

[Transcript] Global News Podcast / Thailand's ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra has jail term slashed

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This is the Global News podcast from the BBC World Service.

I'm Rachel Wright and at 13 hours GMT on Friday the first of September these are our main stories.

Taxing Shinawatt, Thailand's former Prime Minister jailed for corruption has had his sentence massively reduced. Hong Kong batons down the hatches as typhoon Saula approaches.

I'm very worried because this typhoon is a super typhoon. We can see that the eye of the typhoon will pass very close to Hong Kong.

And how the human race nearly got wiped out 900,000 years ago.

Also in this podcast.

Prisons in Ecuador have become the scene of murder, kidnapping and car bombs. So what's going on?

He only just returned from exile days ago. Now Thailand's former Prime Minister, Taxin Shinawatt, has had his eight year jail term slashed to one year.

The country's most famous politician spent 15 years in self-imposed exile before returning home to face jail. He'd been convicted of abuse of power and corruption.

Mr. Taxin appealed for a royal pardon only yesterday.

So has a deal been struck? A question for our South East Asia correspondent, Jonathan Head, who's in Thailand.

I think it probably does although no one's going to admit that. You know he wouldn't have come back if he hadn't negotiated a deal beforehand. He might well have hoped possibly for a complete pardon. This arrangement I think is a very appropriate compromise. There are many people still very critical of Mr. Taxin who feel that he genuinely did abuse his power.

He said in the past that these convictions were politically motivated.

Of course he was ousted by coup and the convictions were imposed in his absence.

But many people feel he did do a lot wrong. And so I think the king has probably chosen

a sort of middle round here. There has to be a deal, not just to get Mr. Taxin back,

but the real the point of this deal is to get his party, which is still a very big one, and in the past used to win elections all the time, in a reconciliation with its conservative opponents.

This conflict has dominated Thailand for 20 years. And I think it's in both Mr. Taxin's interests

and the interests of conservatives that they bury the hatchet. And that that was what we

understood the deal to be about. And always leniency for Mr. Taxin was an inevitable part of that.

But he is, I understand, in the prison hospital. He's not very well. He's quite old.

Is he likely to be able to re-enter the political stage?

Well, nobody knows just how unwell he is. He's clearly got some issues. He's 74. I don't think

he certainly didn't look very well when he first arrived back. He's in a police hospital. They say

it's a police hospital. It's actually a state hospital on the 14th floor. The premium wing.

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I don't think he's in any discomfort. I'm sure all of this was part and parcel of the arrangements that were made with him. And although he has a year still to serve, with parole, he could in theory be eligible for release after four months. So he doesn't have long to wait. And I, you know, he is still the most influential person in his party. His problem is going to be that in order to execute this deal, his party has gotten to bed with its former enemies, with people it swore never to cooperate within government, people who, you know, there are a lot of grievances against them. It's a very messy coalition government, lots of parties, lots of interests, very high expectations from the public that they will perform and do miracles with the economy. After the front leading party, the party that actually did get the most seats in the election, which was a reformist party, was barred from office. So there's a big hill to climb for Mr Tax and his party to recover both legitimacy and to be able to perform in not very favorable political conditions. Jonathan Head. Typhoon Saola has been slamming into Hong Kong with weather forecasters predicting that this could be the biggest storm in the region since 1949. Schools, businesses and financial markets have been closed, hundreds of flights cancelled, as people shelter inside away from the storm. This local woman explained her concern. I'm very worried because the news and the Hong Kong Observatory have both reported that this typhoon is a super typhoon. Moreover, after seeing the typhoon's path map online, we can see that the eye of the typhoon will pass very close to Hong Kong. So I'm a bit concerned and hope it won't cause too many casualties. Our reporter Martin Yip is in Hong Kong. Well, right outside of my window at this very moment, I'm seeing palm trees being blown pretty hard. I'm not sure if they will be able to hold on for any time longer, but they're still standing, but you can see the gusts blowing through with increasingly heavy rain is now coming close to the stage that you can say is throwing cats and dogs in the sky. It's really strong out there. And what I just read from the Hong Kong Observatory, that's the meteorological agency in Hong Kong, they are saying that gusts up to 154 kilometers per hour after that speed has already been recorded. So this is definitely something. And it's obviously a big storm. As you say, what kind of damage are the authorities expecting and what kind of preparations have they made? Well, fallen trees would be the one of the biggest concern, because last time in 2018, when Typhoon Macroots hit Hong Kong, that one brought Hong Kong with no fatalities, that that's the upside. But then loads of trees, tens of thousands of them were fallen, some blocks major through vests and even railways and ended up Hong Kong with quite a travel chaos in the coming hours, if not days. So the government has been saying that they have allocated extra manpower and location to clear up and store any fallen trees to make sure once Typhoon is gone, the city could get back to normality as soon as possible. And very briefly, how frequent are these storms? Storms in Hong Kong is not red, Typhoon hits Hong Kong virtually every year, but not for something getting this strong. And now we are having the signal number nine at the moment, that's the second highest, if that goes up to number 10, that would put it at par with American Hurricane. And signal number 10 has only been issued for 16 times since World War 2, so you can tell how rare it is for Hong Kong. Martin Yip. And since we spoke to Martin, the authorities have indeed upgraded the

