

IV. Armed conflict and peace processes in South East Asia

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This section focuses on the armed conflict in Myanmar, which was transformed from a low-intensity armed conflict (less than 1000 conflict-related fatalities) in 2020 to a major armed conflict (more than 10 000 conflict-related fatalities) in 2021. It also reviews the low-intensity subnational armed conflicts in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. In the Philippines, when fatalities from the ‘war on drugs’ are added to those from the subnational armed conflict, the number of conflict-related deaths rises to over 1100. Some of Asia’s most organized Islamist extremist groups are active in South East Asia, most notably in Indonesia and the Philippines.¹

Armed conflict in Myanmar

Insurgencies have persisted for much of the past seven decades in Myanmar’s Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan states. Various armed insurgent groups have fought the country’s armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, over political control of territory, ethnic minority rights, and access to and control over natural resources. These long-running armed conflicts are now structured along complex ethnic and/or religious lines, and include about 20 ethnic armed groups and hundreds of armed militias mainly located in the country’s border regions.² A military coup at the beginning of February 2021 ended the recent short period of partial civilian rule—the Myanmar military has ruled the country for most of the past 60 years—and led to escalating protests and violence throughout the country. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), conflict-related deaths in Myanmar increased to over 11 000 in 2021, taking it into the category of a major armed conflict (see table 4.5).³

The military coup, civil disobedience and armed resistance

Having achieved a landslide victory in the November 2020 general election, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) was set to return to power for another five-year term. However, voting was cancelled in several areas dominated by ethnic minorities (most of Rakhine State and

¹ United Nations, Security Council, ‘Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities’, S/2021/655, 21 July 2021, pp. 16–17.

² International Crisis Group, *Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, Asia Report no. 312 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 28 Aug. 2020).

³ On the methodological challenges for the recording of political violence amidst the complexity of the disorder in Myanmar see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED methodology and coding decisions around political violence in Myanmar’, Nov. 2019.

Table 4.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Myanmar, 2016–21

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	277	297	150	1 248	381	6 203
Explosions/remotely violence	69	42	36	85	127	2 554
Protests, riots and strategic developments	10	13	9	30	8	647
Violence against civilians	257	1 055	69	132	143	1 657
Total	613	1 407	264	1 495	659	11 061

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

parts of Shan, Karen and Kachin states), ostensibly due to security concerns. This disenfranchised an estimated 1.5 million people (out of approximately 38 million eligible to vote), in addition to about 1.1 million Rohingya who had long been denied citizenship and voting rights.⁴ Moreover, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party claimed widespread electoral fraud (without evidence) and called for a rerun of the elections with military involvement.⁵ The NLD rejected such claims and international observers described the election as credible.⁶ Nonetheless, civil–military relations remained strained at the beginning of 2021.

On 1 February 2021 Myanmar's military seized control of the country, detaining several leaders of the NLD—including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi—and declaring a state of emergency. Against a backdrop of widespread international condemnation (see below), the coup triggered nationwide mass protests and general strikes led by public sector workers and labour unions, which the military responded to using a range of repressive measures, including an internet blackout, online censorship and digital surveillance.⁷ From 20 February 2021 onwards the military's response to the waves of protests and civil disobedience grew more violent, incorporating killings, torture and arbitrary detentions. Widespread human rights violations potentially amounting to crimes against humanity

⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Majority rules in Myanmar's second democratic election', Asia Briefing no. 163, 22 Oct. 2020; Ratcliffe, R., 'Aung San Suu Kyi's party returns to power in Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 13 Nov. 2020; and Ratcliffe, R., 'Myanmar minorities, including Rohingya, excluded from voting in election', *The Guardian*, 6 Nov. 2020.

⁵ Strangio, S., 'What's next for Myanmar's military proxy party?', *The Diplomat*, 26 Nov. 2020.

⁶ See e.g. Carter Center, 'Election Observation Mission, Myanmar, General Election, November 8, 2020, preliminary statement', 10 Nov. 2020.

