable disruption in their vicinity. Rallies and related events are liable to be largest and most disruptive in the capital Quito and other major cities such as Guayaquil (Guayas province), Cuenca (Azuay province) and Manta (Manabi province).

We anticipate these events will pass off peacefully and their impact will be limited to travel disruption. However, incidents of unrest or localised disturbances cannot be ruled out. This is particularly likely if rival events take place at similar times and locations. Unrest would also be likely if low-probability but high-impact developments

were to unfold over the coming weeks, such as renewed electricity shortages or a political scandal involving Noboa or Gonzalez.

There remains a relatively low likelihood of an increase in violence linked to the runoff. However, such a possibility cannot be fully ruled out. Thus far, election- or political-related violent incidents have been sparse, though the mayor of the small town of Arenillas (El Oro province) was assassinated in January, allegedly by a criminal group. Such incidents were much more widespread in the 2023 election cycle, with the most notable one being the assassination of then-presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. That incident notwithstanding, electoral violence most frequently takes place in local races and targets mayoral or city council candidates. However, should an attack or security incident targeting Noboa or Gonzalez take place, it would have serious security repercussions. These could include a widespread security mobilisation, curfew and/or checkpoints along major roadways.

Recommendations

Managers should continue to carefully assess the development of the electoral cycle, as well as their organisations' travel and workforce exposure. This is particularly important in HIGH-risk western provinces, where workforce must exercise stringent security precautions due to the precarious and volatile risk environments. In these areas, a full and personalised risk assessment is recommended, along with logistical support from a trusted and vetted security provider. Although non-essential travel can proceed to Quito and other central and eastern areas, workforce should exercise caution and practice crime mitigation measures at all times. This includes maintaining a low profile, pre-arranging transportation and minimising non-essential movements after dark.

Managers should remain abreast of developments throughout the month by monitoring International SOS alerts, maintaining close contact with local networks, and tracking indicators of a potential deterioration in the security environment.

While the risk of major unrest remains low, workforce should remain cautious regarding the electoral cycle and take measures to reduce their exposure to potential protest activity or unrest, such as avoiding campaign events, government buildings and central areas with heightened security. Business travellers in western provinces should minimise non-essential road journeys, avoid movement after dark and remain in secure locations near their accommodation. Workforce operating in western provinces should carry out well-co-ordinated journey management plans, have backup transport options in the event of an incident, and have proper training on how to respond to crime-related incidents.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** A robust vetted network of security providers.
- **Services offered:** Updates and advice on various travel and security risks. Secure ground transport, meet-and-greet and evacuations, with appropriate notice.
- **Activation time:** Generally shorter in major cities such as Quito or Guayaquil but may vary according to provider availability and on-the-ground conditions. Preferred lead time for security or ground transport task is 24-48 hours.
- **Secure accommodation:** Available in most major cities. Hotels vetted by International SOS in Quito and Guayaquil.

Managers should also ensure they have proper communications contingency plans in place, particularly in the event of a low-probability, high-impact situation. They should ensure they can distribute essential and time-sensitive security information to workforce and be prepared to adjust operational protocols in the event of an escalation. Managers should also review communications procedures and identify triggers specific to their organisation for communicating important developments and protocols to their workforce.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Increased polarisation or an escalation in divisive political rhetoric	Should Noboa or Gonzalez escalate political attacks and accusations against each other, an increase in election-related demonstrations and disturbances could take place. These could pose incidental risks to workforce in the vicinity of such events.
An increase in anti-gang security operations	Noboa could call for additional security deployments or anti-gang operations, whether in response to developments linked to gang activity or to boost his standing ahead of the runoff. This would lead to heightened security, checkpoints and the potential for gang-related clashes in peripheral areas of urban centres, particularly in HIGH-risk coastal provinces
Low-probability, high-impact incidents such as gang attacks on a presidential candidate or against critical infrastructure	This scenario remains unlikely but would carry significant security implications. Such attacks would likely prompt a large-scale security response, which could escalate violence in the immediate term. The authorities' response could also entail restrictive measures such as a curfew and road closures. Workforce would need to liaise closely with security providers (particularly in HIGH-risk locations) and consider standing fast until the situation stabilises.

HAITI

- The security situation in the capital Port-au-Prince has continued to deteriorate despite the presence of a Kenyan-led multinational security force.
- Funding for the multinational force, whose largest donor by far is the US, is threatened due to recent executive orders (EOs) issued by President Donald Trump.
- Flight restrictions from the US to Port-au-Prince are set to be lifted on **12 March**.

Situation

The security situation in Haiti, especially in Port-au-Prince, remains highly volatile despite the presence of the multinational security force assisting the domestic police. Even with foreign reinforcements, the number of police officers remains insufficient to provide security across the country.

The police recently retook the Teleco base in Kenscoff, an upscale community home to much of the country's elite in the hills outside Port-au-Prince. Kenscoff, which had been relatively

untouched by gang violence, came under a well-co-ordinated and sustained attack by gangs starting on 28 January. Thousands were forced to flee, with dozens of civilians and numerous police officers confirmed killed. According to police sources, the gangs also suffered heavy casualties.

Complicating the mission of the Kenyan-led force are the recent EOs issued by Trump. These orders have frozen \$13.3m in US funding for the force, while an additional \$71m is under review but has not yet been frozen. The US contributes the vast majority of funds to the multinational force, which is backed by a trust of approximately \$100m, well short of the recommended \$600m.

In addition to freezing funds for the multinational force, approximately \$330m in aid to Haiti that supports a wide variety of humanitarian efforts, including healthcare and food security, has also been halted. Haiti remains heavily reliant on US humanitarian aid.

The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) flight restrictions from the US to Port-au-Prince's Toussaint Louverture International Airport (PAP) are in effect until 12 March. Most flights to and from the airport were suspended following an attack in November 2024, which damaged several aircraft and injured a flight attendant. In addition to the FAA restrictions, numerous air carriers have voluntarily suspended service to Port-au-Prince indefinitely.

Implications

Continued gang attacks in Port-au-Prince are likely throughout March, with civilians, the police and gangs all plausible targets. Both low-income areas, such as Cite Soleil, and affluent areas, such as Kenscoff and Pétion-Ville, may be targeted. Foreign travellers to Haiti have historically been targeted by gangs in kidnapping plots, some of which have resulted in the deaths of hostages.

The partial loss of US funding is likely to cause difficulties for the multinational force in conducting operations. While the freezing of \$13.3m may present some challenges, a complete halt of the additional \$71m would cast the future of the operation into doubt. It is unclear where funding for the multinational force will come from if the US withdraws its support.

The loss of US aid is also likely to deepen Haiti's humanitarian crisis in the long term. Expect food insecurity to rise, which may lead to an increase in malnutrition. The withdrawal of aid previously allocated to healthcare, including HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, could cause a surge in preventable diseases and associated deaths.

The Trump administration has begun large-scale deportations of migrants. In addition, deportation protections for approximately 500,000 Haitians in the US are ending in **August**. Haiti is ill-equipped to handle a large number of people returning to the country, which would exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

A further deterioration of the humanitarian and security situations may trigger instances of civil unrest. Protests in Haiti can turn violent, with arson, vandalism and looting occurring. The security forces are known to respond to such demonstrations with tear gas and, occasionally, live ammunition to disperse participants. Protesters often block major thoroughfares, disrupting overland travel.

Although the FAA's flight restrictions are due to be lifted on 12 March, they could be extended with little warning. Initially imposed in November 2024, the restrictions were extended to March in December 2024. Even if the FAA allows flights to Port-au-Prince, air carriers' self-imposed restrictions may continue.

Recommendations

Defer all travel to Haiti. Those currently in the country should develop an evacuation plan and execute it when feasible. Business travellers should inform their diplomatic authorities of their presence in the country.

If already in Haiti, maintain a stockpile of essentials such as food, water and medicine to last up to seven days to enable a standfast period if needed.

All travel within Haiti, whether overland or by air, requires advanced security and contingency planning. Contact International SOS for consultation in developing such plans.

If encountering roadblocks, business travellers should not attempt to force their way through. Instead, co-operate with criminals' demands to avoid an escalation to violence.