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storm to signal 10. Around 900,000 years ago, the human race hit a bottleneck, and our ancestors nearly became extinct. The population dropped to about 1,300 people. These days, that would be just about the size of a village. So what threatened our existence, and how did we overcome it? The newsroom's Lipika Pelham has been finding out more. From prehistory to our time, from folklore to doomsday clock, the earth has hit kilometers events which threaten the human race. But scientists have now identified a period of maximum danger when our very existence flickered on the brink of extinction. Researchers in China have determined that the worldwide human breeding population fell to only about 1,300 people, and it stayed at this perilously low level for 100,000 years.

The scientists have developed a unique method which can analyze modern genetic data to estimate past population size. They analyzed the DNA of 3,154 modern humans from both African and non-African populations and found that nearly 99 percent of our ancestral population was lost at the start of this bottleneck. The decline may have coincided with climate change leading to long periods of glaciation, a drop in sea surface temperature, long periods of drought, and the loss of other species which may have been a food source. The collected data suggests that the bottleneck may have led to increased inbreeding and loss in human genetic diversity. The scientists said their findings have developed a new field in human evolution, posing questions about just where these 1,300 individuals lived, how they overcame catastrophic environmental changes and whether natural selection during the bottleneck led to the evolution of the human brain as it is today.

A video posted by a Moroccan fisherman on social media of the body of a holiday maker floating in the Mediterranean has triggered an intense reaction among many Moroccans. The victim has been identified as one of two French Moroccan dual nationals who were shot dead by Algerian coast guards after they lost their way after setting off on their jet skis from the Moroccan resort of Saidia. I got some more about this from our Africa regional editor Richard Hamilton. One of the survivors, Mohammed, said he and his brother and two friends went jet skiing off the coast. They got lost, they ran out of fuel and they strayed into Algerian territory. He said they were approached by a black rubber dinghy with Algerian coast guards on board who shot two of them dead. Mohammed said he swam back towards Saidia. He got picked up by a Moroccan Navy patrol boat, but he said that one of the four people is currently in jail in Algeria. If you look at the map, Saidia is right on the edge of the border, but there wouldn't be like a border post in the water. So it'd be quite easy to get lost or to stray across. And jet skiing is actually very popular amongst Moroccan, certainly richer people. And the king, Mohammed VI, is a great jet skier and has even been nicknamed Samajetski. What has the reaction been like in Morocco to this? Well, as you might imagine, there's been a lot of outrage on social media. So one Moroccan man on Twitter or ex has said, the Algerian military regime is killing our children in cold blood. The victims were quite young men. They weren't children. Another one says this shows the amount of hatred from Algeria towards Moroccan people. And the cousin of one of the victims, an actor called Abdullah Karim Kisi, called on the authorities to bring the case to the international courts. And then some Algerians have been retaliating, suggesting that it might have been some drug trafficking incident. But there's no evidence so far of that. It sounds to me from those reactions that there is tension, great tension

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between the two countries. Yeah, it's not an understatement to say they absolutely hate each other. And it goes back to independence. There was what was called the Sand War in 1963, a border war between the two countries. Algeria closed the border in 1994. It's never been reopened. It's mainly to do with the disputed territory of Western Sahara. And any slight incident can flare up and become a major diplomatic incident.