⁷ 'Myanmar junta cracks down on crowds defying protest ban', AP News, 10 Feb. 2021; 'Myanmar coup: Protesters face up to 20 years in prison under new law', BBC News, 15 Feb. 2021; 'A boycott by bureaucrats is undermining the coup in Myanmar', *The Economist*, 18 Feb. 2021; and Beech, H., 'Myanmar's military deploys digital arsenal of repression in crackdown', *New York Times*, 1 Mar. 2021.

were documented.⁸ According to Thailand-based human rights group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, state security forces had killed 1384 people and detained over 11 200 protesters by the end of 2021.⁹

In April 2021 elected lawmakers ousted in the coup formed a National Unity Government (NUG)—a parallel administration in exile.¹⁰ The vast majority of anti-coup demonstration events held in the first half of 2021 were peaceful on the part of the protesters, despite the excessive force used by the military.¹¹ However, the protests began to fragment, with some protesters turning to armed resistance in local anti-regime militias, known as ‘people’s defence forces’ (PDFs). The NUG had called for the establishment of the PDFs on 5 May 2021 and while a significant proportion of them appeared to be politically aligned to the NUG, many also seemed to be operating autonomously.¹² Most of the subsequent fighting between the Tatmadaw and the lightly-armed PDFs took place in rural areas of Chin State and Sagaing Region, as well as Kayah State. The Tatmadaw responded with indiscriminate attacks on populated areas using artillery, airstrikes and helicopter gunships.¹³

On 7 September the NUG declared a ‘people’s defensive war’ against the military junta, and later the same month claimed to have killed at least 1700 regime troops over the previous three months.¹⁴ The remainder of the year saw the NUG and the Tatmadaw locked in an increasingly violent conflict, which included the indiscriminate use of weapons by the latter.¹⁵ The formation of militias loyal to the Tatmadaw in the aftermath of the coup further complicated an already super-fragmented conflict landscape.¹⁶

⁸ See, e.g. Human Rights Watch, ‘Myanmar: Coup leads to crimes against humanity’, 31 July 2021; United Nations, Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar’, A/HRC/48/18, 5 July 2021; and United Nations, Human Rights Council, ‘Written updates of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Myanmar’, A/HRC/48/67, 16 Sep. 2021.

⁹ Since the military coup the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has catalogued those killed and detained by the security forces. See their website: <<https://aappb.org/>>. See also multiple media reports, e.g. Mandhana, N., ‘Myanmar protesters return after security forces kill at least 90 people’, *Wall Street Journal*, 28 Mar. 2021; Solomon, F., ‘Chinese factories burn in Myanmar’s deadliest weekend of protests since coup’, *Wall Street Journal*, 15 Mar. 2021; and ‘Myanmar crackdown on protests, widely filmed, sparks outrage’, AP News, 4 Mar. 2021.

¹⁰ ‘Opponents of Myanmar coup announce unity government’, Al Jazeera, 16 Apr. 2021.

¹¹ Bynum, E., ‘Myanmar’s Spring Revolution’, ACLED, 22 July 2021.

¹² ‘Myanmar’s shadow government forms People’s Defense Force’, *The Irrawaddy*, 5 May 2021.

¹³ International Crisis Group, ‘Taking aim at the Tatmadaw: The new armed resistance to Myanmar’s coup’, Asia Briefing no. 168, 28 June 2021.

¹⁴ The NUG posted its declaration on its Facebook page on 7 Sep. 2021. See also ‘Declaration of war necessary as international pressure fails: Myanmar shadow govt’, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 Sep. 2021; and ‘Over 1,700 Myanmar junta soldiers killed in past three months, civilian govt says’, *The Irrawaddy*, 14 Sep. 2021.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, ‘The deadly stalemate in post-coup Myanmar’, Asia Briefing no. 170, 20 Oct. 2021; and AFP, ‘Myanmar massacre: Two Save the Children staff among the dead’, *The Guardian*, 28 Dec. 2021.

¹⁶ Selth, A., ‘Myanmar’s military numbers’, *The Interpreter*, 17 Feb. 2022.