In the event of a protest and/or violence, leave the area immediately if it is safe to do so. If unable to leave the area, shelter in place until the situation stabilises.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
FAA flight restrictions are extended in Port-au-Prince	The ability to quickly leave the capital would remain difficult. However, exiting the country via Cap-Haitien (Nord department) remains possible.
Widespread protests occur	Gangs may take advantage of a distracted police force to launch attacks and seize additional territory. Overland travel routes could become blocked, causing difficulties in overland evacuations.
Large-scale clashes between gangs and the security forces occur	A widespread displacement of the local populace is likely. Destruction and damage to infrastructure are also possible. Civilians, including business travellers, may get caught in the crossfire.
All US funding to Haiti is cut off, including to the multinational force	The multinational force may quickly become unable to operate. Gangs are likely to launch attacks to take advantage of the power vacuum.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** A vetted network of security and transport providers able to operate outside Port-au-Prince and in limited areas of the capital. Sources' network can verify complex information from across the country.
- **Services offered:** A robust offering of security services, including meet-and-greet, secure ground transport, supply drops, active monitoring for travellers, executive protection, evacuation assistance with appropriate notice, security consulting and training, 24/7 threat monitoring, security and medical alerts, information, analysis and advice on a range of security risks, travel and operational issues, medical information, advice and assistance. Services may be limited by the security environment, including airspace, airport and seaport closures, roadblocks and immigration constraints, but will be attempted on a best-effort basis.
- **Activation time:** Up to 6-48 hours to activate for on-the-ground, depending on the location and the availability of resources at the time of the request. For aircraft, expect a lead time of two to three days. Due to the security situation, a longer lead-up time may be required for advanced planning.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes, a list of recommended hotels assessed by International SOS in numerous cities nationwide. Advice for accommodation selection is available via the Assistance Centre.

PANAMA

- Anti-government protests will continue **throughout March** as President Jose Raul Mulino's government attempts to pass controversial social security reforms.
- Opposition to the reforms has become the focal point for discontent over various social, economic and political issues, fuelling the potential for the protests to grow in scope.
- Associated gatherings have a potential for violent unrest. The security forces are liable to disperse unruly gatherings with heavy-handed methods, posing incidental risks to bystanders.

Situation

Since early-February, Panama has witnessed a significant surge in protests surrounding reforms to the Social Security Fund (CSS) under Bill 163. Proposed by Mulino's government, the legislation aims to privatise social security, increase the retirement age, and transfer public funds to private entities, which has sparked widespread opposition from labour unions and various civil society organisations. Although Mulino's government aimed to pass the reforms in January, the bill's approval has been repeatedly postponed in the National Assembly due to persistent political disagreements and the looming potential for widespread unrest in response to the reforms.

On 12 February, a national demonstration organised by the Single Union of Workers of Construction and Similar

Industries (SUNTRACS) and other groups led to clashes with police in the capital Panama City. The authorities arrested over 480 protesters, with reports of more than 100 demonstrators injured. Following the unrest, Mulino branded SUNTRACS a 'terrorist' organisation and vowed to pursue legal action against its members.

Despite the arrests, protests have continued. By 19 February, the remaining 83 detained workers were released after persistent demonstrations and demands from families and supporters. The movement's leaders have since pledged to maintain pressure on Mulino's government to withdraw Bill 163 and address concerns over labour rights and national sovereignty.

The protests have also been fuelled by issues beyond Bill 163. This includes widespread opposition to statements by US President Donald Trump regarding the ownership of the Panama Canal, and the Panamanian government's perceived acquiescence to US interests. Unresolved concerns over the environmental impact of mining, which sparked widespread unrest in 2023, increasingly feature among the issues driving mobilisation in the current context. Other grievances, including concerns over the state of the education system, have become rallying calls for other segments of Panamanian society as well.

Union leaders have expressed unwavering commitment to opposing the CSS reforms. Reports indicate the SUNTRACS leadership has vowed to carry out a 24-hour strike in response to the reforms. Additionally, they have addressed the idea of calling for a nationwide indefinite strike, contingent upon the National Assembly's and Mulino's actions regarding Bill 163. The recent freezing of bank accounts linked to SUNTRACS, purportedly at the government's request, thus far does not seem to have deterred its leadership from pursuing further actions against the reforms.

Implications

The anti-government protests have the potential to continue across March, with labour unions and other social actors mobilising against the CSS reforms and other grievances. The prospect of further escalation, such as in the form of a national strike, will hinge on legislative developments and the response of Mulino's government to the protests.

Much like the mining controversy in 2023, the dispute over the CSS reforms is becoming a nexus for various unresolved socioeconomic and political grievances. Such convergence of issues fuels the potential for participation to broaden. The protests could thus gain additional momentum and pose protracted disruption to travel and business operations throughout the month.

The protests will continue in Panama City and other urban centres. SUNTRACS and other organisations' strike actions are likely to involve blockades along key thoroughfares, including the Panamerican Highway, posing significant disruption to inter-city travel. Blockades in Panama's western provinces of Bocas del Toro, Chiriqui, and Veraguas, as well as the indigenous *comarcas*, could also increase the challenges to mobility.

While most protests since the 12 February unrest have been peaceful, the potential for violent unrest remains. By labelling protesters as 'terrorists', Mulino has signalled a willingness to employ heavy-handed measures if unrest escalates. State of emergency measures (SoE), which would entail greater restrictions to mobility, cannot be ruled out in such a scenario. Such actions by the government, however, risk leading to further escalation.

Recommendations

Managers supporting workforce in Panama should monitor all triggers relevant to the potential for escalating unrest. Workforce should review routes during commutes to work and in other daily activities in the event of scheduled protests in Panama City and other urban centres. Organisations with a presence near city centres should advise workforce to remain cautious and bypass demonstrations as a precaution.

Managers should also make sure they have up-to-date communication protocols and review operational exposure, especially if work facilities and personnel are in provinces where mobility might be easily disrupted by protracted roadblock campaigns, especially in the western provinces. Consider making alternative housing arrangements in another province, especially if workforce is exposed and in need of a quick domestic relocation. Be prepared to implement flexible policies such as work-from-home and be ready to suspend non-essential travel at short notice in the event of unrest by labour unions.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** A robust network of logistics and security providers operating countrywide.
- **Services offered:** Meet-and-greet services, secure ground transportation, executive protection, security site assessments, evacuations, security consulting and training, 24/7 threat monitoring, security and medical alerts, medical information, advice and assistance.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24 hours to activate, depending on the location and the availability of resources at the time of request. Shorter in major urban centres such as the capital Panama City.
- **Secure accommodation:** Available in most major urban centres; hotels vetted by International SOS in Panama City.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
SUNTRACS implements 24-hour strike	SUNTRACS and other labour unions are likely to call for a 24-hour strike to put pressure on Mulino's government before attempting a nationwide strike. Associated protests are likely to be very well attended by labour union members and may pose significant disruption in their vicinity. Labour unions are likely to block key avenues in the capital Panama City and other urban centres and may target the Panamerican Highway to pressure the government to concede to their demands.
The National Assembly approves Bill 163	Bill 163's approval in the National Assembly is likely to prompt an indefinite strike by SUNTRACS. Associated actions, including widespread road blockades, could paralyse transport and logistics nationwide if protracted over several days or weeks.
A heavy-handed response from the security forces	If the protests become disruptive and protracted, the security forces may intervene more forcibly to disperse them. Although intending to alleviate disruption to business operations, the use of heavy-handed measures may cause unrest to escalate in intensity.
The government declares SoE measures in the face of widespread unrest	President Mulino has signalled a disposition to employ extraordinary means if the demonstrations escalate. SoE measures could result in increased constraint to mobility, including patrolling and checkpoints on key thoroughfares as well as curfews. In Panama's volatile political environment, however, such measures could also cause unrest to surge, posing severe disruption to travel and increased risks to bystanders.

AMERICAS: ON WATCH

Colombia: The security environment is likely to remain volatile in HIGH-risk rural areas following an increase in violence in recent weeks linked to the National Liberation Army guerrilla group. Workforce should closely examine whether planned travel or operations in areas affected by violence, particularly in Norte de Santander and Cauca departments, are business-critical, and take stringent security precautions.

Mexico: Security operations will continue in Sinaloa state in the aftermath of Ivan Archivaldo Guzman's removal. Violence is expected to remain largely unabated throughout March, especially in the state capital Culiacan, as the remnants of the 'Chapiza' faction of the Sinaloa Cartel continue to feud with the 'Mayiza' faction.

US: More executive orders (EOs) or clarifications of existing EOs issued by President Donald Trump that could restrict or prohibit travel are likely. Previous EOs included a change requiring travellers to make a binary declaration of sex, as well as enhanced scrutiny and vetting of those entering the US.



MYANMAR

- The military government has lost significant territory to ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), controlling only around 20% of the country including major urban centres.
- The military is negotiating a ceasefire with EAOs and signalling its intent to hold an election in 2025. Hostilities persist as both sides manoeuvre for strategic advantage.
- Regularly review and update risk assessments and related mitigation and contingency protocols.