India's Supreme Court is currently hearing an important case about the legality of the withdrawal of Indian administered Kashmir's special status in 2019. Since the change which gave the Indian national government political control of Kashmir, journalists say the administration has been carrying out a systematic and sinister campaign of arrests and intimidation aimed at silencing the press in the region. The BBC has spoken to more than two dozen journalists for this investigation. The Indian government says there is absolute press freedom in Kashmir.

Our South Asia correspondent, Yogita Lamai reports from Srinagar.

At least eight journalists in Indian administered Kashmir have been jailed in the past few years, and we're seeing the frequency of this kind of action against the press increasing in the last 18 months. Some have got bail, four are still in jail. I'm in Srinagar, the capital of the region, and I've come to the home of one of those journalists who's still in custody, Asif Sultan. He was jailed in 2018. Last year he was granted bail, but before he was released from custody, a second set of charges under draconian terror laws was brought against him by

the police, and he wasn't set free. Asif is charged under a terrorism law, accused of aiding militancy. But his father, Mohammad Sultan, says he's been targeted for his work. Arrested soon after he wrote an article analyzing why the killing of one armed insurgent by Indian security forces in 2016 had triggered unrest for years. Everyone knows he's innocent. He's a professional reporter and was jailed for his writing about the militancy. They wanted to make an example out of him. There are more such cases. Last year journalist Sajat Gul was jailed, accused of criminal conspiracy. A month after him, well-known magazine editor Fahad Shah was arrested on terrorism charges. We've spoken to more than two dozen journalists who've told us they see the arrests as a warning. They told us about the intimidation they faced. We're hiding their identities to protect them. I started getting calls from the police over a story I had written. They kept asking why I had done it. Then I was questioned in person. They told me they know everything about me and my family, which felt very scary. Has that in any way at the moment impacted

the journalism that you're doing or the reporting that you're doing? Instead of thinking about whether I have enough facts in a report, I worry more about whether it will land me in trouble. There is an attempt to silence the press in Kashmir once and for all. Each one of the journalists that we spoke to told us they've been summoned at least once. Many of them multiple times by the police over stories or social media posts seen as being critical of the state. Dozens of journalists have had their passport renewal applications stopped. Others are on no-fly lists prevented from leaving the country and the impact is actually evident when you look at the day's newspapers. What I've also got on my phone is the press release which came from the administration yesterday that is one of the stories on the front pages of pretty much every newspaper that I'm looking at. Yeah, the rest of the front page is also covered with statements from either the national government or other arms of the administration. I've looked through them. There are some soft stories but

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there's barely any journalism in there holding the government to account. We've been speaking to magazine and newspaper editors who've told us that they often get directives from the government on what story to run, what not to run and sometimes even where it should be placed in the paper. The police and the state administration didn't agree to be interviewed for our report. We send them specific questions asking about the allegations made by the journalists we spoke to. They've not responded. In press statements, the administrative head of the region has insisted there's absolute press freedom in Kashmir and journalists who are jailed have not been arrested for their writing.

Still to come in this podcast. We're using pressurized air to apply forces to the body from within the fabric materials from which we're composing these wearables and garments and so it feels like a gentle push on the body. How hidden technology could change our relationship with clothes.

The road to success seems quick. My first try to go to the Olympic Games was in 1980. Everybody's been seeing me run for years growing up. Get to know the people behind the medals as Olympians and Paralympians share their stories. My story can help so many other victims and survivors. On the podium from the BBC World Service. The journey in the ups and downs. Listen now by searching for On the Podium wherever you get your BBC podcasts.

In Russia, anyone who publicly criticizes the so-called special military operation in Ukraine faces severe punishment, unless that is they are so-called Z-bloggers, commentators with big online followings who report from the front line. These nationalists are seemingly able to condemn the Russian military over its tactics and escape punishment. In fact, some are making lots of money from advertising between four hundred and one thousand nine hundred dollars per post. My colleague Oliver Conway heard more from Grigor Atonizian of the BBC's disinformation unit. The Z-bloggers post constant updates from the front lines in Ukraine and they try to make the war popular among younger audiences in Russia and to make men go and enlist in the army. But at the same time, they also profit from the war because they now have hundreds of thousands of subscribers on Telegram. The main social media platform in Russia after the ban of Western platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. And they use those audiences to sell ads for anything from you know cryptocurrency to fashion. A lot of them do post at least one at per day. This is a part of our original investigation. We post as hotel owners and try to place ads in their channels and we found out that the top bloggers make fantastic money, especially for Russia. And they are on the front line filming and commenting on what's happening.