A military-installed ‘caretaker government’ was announced on 1 August 2021, with Min Aung Hlaing given the position of prime minister and elections promised by August 2023.¹⁷ In December 2021 Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced by a military court to four years of detention for alleged incitement and breaching Covid-19 restrictions, although the sentence was swiftly reduced to two years by Min Aung Hlaing. Further charges were expected to be made in January 2022 in relation to illegal possession of walkie-talkies.¹⁸

Impact of the coup on the existing armed conflicts

Armed conflict also resumed or escalated between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups in several of the country’s border regions.¹⁹ In March–June 2021, for example, thousands fled to Thailand as a result of airstrikes on civilian settlements in Karen State and subsequent fighting between the Myanmar military and the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the main signatories to the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).²⁰ Some of the clashes were linked to anti-coup protests—the KNU, for example, supported the protests—while others appeared to be mainly related to territorial control of strategic areas, such as the fighting between the Kachin Independence Organisation, a non-signatory to the NCA, over control of the jade mines in Kachin State.²¹ In addition, inter-ethnic unity between armed groups resisting the military has been undermined by territorial disputes and military clashes between such groups, particularly in Shan State.²²

Until a temporary ceasefire was agreed in November 2020, the armed conflict between government forces and the ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army in western Myanmar had seen some of the most serious fighting in recent years.²³ Within days of the military coup the junta reaffirmed its commitment to the ceasefire, thereby enabling it to focus on the emerging PDFs. In November 2021, however, the ceasefire broke down, adding another battleground for the Myanmar military and a further serious challenge to the return of Rohingya refugees forcibly displaced in 2017.²⁴

¹⁷ International Crisis Group (note 15), pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ AP News, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi testifies in Myanmar court as lawyers barred from speaking about her case’, *The Guardian*, 27 Oct. 2021; and ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: Myanmar court sentences ousted leader in widely criticised trial’, BBC News, 6 Dec. 2021.

¹⁹ On the peace process in Myanmar see *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 114–15.

²⁰ ‘Thousands flee to Thailand after Myanmar’s army’s air strikes on villages: activist group, media’, Reuters, 28 Mar. 2021; and ‘Myanmar rebel group says has captured military base near Thai border’, France 24, 27 Apr. 2021. On the NCA see *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, p. 114.

²¹ Global Witness, ‘Jade and conflict: Myanmar’s vicious circle’, 29 June 2021.

²² Bynum (note 11).

²³ United League of Arakan/Arakan Army, ‘Statement no. 41/2020’, 12 Nov. 2020; Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services, ‘Statement on ceasefire and eternal peace’, 12 Nov. 2020; and International Crisis Group, ‘From elections to ceasefire in Myanmar’s Rakhine state’, Asia Briefing no. 164, 23 Dec. 2020.

²⁴ AFP, ‘UN’s “deep concern” at Myanmar fighting between Rakhine rebels and military’, *The Guardian*, 11 Nov. 2021.

The NUG has sought to build political and military alliances with the ethnic armed groups, including by promising a federal system for Myanmar, and a significant amount of political and military cooperation against the military regime was underway by the end of 2021.²⁵

The international response

The coup was widely condemned by parts of the international community and the United Nations Security Council called for all those detained to be released.²⁶ In February the United States and several other states announced sanctions on the military leaders who directed the coup.²⁷ Additional US and European Union sanctions were imposed in late March, with the former also suspending all trade agreements and investment with Myanmar.²⁸

The international diplomatic response was led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).²⁹ At a special summit organized by ASEAN in April 2021, which coup leader Min Aung Hlaing attended, a five-point plan to exit the crisis was agreed. This included an immediate cessation of violence, the delivery of humanitarian aid and the appointment of an ASEAN envoy to facilitate dialogue among the parties.³⁰ However, it took a further three months to appoint the envoy, who was then blocked from visiting Myanmar.³¹ As a consequence of this lack of cooperation and failure to implement the plan, Min Aung Hlaing was excluded from the ASEAN summit on 26 October.³² Overall, though, the effectiveness of the ASEAN-led diplomatic effort has been severely limited by its consensus-based non-interference approach, internal divisions and the refusal of the Myanmar military junta to cooperate.³³

The question of who represents Myanmar at the UN—the military junta or the NUG—remained unresolved at the end of 2021.³⁴ China and Russia

²⁵ International Crisis Group, *Myanmar's Coup Shakes up its Ethnic Conflicts*, Asia Report no. 319 (International Crisis Group: Brussels), 12 Jan. 2022.