Situation

Myanmar's conflict has entered its fourth year with the military suffering major losses in 2024. A renewed joint offensive was launched in June 2024 by the coalition of three EAOs, known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance, comprising the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The Brotherhood Alliance has seized key military bases in Lashio (Shan state) and Ann (Rakhine state) townships. The military fully controls only around a fifth of the country, with the rest either contested or under resistance control. However, the capital Naypyitaw, Mandalay (Mandalay region) and the commercial capital Yangon (Yangon region) remain firmly in military control. Anti-government People's Defence Force (PDF) groups have used drones to target Naypyitaw

International Airport (NYT) since April 2024, prompting temporary suspensions of operations.

Ceasefire and potential elections

The military has extended the state of emergency (SoE) **until 31 July**. On 18 January, the MNDAA signed a Chinese brokered ceasefire agreement, halting clashes in northern Shan near the border with China. Additionally, negotiations with the TNLA commenced in China on 16 February.

In recent months, the military has outlined plans for an election in 2025. It has released the 2024 census results and claimed it is trying to ensure stability ahead of the polls. These developments constitute the military's most significant declaration of intent to hold an election since taking power in 2021. The constitution requires an election to be held within six months of the lifting an SoE. The Union Election Commission has stated that it is prepared to hold an election within four months of the lifting of the SoE, meaning it can be held at the earliest in **November**.

Conflict

Fighting has intensified as the prospect of further Chinese-mediated ceasefire negotiations persists. The military has escalated airstrikes in areas controlled by EAOs, while the EAOs have continued their offensives with the aim of strengthening their strategic positions ahead of the talks. For instance, ahead of ceasefire talks involving the TNLA, an escalation of fighting was reported along the Mandalay-Shan border.

In Kachin state, the battle to control the strategically significant Bhamo township has escalated with intense clashes between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the military. In Rakhine, the AA, which has captured 14 out of 17 townships, is focused on securing key roads towards Ayeyarwady, Bago and Magway regions. The AA also is closing in on the state capital Sittwe, which has prompted the military to block all exit routes and shift efforts towards fortifying the city and reinforcing its defences.

Implications

Chinese-brokered negotiations along with the military's perceived intent to hold an election this year will shape the conflict **in the coming months**. The ceasefire agreement between the military and the MNDA remains opaque with key provisions, such as control over Lashio, remaining unclear. Past ceasefire agreements suggest that such truces are often short lived. However, the current negotiation strategy appears to bypass group negotiations with EAOs, thereby reducing their collective leverage. With talks already underway with the TNLA, negotiations with the KIA and AA are expected to follow. Meanwhile, both the military and EAOs are likely to intensify hostilities as they seek to strengthen their respective bargaining positions.

The conflict in Rakhine will spill over further into neighbouring Ayeyarwady, Bago and Magway as the AA seeks to expand its network of allies and proxies, establish buffer zones west of the Ayeyarwady river and consolidate control over its territories. This will also strengthen the AA's ability to mount attacks and lay siege to Sittwe, an outcome that appears increasingly likely, as it attempts to bolster its position against the military ahead of any peace talks. However, capturing Sittwe will be a far greater challenge for the AA. The city's airport, naval base and port are protected by the sea, making it difficult for the AA to disrupt military logistics effectively. Moreover, given Sittwe's significance as a revenue hub, a key source of foreign exchange and a critical node in the oil and gas trade via the Indian Ocean, the military is expected to hold a strong defence.

Overall, the conflict is unlikely to reach major urban centres, such as Mandalay, Naypyitaw and Yangon, as EAOs are unlikely to risk overextending beyond their ethnic strongholds. However, the military is expected to rely on escalated measures, including airstrikes and 'scorched-earth' tactics destroying crops, livestock, buildings and infrastructure, to mitigate infantry shortages. Anti-government PDF groups also will continue to carry out small-scale explosions and targeted attacks in the cities. Shortages of power and fuel supply in urban centres will persist as the military will divert these resources towards war efforts. Telecommunications blackouts will continue in EAO-held areas and food shortages have been reported in contested areas.

Recommendations

Managers should continue to closely monitor developments and regularly review potential operational exposure. This includes ensuring that response plans are updated ahead of flashpoint dates. Risk-treatment protocols and related contingency plans also should be regularly reviewed. These should include emergency communications protocols that can assist in-country workforce in continuing operations and remaining in contact with management in the event of communications outages. Managers should also ensure that workforce is adequately briefed on the latest developments and able to navigate the operational landscape without incurring additional risks.

In-country workforce should defer all travel to areas affected by persistent conflict. This is due to the unavailability of reliable road and transport options, as well as incidental risks of harm relating to the conflict. These areas

include all of Chin, Kayah, Kachin and Rakhine states and Sagaing region, as well as some districts and townships in Bago, Magway, Mandalay and Tanintharyi regions and Kayin, Mon and Shan states. They should keep non-essential movement in the rest of the country to a minimum. For in-country workforce located in remote or rural locations without access to an airport, particularly those within or close to conflict zones, relocation to Yangon should be considered. Although some domestic airports are presently operational, a deterioration of the security situation could cause disruption at short notice.

Essential movement to areas outside conflict zones should only be carried out during daylight hours, with heightened situational awareness and robust journey management plans. Contingency plans should be in place, including re-routing to potential safe havens and the ability to stand fast for prolonged periods of time. During essential movement, workforce should minimise time spent near infrastructure commonly targeted by anti-military groups. A pre-trip assessment should be conducted to ensure that proposed routes avoid areas affected by conflict. Road movement should be undertaken with trusted providers and in plain, unmarked vehicles that are in good condition.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network of logistics and security partners are able to operate in Mandalay, Naypyitaw and Yangon. For other urban centres and conflict locations, it is contingent on the latest security developments.
- **Services offered:** Meet-and-greet, ground transportation, travel arrangements to secure movement and static guarding. We also maintain a network of aviation providers in-country and across the region to assist with air charter evacuations to international destinations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of the request. For air charter, the lead time is expected to be a minimum of two to seven business days.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes. Recommended hotels assessed in-person by International SOS in Mandalay, Naypyitaw and Yangon. Advice on accommodation selection available via the Assistance Centre.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
An intensification of violence as both the military and EAOs attempt to strengthen their positions amid Chinese mediated negotiations	The attritional nature of the conflict is expected continue with the military increasing the frequency of airstrikes in rebel-held areas.
Further ceasefires with either one or more of the AA, KIA or TNLA	Further ceasefires would ease pressure on the already overstretched military, allowing it to focus on other conflict areas.
Explosions in urban areas and near high-end hotels	Given the heightened surveillance capabilities of the security forces, especially around key dates, this scenario is unlikely. There has also been no indication thus far that the PDF or EAOs have the capability to carry out such attacks.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

- Despite the announcement of a peace agreement on 3 February, tensions remain high at the Porgera Mine in Enga province.
- Fighting between illegal miners and the security forces continues to take place almost daily.
- The violence poses significant risks to workforce operating in and around the Porgera Mine.

Situation

At least 33 people have been killed in and around Porgera since August 2024, which is a significant increase in violence. This is primarily due to the swelling of informal settler populations around the mine and an increase in illegal mining activity. Landowner clans and the security forces have been known to clash with settlers, whose activities affect the revenue generated by landowner clans from the mine. Clashes have been primarily concentrated around the mine itself, though violence is often reported in Porgera town and on the Highlands Highway route leading to the mine. Violence has also reignited long-standing tit-for-tat conflicts between

landowner clans. The number of fatalities is likely higher due to many killings going unreported.

On 3 February, the authorities announced that a peace agreement had been reached between five clans involved in tribal fighting and violence near the Porgera Mine. The agreement commits landowner clans to ceasing the use of violence, though, notably, informal settler communities living around Porgera were not represented. Despite this announcement, local sources and videos of fighting surfacing online suggest that the agreement has done little to quell the violence by informal settlers around the mine.

The level of violence observed at Porgera represents a confluence of the major issues the country is currently facing. A lack of formal employment opportunities has motivated settlers to congregate opportunistically around high-value resource projects. The population around the Porgera Mine has swelled considerably since its reopening in December 2023, as the mine has attracted settlers from other parts of Enga as well as from across the Highlands region. Additionally, the influx of high-powered weapons into the country has also increased the fatalities and overwhelmed the security forces operating in the area. Local sources suggest that settlers arrived in Porgera heavily armed and the presence of weapons is expected to rise as settlers use the revenue from informal mining activities to purchase more sophisticated weaponry to fend off the security forces.