That's right. They're bold, brash and funny and they try to make the war binge warfare relatable to the younger audiences. Very different from the traditional TV propaganda that Putin has relied on throughout his reign. And I think what we are seeing now throughout this invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin knows that there are these people who are very, very popular online and they try to catch up on that. And I think a big sign of that was in June when Putin invited a lot of those bloggers into the Kremlin and he had like a huge two-hour long conversation with them on the record. And they were allowed to ask him very inconvenient questions about Russian setbacks and failures. But he asked them for a favor. He said literally, and I am quoting, the fight in the information space is a crucial battlefield and I really count on your help. Yeah, I mean, it's interesting because they are quite critical and very influential. They even led to some changes within the military structure because of their demands.

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But at the same time, there seems to be something of a crackdown on them, at least from the authorities at the moment. No, you're absolutely right.

They do tell a lot of those inconvenient truths about the Russian military in Ukraine. That's why we and other Western media, independent experts, follow them quite often, cite them and quote in our pieces. But they also do sometimes overstep, specifically when they criticize Putin directly. We've seen Igor Girkin known as Strelkov as well, a former field commander of the pro-Russian forces

in occupied Ukraine. He dared to criticize Putin directly. And then on the same day, the FSB launched a criminal investigation and he was arrested soon.

So they have to try to find line. Are there also Ukrainian military bloggers?

There are military bloggers in Ukraine. They also go to the front lines. They're also very brave, reporting from those front lines. But it's a completely different ecosystem in Ukraine because they're just a part of a thriving democracy, even if they have wartime limitations on speech.

In Russia, you know, thousands and thousands of people have been prosecuted for online post-criticizing the war. You know, we know that families have been separated.

Kids were orphaned because their parents there to say no to war. And then these people, with the millions of followers, they say, you know, generals are corrupt and incompetent and they get away with that. But there will be a point, I think, at which the Kremlin would look at pros and cons of having these voices.

Ecuador has long been known as one of the most peaceful countries in Latin America, but a soaring murder rate driven by drug trafficking gangs has turned it into one of the most dangerous.

The war against the drug gangs has been centering on the prisons, where more than 400 inmates have been killed, many burned alive or beheaded since February 2021.

In the latest violence, more than 55 prison guards and police officers have been taken hostage at several facilities across the country. In the capital, Quito, car bombs went off outside the prison headquarters.

Ecuador made headlines across the world back in August when a leading candidate in the presidential election was murdered at a campaign rally.

I spoke to Matias Zibel from BBC Mundo.

The situation is still ongoing. The tension is there. It's another proof that the Ecuadorian government has not the control of the prisons in the last two years. We have to remember that we are now in the middle of a state of emergency and these kind of terrible acts are going on, are still happening in the country. And do we know who is behind the hostage taking?

We know that this started as a protest from the prisons. The leaders of the gangs were against the transfer of prisoners from one prison to another prison and they were against these operatives of confiscation of guns inside the prisons. They know that the target is the penitentiary service. We have two explosions in the capital city against the headquarters of the penitentiary service. So it's clear that this is a battle between the gangs inside the prisons and the penitentiary service. So how much control do the authorities have over these prisons?

We have been watching these kinds of incidents for the last two years, sometimes with more than

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a hundred prisoners killed in these kinds of mutinies. We have one state of emergency behind another state of emergency and nothing seems to work and nothing seems to show that the government

has the control of the prisons. Ecuador used to be one of the most peaceful countries in Latin America. What's happened? We have to remember that Ecuador is placed in the middle of Colombia

and Peru, the most important cocaine producers in the world. In the past, the drugs just go through Ecuador gradually and slowly. They started to produce drugs inside Ecuador.

We have to remember that a lot of factors like, for example, the peace process in Colombia between the government and the FARC changed the logic in the area completely. We have now more minimal groups, but more violent. And then we have the gangs from Mexico coming to Ecuador to accelerate all this process. So a lot of factors are behind this violence.

Matthias Sebel. Imagine being able to find your way around with the help of hidden technology in your clothes. Well, scientists in America have designed wearable textile belts and sleeves that can help you navigate using a series of pressure-based signals to direct you.

This could be particularly useful for those with visual impairment. So how does it work?