²⁶ United Nations, Security Council, 'Security Council press statement on situation in Myanmar', SC/14430, 4 Feb. 2021; and United Nations, Security Council, 'Statement by the President of the Security Council', S/PRST/2021/5, 10 Mar. 2021.

²⁷ 'Myanmar ruler calls for end to protests as US imposes sanctions', Reuters, 11 Feb. 2021; and 'UK and Canada impose sanctions on Myanmar generals after coup', Reuters, 18 Feb. 2021.

²⁸ 'US suspends all trade engagement with Myanmar until elected government returns', Reuters, 29 Mar. 2021; and 'EU and US sanctions step up pressure on Myanmar military over coup', Reuters, 22 Mar. 2021.

²⁹ For a brief description and list of members of ASEAN see annex B, section II, in this volume.

³⁰ 'ASEAN chairman's statement on the leaders meeting', Nikkei Asia, 24 Apr. 2021; and 'ASEAN "consensus" urges Myanmar junta to end violence', Nikkei Asia, 24 Apr. 2021.

³¹ 'ASEAN appoints Brunei diplomat as envoy to Myanmar', Reuters, 4 Aug. 2021.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brunei, 'Statement of the Chair of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting', 16 Oct. 2021; and Reuters, 'Asean summit starts with Myanmar junta excluded for ignoring peace deal', *The Guardian*, 26 Oct. 2021.

³³ Samet, O., 'There is no ASEAN consensus on Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 22 June 2021.

³⁴ Nichols, M., 'UN committee agrees Taliban, Myanmar junta not allowed in UN for now', Reuters, 1 Dec. 2021.

remained Myanmar's two main foreign partners, while Japan and Thailand remained influential with regard to trade and investment.³⁵

The humanitarian crisis

In addition to armed violence and regime oppression, Myanmar faced a growing country-wide humanitarian crisis characterized by deepening economic recession, collapsing healthcare, and surging poverty and food insecurity.³⁶ In November 2021 UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths warned that the country's humanitarian situation was deteriorating, with more than 3 million people in need of life-saving aid.³⁷ At the end of 2021 over 320 000 people remained internally displaced due to violence since the military coup. This was in addition to the 340 000 people already living in protracted displacement in Rakhine, Chin, Shan and Kachin states.³⁸

State-backed systematic persecution in 2017 forcibly displaced more than 700 000 Rohingya people—members of a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic group—from Rakhine State.³⁹ Continuing persecution and armed conflict led to further displacement, and as of the end of 2021 about 850 000 Rohingya remained in refugee camps in southern Bangladesh—the largest and densest refugee settlement in the world.⁴⁰ Insecurity for these refugees was also growing, with little prospect of repatriation and the Bangladesh government preparing to relocate thousands of them to a seasonally inundated island.⁴¹

Armed conflict in Indonesia

Sporadic attacks by groups associated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda continued in Indonesia in 2021.⁴² However, it was the long-running insurgency in Papua that was the focus of most of the combat-related armed violence in the country, including the death of Indonesia's top intelligence

³⁵ 'Japan's much-touted go-between has little sway over Myanmar junta', *The Irrawaddy*, 9 Sep. 2021; and Zhabina, A., 'China in post-coup Myanmar—closer to recognition, further from "Pauk-phaw"', PRIF Blog, 21 Dec. 2021.

³⁶ International Crisis Group (note 15), pp. 8–9.

³⁷ United Nations, 'Myanmar: 3 million in need of humanitarian aid, "world is watching" UN relief chief warns generals', *UN News*, 8 Nov. 2021.

³⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Myanmar: Humanitarian update no. 14', 17 Jan. 2022.

³⁹ On the Rohingya crisis in 2017 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 49–52. Also see Ahmed, I., 'Special issue on the Rohingya crisis: From the guest editor's desk', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2020), pp. 85–88; and Nishikawa, Y., 'The reality of protecting the Rohingya: An inherent limitation of the responsibility to protect', *Asian Security*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2020), pp. 90–106.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, K., 'UN quizzed over role in prison-like island camp for Rohingya refugees', *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2021.