Implications

While the peace agreement could potentially curb the interclan and landowner-driven conflict in the short term, the continued activity of illegal settlers in Porgera is likely to continue to drive violence in the coming months. Traditional landowners, who rely on revenue-sharing agreements with the mine's operators, have also grown impatient with settler activities and the instability around the mine. Security issues at the mine have prevented it from operating at full capacity, limiting the amount of revenue traditional landowners receive from its operations. It is possible that landowner groups will grow weary of the continued violence and a perceived infringement of their benefits from the mine and use violence themselves to limit informal mining activity. This would jeopardise the peace agreement, which is meant to limit the involvement of landowner groups in the violence.

Although violence often occurs between those directly involved in the conflict, including settlers and members of landowner clans, significant risks persist for business travellers and workforce. The latter may get caught up in the shoot-outs between the security forces and illegal miners. For workforce operating in Porgera or at the mine, these risks are heightened during the overland movement from the Kairik Airstrip, where armed escorts aided by local security forces are mandatory. In October 2024, an armed attack on a passenger vehicle travelling on the Highlands Highway near Porgera killed seven people. Overland travel should also be avoided at night, as informal mining activity is at its height overnight, which raises the possibility of clashes.

Curfew and state-of-emergency measures are likely to be extended and should be abided by. Restricted access to the mine continues to lead to reports of a lack of essential supplies in Porgera. Access to the mine via road remains cut off due to a landslide in May 2024, which has rendered the Highlands Highway in Yambali (Enga) impassable. This lack of road access has limited the essential supplies reaching the mine and Porgera town. The authorities have reportedly arranged to build an alternative road, though the need for fresh negotiations with the landowners along the new proposed route has complicated the process.

Recommendations

Managers should arrange secure transport and implement stringent security measures for all movements to and in the Porgera Valley. Hired security providers/personnel should accompany all business travellers any time they leave a secure perimeter due to the risk of widespread, indiscriminate violence and the limited capacity of local police. Move in a vehicle convoy when possible and maintain communication with workforce undertaking road travel, including scheduling checkpoint check-in calls. Safe havens, secure routes, methods of transport and ports of departure should be identified in advance. Maintain access to multiple means of communication, including local and international SIM cards, landlines and satellite phones, due to the potential for sporadic disruption to domestic networks. The local environment in the Porgera Valley may further deteriorate at short notice.

Organisations with workforce in the area should have evacuation and emergency response plans in place. Local logistical infrastructure is limited and can be severely hampered by periods of unrest. Ensure that your workforce is aware of contingency plans and is prepared with a grab bag of essentials. The grab bag should include documentation (passport and relevant visas) and food, water and medical supplies to last for at least 72 hours.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** Our local staff support operations at the Porgera Mine and we have a physical presence in the capital Port Moresby and Lae (Morobe province). We have an accredited medical, security and ground transport provider network nationwide.
- **Services offered:** Arranging ground transport services, assisting with evacuations, welfare checks and intelligence on the status of fighting near the mine.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on the location and the availability of resources at the time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** International SOS has conducted on-the-ground assessments of hotels near Mount Hagen (Western Highlands province).

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
A reduction of the police and military presence in the Porgera Valley	This is unlikely, as the revenue generated by the mine incentivises the government to continue to provide security resources and reinforcements to the region. However, an escalation of violence elsewhere in the country may cause the authorities to redirect resources. A reduction in the security presence may increase violence and even cause mining operations to cease completely.
An infiltration and attacks on the Kairik Airstrip	The criticality of this airstrip means that security around the perimeter is substantial. However, should it be attacked and deemed unusable, it would practically prevent entry to the mine, especially given that the Highlands Highway remains blocked in some places.

REGIONAL

- The Islamic holy month of Ramadan will be celebrated from **1-31 March** (exact dates vary across countries), with disruption ahead of Eid al-Fitr (**30 or 31 March**).
- Security will be heightened at transport hubs, marketplaces, tourist areas, religious sites and other crowded areas to prevent petty and opportunistic crime.
- Ensure workforce is familiar with heightened cultural and religious sensitivities during this period. Adopt sensible precautions to mitigate potential security risks.

Situation

Ramadan, considered to be the holiest month of the Islamic calendar, will start from around 1 March. It is a period in which observant Muslims abstain from eating, drinking or smoking during daylight hours. In the evening hours, there are large gatherings, especially at mosques after the call to prayer ('*adhan*'), followed by the breaking of the fast ('*iftar*'). Ramadan markets are also organised.

Ramadan is well observed in **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives and Pakistan**. It is also celebrated by the Muslim populations in **Australia, Fiji, India, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Singapore, Sri Lanka, southern Thailand and southern Philippines**.

Due to the significance of the month, cultural and religious sensitivities are heightened. In many Muslim-majority countries, working hours are relaxed and businesses reduce operating hours.

Ramadan will culminate with the celebration of Eid al-Fitr (also known as *Chhoti Id* or *Hari Raya Puasa* in some countries). This is observed by congregational prayers and communal celebrations in homes, community centres or public squares and gardens. The festival can last up to three days, with a public holiday observed in countries with a large Muslim population.

Implications

During Ramadan, many Muslim-majority countries reduce working hours in both public and private sectors to allow religious observances. Some organisations may even consider hybrid working conditions and work from home options. The pace of business activity typically slows down as a result, leading to administrative delays.

Security will be heightened ahead of and during Eid al-Fitr at major transport hubs, including airports, bus and railway stations. Air and railway fares may spike due to an increase in demand. In countries such as Bangladesh, the government increases public transport services to accommodate demand. Expect road traffic and congestion at airports and railway stations.

Additionally, large crowds at public transport hubs, religious sites and marketplaces during Ramadan increases the risk of petty and opportunistic crime. This is especially prevalent towards the end of Ramadan, given the increased exchange of cash and goods and more public gatherings. Heightened security measures, such as traffic restrictions, the deployment of additional personnel and the installation of checkpoints along key routes, remain likely. These measures could cause travel delays and disruption.

Ramadan celebrations generally pass off peacefully. However, there is credible risk of communal unrest where the Muslim population does not comprise a majority, including in India, or countries where there is a precedent of unrest, such as Bangladesh. Such unrest usually takes place in rural areas and low-income neighbourhoods in major cities. Any provocative statements and social media posts by political and religious leaders during Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr are triggers for unrest. It is prudent to exercise caution while discussing religion in public and to refrain from acting upon unverified news.

In Bangladesh, various groups including garment workers and government employees have previously protested ahead of Eid al-Fitr to demand bonuses and wage increases. Student groups may also hold protests over long standing demands.

Increased outreach by political parties is likely in the forms of free *iftar* meals or charity events related to Ramadan. Localised clashes between rival parties and factions of the same party are likely during these events.

There is a risk of militant attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan during Ramadan and ahead of Eid al-Fitr. In Afghanistan, the extremist Islamic State-Khorasan group has previously targeted religious minority sites during holiday periods. In Pakistan, the extremist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) group and Baloch insurgent groups target religious sites and civilians. Social media channels associated with the TTP recently circulated threats against the Faisal Mosque in the capital Islamabad. Similar risks are present in the southern provinces of Thailand, with insurgent groups increasing the frequency of attacks targeting security personnel or police stations.

Across countries, the authorities are likely to routinely flag terror threats and increase their security posture pre-emptively to thwart untoward incidents. All terror threats should be taken seriously unless disproved.

How we can help

- **Presence in-region:** Assistance centres in major urban centres such as Bali, Jakarta (both Indonesia), Bangkok (Thailand), Dubai (UAE), Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (both Vietnam), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Manila (Philippines), New Delhi (India), Singapore and Sydney (Australia). The Asia Security Centre is in New Delhi and the Global Threat Monitoring Centre is in Sydney. An accredited network of credentialled security and logistics partners.
- **Services offered:** From meet-and-greet, secure ground transport and close protection officers to assisting with evacuations with appropriate notice. We carry out 24/7 threat monitoring and issue security and medical alerts on a range of risks and operations issues.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24 hours to activate in major urban centres and national capitals. Longer response times depending on location and availability of resources at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes. Recommended hotels assessed on the ground and via research by International SOS in major urban centres. Advice on accommodation selection available via the Assistance Centre.

Recommendations

Business travellers and foreign nationals should expect increased demand for trains, flights, car hire and taxis. Book ahead and reconfirm existing bookings for domestic travel and accommodation options to minimise inconvenience. Plan journeys accounting for the potential for delays and maintain flexible itineraries, including regarding security measures and restrictions near celebratory gatherings.

Reconfirm meetings at government offices, banks and other businesses due to Ramadan related closures or shortened hours.

Expect a heightened security presence in crowded areas and follow all official directives. Due to the risk of terrorist/militant attacks against perceived soft targets in certain countries, business travellers and foreign nationals are encouraged to adopt an appropriate level of vigilance. Minimise time spent at potential criminal and terrorist targets, such as shopping centres, religious buildings and entertainment venues. Avoid any events or processions as a precaution against the risk of terrorist attacks or sectarian violence. Protests should also be bypassed to minimise disruption. As a precaution against unrest, it is advisable to leave an area as soon as a crowd begins to gather and to be aware of nearest egress points.