Dan Preston is an assistant professor of mechanical engineering at Rice University in the U.S. where this was developed. We've incorporated haptic cues, things that take advantage of your sense of touch to convey information. We're using pressurized air to apply forces to the body from within the fabric materials from which we're composing these wearables and garments. And so it feels like a gentle push on the body. We've incorporated it in wristbands and sleeves and shirts. The actual region that applies force is a little bit bigger than a centimeter by a centimeter. But when we incorporate many of them, they can cover the entire shirt or sleeve that we're using in this work. And the crucial question for fashionistas, what do the clothes actually look like? We'd like to think that right now they look very high-tech but also very sleek. They're super low-profile, so it looks a lot like any other piece of clothing you might pull out of the closet. And one of the really big advantages here is actually the customizability. So we can make all kinds of different shapes and sizes for these textile-based or fabric-based wearable haptic devices. Ongoing work is looking at how to tailor these for each application or each individual. Dan Preston. A major music label has signed a digital pop star whose voice has been made with the help of artificial intelligence.

Warner Music now have Nor Nori on the books, who's releasing her first song with German DJ Ale Farben. So what does this type of artist mean for the music industry?

Shiona McCullen's been to Berlin to find out.

This is the sound of Nor Nori. She's a virtual character, an Instagram influencer and has worked with big fashion brands. And I've come to Berlin to meet her creator, Jörg Zuber.

I created her in my mind first. I did a little sketch of her.

And now his creation, this avatar living in the digital world, has a record deal with a major label. Oh my god, this is amazing. It was accelerating my pulse when I got the email from Warner Music Central Europe. They were like asking me, are you interested in music? And I said, well, what a question. Her appearance has been created using 2D graphics and motion capture. Her voice has been created with the help of artificial intelligence.

We didn't want to create like a human voice. We wanted to have it a bit like technology,

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like a bit tech voicey. So the base and the original voice of her is my voice.

And to make the sound they wanted, they got a singer involved too.

And there comes the moment where we used AI technology. Because the music from the singer, so the voice from the singer, we needed to know when he was singing high, when he was singing low, when he was singing slower, when he would get more speed, when he got more pressure.

Although Noonuri's voice has only been helped by artificial intelligence and the AI plays a small role in this case, it's the rise of generative AI that has worried artists whose voices, lyrics and sounds have been used often without their consent.

I'm Jamie and Jocu Goodwin. I'm chief executive of the UK music, which is the collective voice of the UK music industry. It's about understanding about transparency. It's about knowing what content

and what data AI has been trained on. It's about ensuring that there's adequate labelling. So we know whether or not a piece of music is AI generated. But also there's questions about things like personality rights. So at the moment in the UK, personality rights aren't really properly protected. You can essentially generate an AI version of someone, of a pop star, of a singer, and they wouldn't have any rights about how that is used.

So that's the industry body's concern, but there are some positives too.

We saw just a few weeks ago Paul McCartney talking about how they used AI to isolate one of the stems

of a John Lennon's voice from one of the Beatles songs. Again, that's all being done with proper permissions. It's been done in quite an exciting way. So there are sorts of huge opportunities.

Berlin is known for its clubbing scenes. So it makes sense for me to ask some people outside the nightclub here what they think about AI and music. I don't think fully AI music is ever going to fully replace creativity. For creatives, I think, although it's really interesting,

innovation and really exciting. On the other hand, I think a lot of artists feel almost frightened or threatened by the idea of clearly the use of AI is becoming more mainstream.

But now that it's officially entering the charts, will it ever get to number one?

Noonuri ending that report from Shiona McCullum.

And that's all from us for now. But before we go, here's Jackie with news of the next edition of The Happy Pod. Yes, in this edition, the pioneering stem cell treatment for serious eye injury and the extraordinary difference it's already made to one of the patients on the trial, the man who saved a toddler as she fell from an apartment block in Italy,

making life cheaper and greener for people working in a subsistence fishing in Southeast Asia.

Also, an 11-year-old boy reviews Braille Lego for us and a chance to hear our politics correspondent Rob Watson like you have never heard him before. It's a treat.

All in the Happy Pod, available from Saturday, the 2nd of September.

And if you want to comment on this podcast or the topics covered in it, you can send us an email.

The address is globalpodcast@bbc.co.uk. You can also find us on X, formerly known as Twitter, at Global News Pod. This edition was mixed by Alana Bowles. The producer was David Lewis.

The editor is Karen Marketing. I'm Rachel Wright. Until next time, goodbye.