

7. Armed conflict and peace processes in sub-Saharan Africa

Overview

At least 18 states in sub-Saharan Africa (out of a total of 49) experienced active armed conflict in 2021. High-intensity armed conflicts occurred in 12 states—Nigeria (9913 estimated conflict-related deaths); Ethiopia (8958); the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (5683); Somalia (3261); Burkina Faso (2373); South Sudan (2156); Mali (1910); the Central African Republic (CAR) (1707); Sudan (1652); Niger (1460); Cameroon (1395); and Mozambique (1158)—and low-intensity, subnational armed conflicts in a further 6 (Benin, Burundi, Chad, Kenya, Madagascar and Uganda). Eleven of these 18 countries suffered higher estimated conflict-related fatalities in 2021 than in 2020, with the total increase for the region standing at about 19 per cent.

Almost all the armed conflicts were internationalized. Conflict dynamics and ethnic and religious tensions were often rooted in a combination of state weakness, corruption, ineffective delivery of basic services, competition over natural resources, inequality and a sense of marginalization. Four other cross-cutting issues (section I) shaped security dilemmas in sub-Saharan Africa in 2021: (a) the presence of armed groups and criminal networks; (b) the security activities of external actors; (c) election-related violence; and (d) water insecurity and the growing impact of climate change. There were four successful military coups (in Chad, Mali, Guinea and Sudan) and three failed coups (in CAR, Niger and Sudan) in the region in 2021, compared to just one coup in 2020 (in Mali). There was no substantive progress in any of the region's peace processes in 2021, although sub-Saharan African states continued to host more multilateral peace operations—22—than any other region of the world.

Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria were West Africa's hotspots of insecurity in 2021, mainly due to the attacks of armed groups, some operating beyond their respective national borders (section II). Security forces countering these armed groups included national, regional and international forces, as well as local self-defence groups. In June 2021 France announced a drawdown of the 5000 Barkhane troops in Mali, to be replaced by the European multinational Task Force Takuba, which was established in 2020.

The security situation in Nigeria worsened in 2021, with a 27 per cent increase in conflict-related fatalities compared to 2020, due largely to the high number of conflicts between farmers and herders in the Middle Belt, a sharp rise in banditry in the north-west, and intensifying uprisings by separatists in the south-east.

There was some cautious optimism regarding the course of the conflict with Boko Haram in 2021, following the surrender of thousands of its fighters.

Central Africa (section III) contains some of the world's severest and most protracted crises. Large-scale violence continued in the eastern DRC as external and Congolese armed groups engaged in multiple armed conflicts with the government, alongside a resurgence of intercommunal violence. In Cameroon the anglophone separatist insurgency in the Southwest and Northwest regions, as well as the insurgency in the Far North region (part of the wider Lake Chad crisis), continued, while in CAR the security situation became even more volatile as government forces, backed by Russian private military companies (PMCs) and Rwandan troops, fought to recapture territory from armed groups. Due to the growing influence of the Russian PMCs, France suspended aid to and military cooperation with the CAR government in June 2021, and the European Union mission suspended its training activities in December.

In East Africa (section IV) 9 of the 22 states or territories were involved in active armed conflict in 2021, with 5 in particular—Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan—experiencing sharp escalations or continuing large-scale armed violence that have helped give rise to more than 9.6 million people being internally displaced and more than 4.7 million people becoming refugees across East Africa. Grave violations against civilians continued to be committed in the region, while at least 33.8 million people were severely food insecure. Disputes over resource allocation and access have also been significant in the region.

The armed conflict in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia between federal government forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front worsened during 2021, with the expansion of the conflict to the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar causing a deepening humanitarian crisis. The war fluctuated wildly over the course of 2021, reaching a stalemate at the end of the year. While the government's planned national dialogue offered some grounds for optimism, finding solutions to Ethiopia's deeply rooted conflicts is likely to be a lengthy process.

The insurgency in Cabo Delgado province in the north of Mozambique continued in 2021, leading to a regional military intervention in July 2021. However, the conflict's root causes, including a more equitable distribution of the province's mineral and hydrocarbon resources, remained unaddressed. In Somalia, al-Shabab remained a major threat despite the continued presence of an African Union-led peace operation.

In South Sudan, despite some progress towards implementation of the 2018 peace agreement, intercommunal violence continued to impact communities across multiple parts of the country. In Sudan, despite the optimism arising from the October 2020 Juba Peace Agreement with various opposition armed groups, the situation deteriorated in 2021: there was a military coup in October and a near doubling of estimated conflict-related fatalities during the year.