All terror threats issued during this period to public events should be taken seriously unless disproved by the authorities. Abide by official directives in such instances.

Take sensible precautions against petty and opportunistic crime and maintain a low profile. Large numbers of people will gather in public spaces and carry more money while buying goods for celebrations, heightening the risk of petty crime. Movement should be conducted on well-lit and well-travelled routes.

Business travellers and foreign nationals should familiarise themselves with the nature of observance and cultural sensitivities during the festival period, as these may differ from country to country. During Ramadan, it is preferable to consume food, beverages and cigarettes only in private spaces or areas designated for such activities during daylight hours. Exercise caution while discussing topics like religion in public and social media.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
A stampede at a festive gathering or religious site such as a mosque	Excessive jostling due to large crowds remains a persistent risk, especially around Eid al-Fitr.
Protests in a major urban centre leading to road closures	Protests by labour and student groups are highly likely to increase in countries such as Bangladesh. Significant traffic disruption and localised clashes with the security forces are possible.
Communal tensions due to heightened religious sensitivity	Incidents of communal violence remain a credible risk in rural areas and low-income neighbourhoods and 'old city' areas of urban centres. However, most communal incidents involve the immediate local communities and are quickly controlled by the authorities.
Militant threat or attack targeting a festive celebration or site of worship	Extremist groups may issue threats or carry out attacks, which are difficult to predict and are most often sudden in nature. This is especially the case during sensitive religious periods and high-profile events such as <i>iftar</i> or Eid al-Fitr celebrations.

TAIWAN (CHINA)

- Recall campaigns against legislators began on 1 February following a year of political gridlock under a minority government.
- Well-attended demonstrations have taken place over the last eight months, particularly when controversial bills have been introduced and passed by the opposition-led legislature.
- Increased political activity, which is likely to remain peaceful in nature, can be expected nationwide as civil society groups garner support for recall elections.

Situation

Mass recall campaigns against members of the Legislative Yuan were officially launched in Taiwan (China) on 1 February, exactly one year after the current legislature's inauguration. The primary target of the recall campaigns is the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) party, whose supporters subsequently launched counter campaigns against the ruling minority Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Of the lawmakers targeted, 34 out of 52 KMT legislators are facing recall and 17 out of 51 DPP legislators. If a recall vote is successful, a special election must be held to fill the vacant seats. This

could tilt the balance of the current minority government if the KMT's presence is reduced in the legislature.

The momentum of mass recall campaigns began following a series of controversial legislative reform bills proposed and passed by the KMT-led opposition coalition. It reached its highest point when a significant budget cut was passed in January. While the legislative reform bills were later annulled by the Constitutional Court, the budget cut was sent back to legislature by the Executive Yuan for review. These developments reflected the state of political gridlock under the minority DPP government, which fuels discontent among Taiwanese civil society.

Developments around the legislature sparked waves of large-scale demonstrations in Taipei city between May and December 2024. In January, protests were also held following the passage of an amendment on the Election and Recall Act, which would tighten the conditions for recall petitions. Civil society groups have since concentrated their efforts on the mass recall campaigns to file petitions before the new rules come into force. The DPP has requested a constitutional interpretation of said amendment.

In Taiwan (China), there are three stages to a recall process. In the first phase, campaigners collected signatures from 1% of the voters in the constituency. According to local reports, campaigners set up booths at key locations and held parades to garner signatures. The Central Election Commission (CEC) has 25 days to verify the signature lists.

In the second stage, expected in March, signatures from 10% of the votes must be gathered within 60 days. Civic groups and campaigners will reportedly recruit volunteers and set up signature stalls in preparation for the second phase.

The recall proposal will then be voted on in the last stage, where a 25% voter turnout is mandatory for a majority vote to be valid.

Implications

Civil society groups, political parties' supporters and campaigners are expected to begin the process of collecting signatures for the second round before the CEC's verification. Expect campaigners to conduct talks on the streets and set up signature stalls at key locations, including markets, shopping centres and transport hubs. They will conduct sporadic gatherings and marches to raise awareness about the recall process and gather more signatures.

These gatherings can cause localised disruption but are expected to remain peaceful. While gatherings can occasionally gather large attendance, they are unlikely to cause widespread disruption to traffic. There is a potential for low-level scuffles between supporters of the DPP and KMT. However, these will mostly be isolated incidents and are unlikely to escalate into unrest or violence.

Several KMT legislators are calling for the second phase of the recall process to be held under the new rules, which are currently suspended due to a petition for constitutional interpretation. Any attempt by KMT to push for this could lead to protests, most likely around the Legislative Yuan building in Taipei. Around 10,000 people attended a march near the Legislative Yuan on 19 December 2024 to oppose the amendments.

Demonstrations in support of and against the recall campaigns, as well as protests over legislative issues will occur periodically. While these are expected to be orderly and peaceful, occasional high attendance can cause localised traffic disruption.

If the recall motions are passed **in the coming months**, it could heighten the political tensions in Taiwan (China). The recalled legislator will be removed from public office, which would necessitate by-elections within three months.

Recommendations

Managers should continue to monitor developments associated with the recall motions. They should ensure workforce has access to timely and credible sources of information regarding any upcoming protests.

International assignees and in-country workforce should liaise with local contacts for information on any gatherings in their area and ensure routes are clear before setting out.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** International SOS has a permanent presence in Taipei city, including an Assistance Centre which works closely with our Singapore and Delhi-based Security Centres. A robust network of logistics and security providers operating across Taiwan (China).
- **Services offered:** Meet-and-greet services, secure ground transport, executive protection, security site assessments, evacuations, security consulting and training, 24/7 threat monitoring, security and medical alerts, medical information, advice and assistance.
- **Activation time:** 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Given Taiwan (China)'s LOW-risk security rating, most business-class hotels will have sufficient security standards. International SOS's Assistance team can, however, support desk reviews of specific hotels if required.

MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

Asia-Pacific



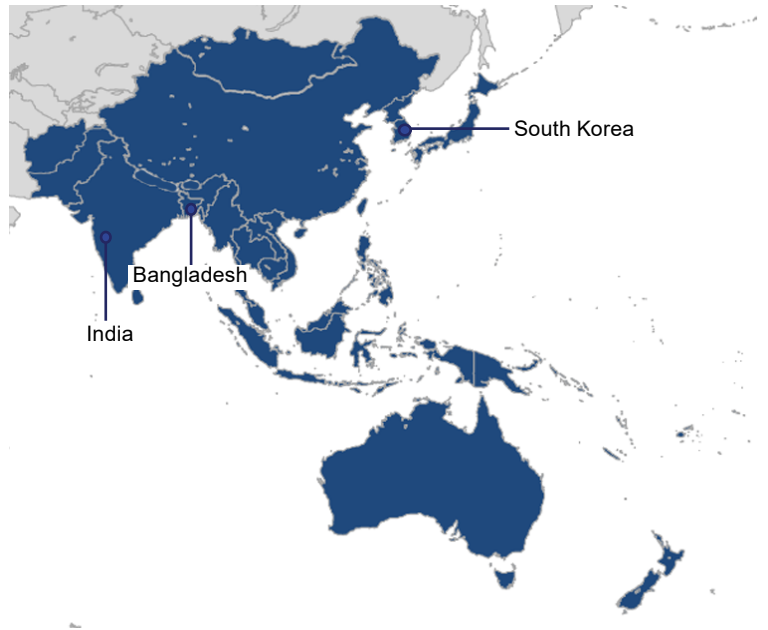
Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Gatherings continue at a similar level to garner signatures	These gatherings are likely. They will cause short-term localised disruption and are unlikely to escalate into unrest.
Sporadic protests and marches against the ruling and opposition parties	Such demonstrations are likely. They will be held at key locations across Taiwan (China). They are expected to pass off peacefully but cause localised traffic disruption.
Widespread demonstrations over opposition pushes for recall motions to comply with new rules	Protests over this issue will be well-attended but are expected to remain peaceful. Hot spots include areas near the Legislative Yuan.

ASIA-PACIFIC: ON WATCH

Bangladesh: The birthday of the country's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman will be observed on **17 March**. Expect commemorative gatherings by the Awami League (AL) and counter-protests by student groups and other political parties. The interim government will likely heighten security to avoid AL rallies. Avoid all student events and gatherings due to the credible risk of unrest.

India: The second phase of the parliament's budget session will take place on 10 March-4 April in the capital New Delhi. Demonstrations will be driven by parliamentary proceedings on key issues. Potential flashpoints include the Jantar Mantar monument, political party offices, the parliament building and central government offices. Liaise with local contacts, monitor political developments and avoid related protests.

