

2. Global developments in armed conflict, peace processes and peace operations

Overview

This chapter describes general developments in 2020 in armed conflicts and peace processes (for detailed regional coverage see chapters 3–7) and global and regional trends and developments in multilateral peace operations.

Section I explores definitions and some of the main features and consequences of the active armed conflicts that occurred in at least 39 states in 2020 (5 more than in 2019): 2 in the Americas, 7 in Asia and Oceania, 3 in Europe, 7 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and 20 in sub-Saharan Africa. As in preceding years most took place within a single country (intrastate), between government forces and one or more armed non-state group(s). Two were major armed conflicts (with more than 10 000 conflict-related deaths in the year)—in Afghanistan and Yemen—and 16 were high-intensity armed conflicts (with 1000–9999 conflict-related deaths)—in Mexico (8400), Syria (8000), Nigeria (7800), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (5800), Ethiopia (3600), Somalia (3100), Mali (2800), Iraq (2700), South Sudan (2400), Burkina Faso (2300), Mozambique (1800), Cameroon (1600), Libya (1500), the Philippines (1400), India (1300) and Niger (1100). Only two armed conflicts were fought between states: the ongoing border clashes between India and Pakistan, and the border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (the latter was also a high-intensity armed conflict with an estimated 6700 conflict-related fatalities). Two other armed conflicts were fought between state forces and armed groups that aspired to statehood (between Israel and the Palestinians and between Turkey and the Kurds). Both major armed conflicts and most of the high-intensity armed conflicts were internationalized.

For at least the second consecutive year the total estimated number of conflict-related fatalities decreased; to about 120 000 in 2020, a 30 per cent reduction since 2018. The decrease in 2020 was driven by further reductions in Asia and Oceania and MENA; estimated conflict-related fatalities were halved in Afghanistan. Two regions bucked this trend: Europe, because of the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and sub-Saharan Africa, where 18 of the 20 armed conflicts had higher estimated conflict-related fatalities in 2020 than in 2019—and the net increase was about 41 per cent. The region also overtook MENA in 2020 as having the most conflict-related fatalities.

While conflict-related fatalities have declined in recent years, other impacts of armed conflict (sometimes in combination with other factors) appear to have increased, including population displacement, food insecurity, humanitarian

needs and violations of international humanitarian law. While many peace processes either stalled or suffered serious setbacks during 2020, important advances were made in the peace talks in Afghanistan, and ceasefires in Libya and Syria suggested both of those conflicts might be open to some form of resolution soon. A Russian-brokered ceasefire ended the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, the peace process in Sudan was the only one to make substantive progress in 2020.

The impact of Covid-19 on armed conflicts in 2020 was mixed: there were some temporary declines in armed violence, but mostly armed conflict levels persisted or sometimes increased. The United Nations secretary-general's call in March 2020 for a global ceasefire had a minimal impact on these conflicts.

Section II describes the trends in multilateral peace operations. With 62 active operations in 2020, there was an increase of 1 compared to the previous year. Three ended in 2020—the Economic Community of West African States Mission in Guinea-Bissau, the African Union (AU)–UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau—and three started—the AU Military Observers Mission to the Central African Republic (CAR), the European Union (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy Advisory Mission in the CAR and the AU Mission in Libya.

Despite this slight increase in the number of multilateral peace operations, the number of personnel deployed in them decreased by 7.7 per cent during 2020 to 127 124 on 31 December 2020—mainly driven by reductions in a number of large multilateral peace operations, especially the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. The UN remained the leading organization in the field, responsible for about one third of all multilateral peace operations and two thirds of all personnel. Multilateral peace operations in sub-Saharan Africa continued to account for most personnel deployed in multilateral peace operations globally.

Despite further force reductions, the AU Mission in Somalia remained the largest multilateral peace operation in 2020. Ethiopia remained the top troop contributor, followed by Uganda and Bangladesh. In 2020 the annual fatality rate for hostile deaths of uniformed personnel in UN peace operations was the lowest in the 2011–20 period. However, the fatality rate for deaths due to all causes was higher than in previous years, as the number of deaths due to illness, including Covid-19, increased significantly. The trend of increasing multilateral operations activity in the grey areas outside the scope of the SIPRI definition of a multilateral peace operation also continued in 2020, with three new deployments: a Russian ‘peacekeeping contingent’ in Nagorno-Karabakh; the EU Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini to implement the UN arms embargo on Libya; and the European multinational Task Force Takuba under the command of the French-led Operation Barkhane in the Sahel. The table in section III provides further details on the different multilateral peace operations and the organizations deploying them.