⁴¹ Hasnat, S. and Yasir, S., 'They were promised a new home. Then they tried to escape it', *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 2021.

⁴² United Nations (note 1). On the domestic roots of Islamic State-inspired groups in Indonesia see Sumpter, C. and Franco, J., 'Islamist militancy in Indonesia and the Philippines: Domestic lineage and sporadic foreign influence', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 15 Sep. 2021.

official in the province in April 2021 and a subsequent troop surge by the Indonesia armed forces.⁴³ According to ACLED, there were 124 conflict-related deaths in Indonesia in 2021 (the same as in 2020), with 74 of these related to armed conflict (battles or explosions/remote violence).⁴⁴

Armed conflict in the Philippines

Two intrastate armed conflicts emerged in the Philippines in the late 1960s: one in the Muslim-majority areas of the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines and another involving the New People's Army (NPA) of the Communist Party of the Philippines, concentrated mainly in rural areas across the country.⁴⁵ However, as in recent years, it was the war on drugs that appeared to result in the most fatalities during 2021.

The establishment in March 2019 of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in the southern Philippines was a major step towards ending the almost 50-year Moro separatist conflict, although many challenges remained.⁴⁶ An 80-member Bangsamoro Transition Authority was appointed to govern the region until 2022, when elections for a Bangsamoro parliament and government were due to take place, and in October 2021 this political transition period was extended until 2025.⁴⁷ A small number of armed groups operating outside the peace process, some with links to the Islamic State, appeared to be in decline.⁴⁸

Equally elusive, despite sporadic peace talks, has been the goal of ending the 50-year-old insurgency by the NPA—the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its political umbrella organization, the National Democratic Front. Despite government forces claiming battlefield successes during the year, as of the end of 2021 there appeared to be no prospect of ending the insurgency.⁴⁹

⁴³ Paddock, R. C. and Suhartono, M., 'Indonesian general is killed in rebel ambush, sparking fears of retaliation', *New York Times*, 27 Apr. 2021; Strangio, S., 'Indonesia deploys forces to troubled Papua region', *The Diplomat*, 5 May 2021; and James, R., "'We are living in a war zone': Violence flares in West Papua as villagers forced to flee', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2021.

⁴⁴ ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

⁴⁵ For background on these two conflicts see Akebo, M., 'Ceasefire rationales: A comparative study of ceasefires in the Moro and Communist conflicts in the Philippines', *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2021), pp. 366–92.

⁴⁶ On key developments in the Philippines in 2019–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 105–107; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 115–17.

⁴⁷ Engelbrecht, G., 'The Philippines: Three more years for the Bangsamoro transition', *International Crisis Group*, 29 Oct. 2021.

⁴⁸ Yeo, K., 'Hungry and tired: The decline of militancy in Mindanao', *The Strategist*, 11 June 2021; and Yeo, K., 'How will the Taliban affect violent extremism in Mindanao?', *The Diplomat*, Issue 83, Oct. 2021. See also Sumpter and Franco (note 42).

⁴⁹ Broome, J., 'An end in sight for the Philippines' Maoist insurgency?', *The Diplomat*, 19 Feb. 2021; 'Philippines military says 16 communist rebels killed in raid', *Reuters*, 16 Aug. 2021; and Gomez, J., 'Key leader of decades-old insurgency in the Philippines is killed', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Nov. 2021.

Table 4.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Philippines, 2016–21

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	898	2013	608	531	539	442
Explosions/remote violence	73	56	41	48	34	18
Protests/riots and strategic developments	9	4	4	4	20	7
Violence against civilians	3 546	2 294	1 453	1 120	893	672
Total	4 526	4 367	2 106	1 703	1 486	1 139

Notes: The first available year for data on the Philippines in the Armed Conflict Location & Data Project (ACLED) database is 2016. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, 'ACLED definitions of political violence and protest', 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 27 Jan. 2022.