South Korea: Yoon Suk-yeol is the first sitting president to be impeached and indicted on insurrection charges for imposing martial law on 3-4 December 2024. The Constitutional Court will rule on the impeachment's legality by mid-March. Protests and political tensions will persist in the interim. If the impeachment is upheld, a presidential election must take place within 60 days.



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

- The trial of Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik has raised political and ethnic tensions in recent weeks.
- Dodik and other leaders of the autonomous Republika Srpska (RS) called for demonstrations linked to the trial.
- The defendant was found guilty. RS had threatened to halt collaboration with the central government in this scenario.

Situation

Dodik is president of RS, one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) two autonomous entities. The other is the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). Both have their own parliaments and governments. Dodik had been on trial since February 2024 for refusing to comply with directives ordered by the High Representative for BiH, Christian Schmidt, and signing decrees enforcing unconstitutional laws previously annulled by Schmidt.

The High Representative holds the highest political authority in BiH. The High Representative's mandate is to oversee the implementation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the Bosnian War (1992-95) and established BiH's governance framework. The role includes the power to dismiss officials, both elected and non-elected, as well as essential veto powers.

Dodik on 26 February was found guilty and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. He has also been banned from holding public office for six years. The defendant had denied the charges against him, claiming they were politically motivated. He questioned the legitimacy of Schmidt, alleging that he was appointed without a UN Security Council resolution.

Since 2023, protesters have gathered across the RS to denounce the trial. Related rallies have been concentrated in parts of the capital Sarajevo, as well as Doboje, Foca, Istocni Stari Grad, Ostra Luka, Ribnik and Vlasenica (all RS). Although the demonstrations have been peaceful, they have been accompanied by a heightened security force presence. They have also disrupted traffic on several major roads. In Sarajevo, Dodik's supporters regularly gathered outside the trial venue, the Court of BiH.

Implications

The court's verdict will heighten ethnic tensions across BiH in the coming weeks. It will also intensify public debate relating to the secessionist threats of RS leaders, the legitimacy of Schmidt and the enforceability of articles of the Dayton Peace Agreement. These issues have the potential to stoke already heightened political and ethnic tensions.

The RS warned of severe responses, including the withdrawal of Serb representatives from BiH's institutions, if Dodik was convicted. Should it transpire, an RS boycott will pose the risk of a constitutional crisis. Such a development would degrade the capacity of the central government to make decisions on key issues, including defence and foreign policy.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** An accredited network.
- **Services offered:** From ground transport services to assisting with evacuations.
- **Activation time:** Up to 24-48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at time of the request.
- **Secure accommodation:** Yes.

RS lawmakers in December 2024 ordered state institutions to block all legislation relating to BiH's accession to the EU. This was an initial response to Dodik's trial.

Following Dodik's conviction, RS leaders are likely to cease collaboration with the central government and intensify secessionist rhetoric and policies. This is liable to result in disputes between central and regional institutions.

We expect that Dodik's conviction will result in widespread demonstrations and possible unrest in Sarajevo, as well as Banja Luka (RS) and other parts of the RS. Such protests are likely to take place at government buildings in urban centres and along key highways. In particular, roads along the Inter-Entity Boundary Line between FBiH and RS may be targeted by demonstrators.

Recommendations

Managers should liaise with local contacts and monitor developments associated with the trial, as well as responses from RS leaders and any related calls for protests. They should maintain a communications plan and emergency communication protocols, verifying and disseminating information in a timely manner. In-country workforce should know to avoid the sites of planned protests and comply with any related official directives.

Workforce should maintain flexible itineraries, have clear emergency plans in place in the event of unrest, and leave affected areas as quickly as possible.

Managers should review business-continuity plans, particularly within the RS, and consider flexible working arrangements for their workforce on days when major protests are planned.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Dodik is convicted, removed from office and imprisoned	We expect widespread demonstrations in Sarajevo and parts of the RS, as well as increased calls for secession by RS leaders. A cessation of collaboration between RS and BiH officials will result in a constitutional crisis.
RS leaders call for secession from BiH	We expect an escalation of a constitutional crisis in BiH. This would be accompanied by widespread demonstrations and increased hostilities, including possible armed clashes, between RS and BiH officials.

TAJIKISTAN

- Parliamentary elections will take place on **2 and 28 March** for the lower and upper houses, respectively.
- There will be little genuine competition in the elections. Political power is highly concentrated within the office of the long-time president Emomali Rahmon, in office since 1994.
- The political situation is increasingly complex, marked by the looming question of succession, reports of increasing surveillance and a growing extremist threat.

Situation

Parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2 and 28 March. However, the political space is tightly controlled by President Rahmon and Parliament largely serves to formalise his policy decisions.

In his three decades of rule, Rahmon has overseen the removal of any real political opposition. No election in Tajikistan has been judged free and fair by international observers since independence in the early 1990s. There are indications the ruling regime has further increased its control over the political and information space. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe recently announced it was cancelling its planned monitoring

mission for the upcoming polls due to a lack of co-operation from the authorities.

Despite the uncompetitive landscape, the polls will take place amid a complex political backdrop. The president has been laying the groundwork for handing power to his son, Rustam Emomali, for several years. This has included elevating him to chair parliament's upper house.

While the timeline for the potential transition of power has never been clear, preparations appear to have recently ramped up. Throughout January, Rahmon made several major personnel changes, firing or demoting senior personnel and reshuffling others. This appears designed to limit internal competition to pave the way for an easier political transition from father to son.

In recent weeks, almost a dozen Tajik senior officials, politicians and journalists were sentenced to lengthy prison terms in connection with an alleged coup plot last year. Those arrested include a former foreign minister, a former ambassador and at least two retired colonels – all regime insiders. The lack of public information about the particulars of the charges has led to speculation that they were politically motivated.

Previously, it appeared Rahmon was delaying stepping down from the presidency due to regional security concerns. Recent border agreements with neighbouring Kyrgyzstan have alleviated one major issue. However, a recent attempted prison break by supporters of the extremist militant Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) group highlights an additional issue: radicalisation.

Tajik nationals are playing an increasingly prominent role in IS-K. Tajik nationals were responsible for major mass casualty terror attacks in Russia and Iran in the last twelve months, and for thwarted attacks in Germany and the US. Approximately half of IS-Ks several thousand fighters are believed to be Tajik nationals or ethnic Tajiks, including the group's current leader. Millions of Tajik migrants have been forced by economic circumstances to

seek work in Russia, where they are often low paid and ill-treated. They represent a large target group for IS-K's online recruitment efforts.

Implications

We expect the elections to pass with little impact on the security environment. There will be heightened scrutiny of inbound travellers and enhanced monitoring of online activity during the election period. The authorities may institute communication blocks around polling day, though these are likely to be relatively limited in scope.

It is unclear when Rahmon intends to step down as president. His current presidential term ends in **2027**. However, the latest government reshuffle and the supposed coup attempt indicate a transition could occur before then.

A period of political transition provides opportunities for other political actors to challenge the status quo. Acutely aware of this, the ruling family will continue taking steps to ensure that any political transition is not threatened by political figures outside the Rahmon dynasty. After the elections, further significant legislative and personnel changes may indicate a handover in power is drawing closer.

IS-K will seek to capitalise on the lack of legitimate avenues for political frustration by increasing its Tajik language propaganda and recruitment efforts. Tajikistan will remain largely a support base for IS-K rather than an area of activity. Despite this, the potential for attacks by IS-K supporters cannot be ruled out.

The number of Tajiks joining IS-K remains lower than ten years ago, when several thousand left for Iraq and Syria. However, the resurgence in radicalisation is one of the government's primary security challenges. Official efforts to combat terrorism have so far focused on public displays of religiosity instead of the primary socio-economic and political drivers of radicalisation, and there is no indication this policy will change in the coming months. Nevertheless, this issue will be a consideration for the president when weighing up the timing of the intended political transition.

Recommendations

Foreign nationals are advised to avoid polling stations on voting day as a precaution and to minimise exposure to disruption. Local nationals intending to vote should reconfirm voting procedures, maintain heightened vigilance at voting stations, and leave an area at the first sign of unrest. Journalists attending political events should exercise caution and ensure they have the necessary permissions and identification documents to cover events.

Managers should prepare for potential communications outages around polling day. They should ensure in-country workforce is aware of the high levels of electronic surveillance and risks of detention linked to any sort of political engagement, including any social media or online activity.

How we can help

- **Presence in-country:** International SOS has a fully resourced 24/7 Assistance Centre in Dubai (UAE).

MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

Europe and CIS



Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Widespread reports of election fraud, such as vote tampering	These reports are less likely to be made public in the absence of international observers. Due to the tightly controlled political space, related protests are unlikely.
The authorities institute communication blocks on or around pollind day	The authorities may seek to block certain social media or messaging sites and apps on polling day to limit dissent from activists in the diaspora. Large-scale communication blocks are less likely.
Rahmon announces a timeline for political transition	Thus far, succession planning has been kept highly secret. The ruling regime will likely continue in this manner, only announcing transition once it is imminent.



Georgia: Anti-government protests will continue in the capital Tbilisi in the coming weeks. The government has refused to engage with the demands of protesters and the opposition, while the latter has shown no sign of halting its demonstrations. The security forces continue to use forcible means to disperse peaceful gatherings.

Romania: Protests are likely in the capital Bucharest in support of populist politician Calin Georgescu, who won the first round of the 2024 presidential election. The 2024 poll was annulled by the Constitutional Court, which cited international interference. Georgescu was arrested on 26 February on various charges as he went to register for the election rerun, due in May.

UK: Farmers will continue to protest against inheritance tax changes in March. A large protest is planned for the capital London on 4 March, and other protests may cause disruption in urban centres across the month. Farming groups have previously stated that they may resort to disrupting the food chain if the government fails to engage with their demands.

PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

- The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched the 'Iron Wall' security operation against alleged militant groups in northern areas of the West Bank (Palestinian Territories) on 21 January.
- The security operation has resulted in aerial strikes, clashes, casualties, arrests, displacement, residential demolitions, infrastructure impacts and business closures.
- Israel will seek to continue to intensify operations in West Bank during Hamas-Israel and Hizbullah-Israel ceasefires.

Situation

The IDF is undertaking the Iron Wall operation predominantly in northern areas of the West Bank, including Jenin, Nablus, Tubas and Tulkarm governorates. At least 60 militants and civilians have been killed, over 300 arrested and more than 40,000 displaced since the beginning of the operation.

The operation is targeting members of Hamas-affiliated and Palestinian Islamic Jihad affiliated groups including the Jenin Brigades and Tulkarm Brigades. The operation coincides with the Hamas-Israel ceasefire, which has allowed over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners to be freed during hostage and prisoner exchanges. Many of these prisoners were alleged militants who have since returned to West Bank.

Israeli forces have redirected resources and implemented the operation during the Hamas-Israel and Hizbullah-Israel ceasefires. While IDF operations in West Bank are common, this is the largest and longest sustained operation witnessed in decades. On 23 February, Israeli authorities announced the operation would continue **over the coming year**. This announcement coincided with IDF tanks being sent into Jenin, which has not occurred since 2002. The IDF has announced a permanent battalion will be placed in Jenin following its operation. Additional battalions have been deployed to the Central Command over the past weeks.

The Iron Wall operation also coincides with a series of recent policy changes introduced by the Knesset (Israeli parliament), IDF and Palestinian Authority (PA). In October 2024, the Knesset passed a law prohibiting the UN Relief and Works Agency from operating in the West Bank. In January a bill was also introduced to ease land purchases for Israeli settlers. This is alleged to allow the re-establishment of settlements in West Bank and has added to tensions with Palestinians. Shooting orders have been imposed against unarmed Palestinians in the West Bank. The PA also redacted a law that paid families of Palestinians killed and imprisoned by Israel. These recent policy and law changes were condemned by Hamas and other state and non-state actors.

Prior to the IDF operation, the PA undertook its own security and counter-terrorism operation against militant activity. This operation, the largest and most intense undertaken by the PA, was aimed at gaining control of the security environment in areas it governs. While the PA initially denounced the IDF's operation, it has not attempted to stop the operation over the past weeks.

Implications

IDF operations are like to spread to other areas of the West Bank and continue to intensify in northern governorates over the coming months. Aerial strikes are likely to increase alongside ground clashes between IDF and militants. Further checkpoints and roadblocks are expected to occur during operations.

Additional operations by Israeli forces are likely to garner calls for demonstrations and labour strikes throughout the West Bank. Protests are likely to be called by Hamas or other militant groups. Labour strikes are likely to be accompanied by closure of stores and services.

While the operation is aimed at reducing security threats, militant groups have continued to engage in attacks against Israel. On the 20 February, an attempted coordinated terrorist attack was reported in Tel Aviv district (Israel). Israeli authorities responded to the attack by

deploying further battalions to the West Bank and announcing operations would be strengthened. Militant attacks at checkpoints, settlements, IDF installations, public spaces and transport hubs are expected to continue in Israel and West Bank amid intensified operations.

The ceasefires are large determinants of the ability for the IDF to continue the intensification of operations. If either of the ceasefires break down and wider conflict resumes, the IDF will likely reduce resourcing for extensive operations in the West Bank. If the ceasefires continue and conflict remains reduced, operations are likely to continue to intensify.

There are also likely to be further laws imposed by the Knesset to assist with IDF exhibiting increased control, including through security apparatus, restrictions and force, in the West Bank. This will reduce PA control of the security environment. These moves will likely be validated through further support from the US under President Donald Trump's administration.

Recommendations

Defer all travel to Jenin, Tubas and Tulkarm governorates amid the Israeli military operation.

Normal travel can proceed to Bethlehem, Jericho and Ramallah governorates. Essential travel can proceed to the rest of West Bank. Journeys to Nablus should be limited to daylight hours only. Avoid overnight stays where possible and always carry ID.

How we can help

- **Presence in-region:** International SOS has one security and logistical partner in the West Bank, which can operate across governorates.
- **Services offered:** Security Security partner capabilities include meet-and-greet services, ground and secure transport services, close protection, mobile patrol services, procurement of essential food supplies and distribution.
- **Activation time:** Between two and 48 hours to activate, depending on location and availability of resources at the time of request. Capabilities are subject to change based on the security and operational environment at the time of request.
- **Secure accommodation:** International SOS maintains a network of vetted secure accommodation in Ramallah (West Bank).

MONTHLY SECURITY FORECAST

Middle East and North Africa



Monitor developments regarding ceasefire developments, new policies in the West Bank and announcements about any change of posture for IDF operations.

Stay up to date with information on protests and strikes, as well as areas affected by security operations, throughout the West Bank. Avoid all affected areas. Expect a heightened security presence in affected areas.

Remain alert to your surroundings as clashes between various groups, including Israeli security forces and militants, protesters and Israeli settlers can break out with little warning. Checkpoints, settlements and refugee camps will remain flashpoints throughout the whole of the West Bank.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Increased protests throughout the West Bank	Increased protests are likely to be met with strengthening of security responses, while also causing unrest and transport disruption.
The spread of operations to other parts of the West Bank	Any spread of consistent operations and clashes to other governorates not yet impacted by the operation in northern areas may cause increased violence, unrest and further transport disruption across the West Bank.
Ground operations in Ramallah	An announcement of prolonged ground operations occurring in or close to the administrative capital Ramallah will likely result in increased clashes and further transport disruption. Expect both militant responses and strong rhetoric from militant groups as well as state and non-state actors.
An increase of aerial strikes	While targeted drone strikes have increased in northern governorates over the past months, any prolonged bombardment of aerial strikes would signal a change in the security posture. Increased aerial bombardments would cause significant casualties, displacement and resource shortages. The emergency services would have with reduced capabilities to assist.

TURKEY-SYRIA

- The recent rapprochement between Turkey and Syria is likely to continue in the coming months.
- Turkey will temper military operations against Kurdish militants in northern Syria during the ongoing Syrian state-building process.
- A large-scale Turkish military operation in north-east Syria is possible if internal political talks in Syria break down.

Situation

Since the December 2024 fall of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime (2000-24), Turkey has sought to increase its influence on Syria. In early-February, Assad's successor Ahmed Al-Sharaa travelled to Turkey's capital Ankara to meet his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They reportedly initiated talks for an eventual defence pact, under which Turkey would establish military bases in Syria and train the country's new military. In the meantime, Turkey and Syria have announced a strategic partnership, which represents a major shift in the region. Turkey cut all ties with Assad's government when the Syrian Civil War began in 2011 and has actively supported Syrian opposition groups. These include the Syrian National Army (SNA) and, to a

lesser extent, Al-Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

For the past decade, Turkey has been involved in Syria through the SNA, which controls large parts of the Syrian-Turkish border area in the north-west. In addition, Turkey has been leading military operations against Kurdish militias in north-eastern Syria, which is controlled by the US-backed Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). These generally target the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has waged an insurgency against Turkey since the early 1980s.