The war on drugs and contested casualty statistics

While the number of civilians killed in the Philippines in 2021 is uncertain and disputed, indications are that the government's war on drugs, initiated when President Duterte took office in 2016, continued to result in more deaths than the insurgencies (see table 4.6)—although, overall, conflict-related fatalities in the Philippines fell for the fifth year in a row. Concerns about the war on drugs are part of wider concerns about repression of human rights and the targeting of political opponents, activists and journalists.⁵⁰ According to the government the estimated death toll in the anti-drugs campaign between 1 July 2016 and 30 September 2021 was 6201, although ACLED estimated the figure to be at least 7742 (as of 12 November 2021) and domestic human rights groups suggest drug war killings could be up to four times higher than the government number.⁵¹ In September 2021 the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced an investigation into alleged state crimes committed during the period between 2011 and March 2019, when the Philippines left the court. The ICC said that while relevant crimes appeared to have continued after that date, it was limited to investigating those suspected to have occurred while the Philippines was a member.⁵²

⁵⁰ 'Philippines downgraded as civic freedoms deteriorate', CIVICUS Monitor, 8 Dec. 2020. On the linkages between the Covid-19 pandemic and state repression see Agojo, K. N. M., 'Policing a pandemic: Understanding the state and political instrumentalization of the coercive apparatus in Duterte's Philippines', *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2021), pp. 363–86.

⁵¹ The government's official numbers are periodically published under its #RealNumbersPH campaign on Facebook—see Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency, '#RealNumbers from July 01, 2016 to September 30, 2021'; and Kishi, R. and Buenaventura, T., 'The drug war rages on in the Philippines: New data on the civilian toll, state responsibility, and shifting geographies of violence', ACLED, 18 Nov. 2021.

⁵² International Criminal Court, 'Situation in the Philippines: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I authorises the opening of an investigation', Press release, 15 Sep. 2021; Engelbrecht, G., 'Philippines: The International Criminal Court goes after Duterte's drug war', International Crisis Group, 17 Sep. 2021; and Aspinwall, N., 'The ICC will probe Duterte. Will he get off scot-free?', *The Diplomat*, Issue 83, Oct. 2021.

Armed conflict in Thailand

The decades-old non-international armed conflict in the south of Thailand between the military government and various secessionist groups continued in 2021, but at lower levels of violence. ACLED recorded 66 conflict-related deaths in Thailand in 2021 (down from 102 in 2020 and the third consecutive year of decline), with 40 of these related to armed conflict (battles or explosions/remote violence).⁵³ More than 7000 people have been killed in the conflict since 2004.

Malaysian-brokered peace talks started in 2015 between the government and Mara Patani, an umbrella organization of Thai Malay secessionist groups. The most significant insurgent group—the National Revolutionary Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, BRN)—had been boycotting the talks, but in January 2020 the group met with government officials for the first time in a formal peace dialogue.⁵⁴ However, the talks stalled and by the end of 2020 state–insurgent violence had resumed. There was no resumption of face-to-face peace talks in 2021, although some technical-level discussions between the parties took place online (due to the Covid-19 pandemic). However, reports suggested that talks would resume in January 2022.⁵⁵

Pro-democracy demonstrations and other protests continued in Thailand in 2021, although these were more sporadic than the 2020 protests due to increased repression. The demands for constitutional and monarchical reform also expanded to criticism of the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on the economy.⁵⁶ The continuation of emergency rules and police crackdowns on activists failed to halt the protests.

⁵³ ACLED, 'Dashboard', accessed 27 Jan. 2022.

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form*, Asia Report no. 304 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 21 Jan. 2020). On the role of religion as a motivating frame within the BRN see Chalermripinyorat, R., 'Islam and the BRN's armed separatist movement in Southern Thailand', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 32, no. 6 (2021), pp. 945–76.

⁵⁵ Pathan, D., 'Thailand: Could one of Asia's deadliest conflicts be coming to an end?', United States Institute of Peace, 7 Sep. 2021; and Azmi, H. and Ahmad, M., 'Sources: Thailand, BRN rebels to resume in-person peace talks next month', Benar News, 23 Dec. 2021.

⁵⁶ Kuhakan, J. and Setboonsang, C., 'Thai anti-govt protesters clash with police in Bangkok', Reuters, 7 Aug. 2021; and Ratcliffe, R., "'Everything has exploded now": On the streets with Thailand's protesters', *The Guardian*, 24 Sep. 2021.