Following the rebel takeover of the capital Damascus in December 2024, significant Turkish military operations against Kurdish groups in northern Syria were widely expected. The SNA, supported by Turkey, moved east to capture SDF-held territory. However, hostilities subsided in late December. Although minor clashes between the SDF and the SNA still occur, no military movement has been reported in recent weeks. Turkey has also refrained from leading any major military operations, though it continues to carry out periodic airstrikes, also in SDF-held territory.

Turkey appears to be deferring military operations as the new Syrian administration focuses on internal issues, including the integration of independent armed factions into a unified army. However, the administration faces significant challenges with the SDF, which has only agreed to join the military as a distinct bloc with its own command structure. The recent change in administration in the US, the SDF's main backer, has exacerbated the uncertainty. US president Donald Trump attempted to withdraw all US troops from Syria during his first term (2017-21). Nevertheless, talks between the Syrian government and the SDF are ongoing.

Implications

In the coming months, Turkey will continue to strengthen ties with Syria and attempt to maintain its influence on HTS and the new Syrian administration. This will be welcomed by Al-Sharaa, whose administration has made a point of rejecting any support from Iran, the Assad regime's main ally. Although this is likely to be challenged

by other regional actors, Turkey is in a good position to become Syria's main ally in the region. As such, it will have a significant influence on the country's rebuilding process.

However, a defence pact between Syria and Turkey is unlikely to be agreed in the coming weeks.

Instead, the new Syrian administration will continue to focus on attempts to reconstruct administrative and military structures. A main component of this will be negotiations over the status of the SDF's territory and armed forces. In the interim, Turkey will continue to minimise its operations against Kurdish groups in Syria to avoid interfering in the process.

Nevertheless, Turkey will not abandon its fight against Kurdish armed groups, as it considers them a national security threat. Erdogan is likely to make this initiative a key component of any eventual defence pact with Syria. Should talks between Al-Sharaa's administration and the SDF decisively collapse, Turkey is likely to resume large-scale military operations in north-east Syria.

Within Syria, the status of the SDF and the territory it administers will remain a central issue in the new state-building process. The SDF is unlikely to make compromises on its armed forces and the autonomous status of the region it administrates. However, if the US withdraws its troops from Syria, the SDF will be in a much weaker negotiating position.

We expect the security situation in northern Syria to remain volatile in the coming months. Minor clashes are likely to persist in eastern Aleppo governorate and Raqqa and Hassakah governorates, where the SDF and forces formerly associated with the SNA face each other. Larger-scale fighting, including Turkish military operations, could spread further in the north-east if talks with the SDF fail.

Recommendations

We continue to advise against all travel to Syria as the security environment will remain volatile during the political transition.

Organisations that, due to the nature of their work, deem travel to Syria to be business-critical should conduct comprehensive planning prior to departure. This should include conducting an itinerary, location and profile-specific security risk assessment and reconfirming eligibility to enter the country. Managers should ensure that workforce has access to trusted local contacts or a security provider able to provide locally sourced, up-to-date information and assist with transport, accommodation, any permits and other necessities while in the country. Organisations should prepare a detailed journey management plan in co-ordination with local contacts or a security provider. This should account for the potential to be stranded in the country for a prolonged period.

Managers should ensure that contingency and evacuation planning is in place, accounting for the fluidity of the situation on the ground, as well as a lack of support in the event of an emergency. This include ensuring travellers' ability to stand fast if the situation deteriorates and that they have all necessary documentation, including any necessary visas, to depart the country.

How we can help

- **Presence in-region:** International SOS has a fully staffed 24/7 Assistance Centre in Dubai (UAE).

In-country workforce in areas under the control of the new administration, including Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Homs and Idlib governorates, should minimise non-essential movement due to the fluidity of the situation. Essential movement is possible, contingent on a location-specific assessment of the security situation and the support of a trusted local contacts or a security provider. All movement should account for local curfews, procedures for passing through checkpoints and allow extra time for completion of journeys.

Main indicators of deterioration	Assessment
Turkey and Syria enter into a defence pact before any internal agreement is struck with the SDF	The presence of Turkish troops beyond the border areas would fuel tensions between the SDF and the administration, adding hurdles to any internal agreement.
The SNA or the SDF launches an offensive to capture territory in north-east Syria	The resumption of large-scale hostilities would slow down any talks between the SDF and the new administration but would not spread beyond the north-east.
Talks between the SDF and the new administration break down permanently	In such a scenario, Turkey would be likely to launch a large-scale military operation in SDF-held territory. It would also have a long-term effect on stability, as the territory and administration would remain fragmented, with a volatile security environment.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: ON WATCH

Lebanon: The security environment in South and Nabatieh governorate, near the Israeli border, will remain volatile. Despite a ceasefire agreement, Israel remains present in five locations along the border. Periodic clashes between Israeli forces and local residents and/or Hizbullah supporters are likely. Periodic Israeli airstrikes against targets linked to Hizbullah and associated groups will also continue.

Regional: Discussions to solidify the second phase of the Hamas-Israel three-phase ceasefire in the Gaza Strip (Palestinian Territories) are underway. While there have been disagreements during the first phase, predominantly over hostage and prisoner exchanges, conditions have continued to be met.

Sudan: Since January, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) have steadily gained territory held by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the capital Khartoum. If this continues, the RSF will likely retreat west towards Darfur region. Intensified fighting will continue in EXTREME-risk areas but is unlikely to spread to the SAF-controlled Gedaref, Kassala, Northern, Red Sea and River Nile states.

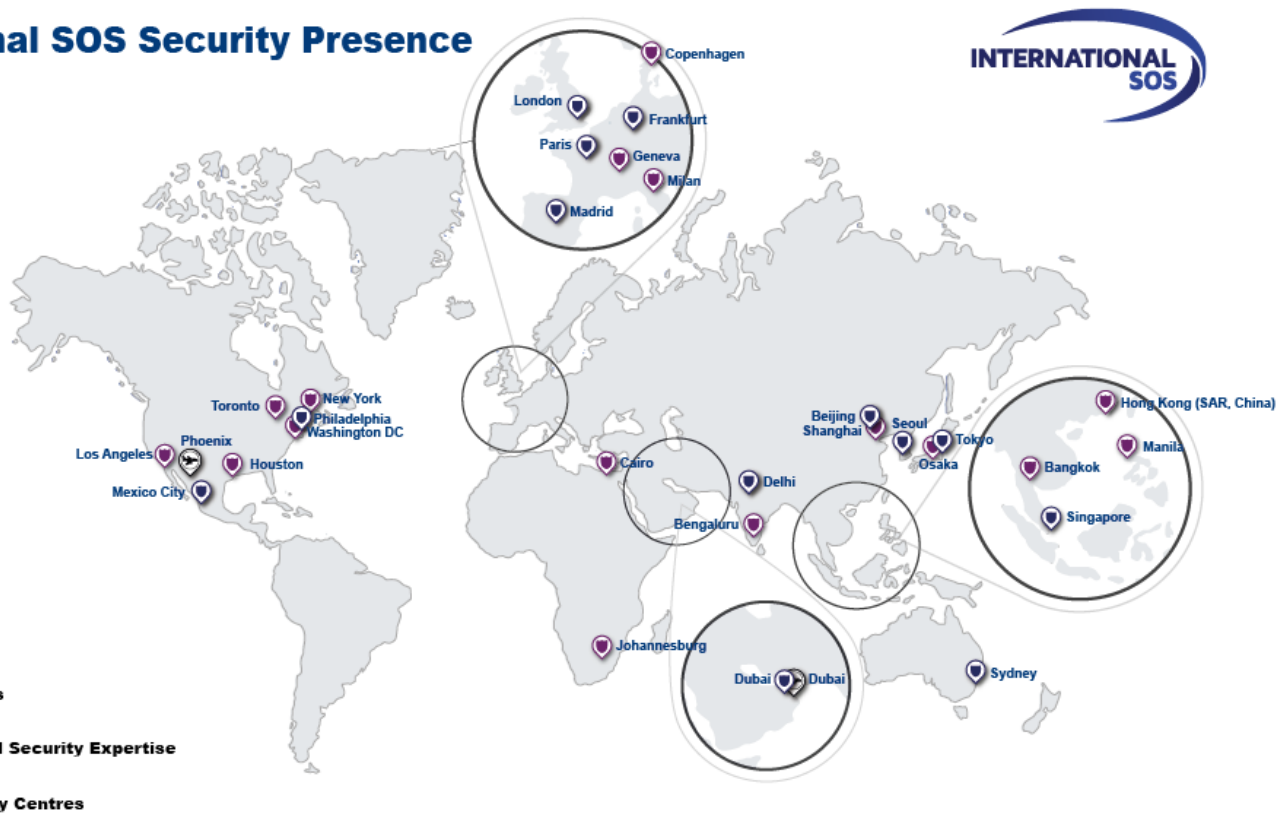




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