

## I. Key general developments in the region

IAN DAVIS

At least 18 states in sub-Saharan Africa experienced active, subnational armed conflict in 2021, compared to 21 (Angola, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea being the three additional countries) in 2020. Low-intensity armed conflicts (fewer than 1000 conflict-related deaths) occurred in 6 states, and high-intensity armed conflicts (1000–9999 deaths) occurred in 12—two more than in 2020. The Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan moved from being low-intensity armed conflicts in 2020 to high-intensity armed conflicts in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

Eleven of the 18 armed conflict countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, CAR, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda) had higher estimated conflict-related fatalities in 2021 than in 2020, translating into an increase of about 19 per cent across the region as a whole (see table 7.1). A doubling of estimated fatalities in Ethiopia, a 27 per cent increase in Nigeria, and persistently high levels in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) were the most significant contributing factors.

Most of the armed conflicts were internationalized, with many of them overlapping across states and regions due to the involvement of external state actors—whether directly or through proxies—and/or the transnational activities of armed groups and criminal networks. 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. Among the world's economies for which poverty can be measured, 18 of the 20 poorest countries in 2021 were in sub-Saharan Africa, as were 33 of the 46 least developed countries (LDCs).<sup>2</sup> Aside from Cameroon, Kenya and Nigeria, all the countries in the region with armed conflicts in 2021 were LDCs.<sup>3</sup>

Developments in each of the armed conflicts and any related peace processes are discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this chapter: West Africa (section II), Central Africa (section III) and East Africa (section IV). While many of the armed conflicts were the subject of ongoing

<sup>1</sup> For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume. For armed conflicts in North Africa see chapter 6, section IV, in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, *Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune* (International Bank for Reconstruction/World Bank: Washington, DC, Oct. 2020), p. 13; and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *The Least Developed Countries Report 2021* (UN: Geneva, 2021), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, this means that the other 18 LDCs in sub-Saharan Africa were not involved in an armed conflict in 2021. Thus, while poverty and armed conflict are thought to be closely interconnected, the poverty–conflict nexus is not straightforward. See e.g. Mueller, H. and Techasunthornwat, C., *Conflict and Poverty*, Policy Research Working Paper no. 9455 (World Bank Group, 2020); and Braithwaite, A., Dasandi, N. and Hudson, D., 'Does poverty cause conflict? Isolating the causal origins of the conflict trap', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 33 no. 1 (2016), pp. 45–66.

**Table 7.1.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in sub-Saharan Africa, 2017–21

Country	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<i>West Africa</i>					
Benin	15 <sup>a</sup>	31 <sup>a</sup>	37 <sup>a</sup>	64	93
Burkina Faso	117	303	2 216	2 303	2 373
Côte D'Ivoire	43 <sup>a</sup>	16 <sup>a</sup>	45 <sup>a</sup>	132	38 <sup>a</sup>
Guinea	47 <sup>a</sup>	39 <sup>a</sup>	41 <sup>a</sup>	145	28 <sup>a</sup>
Mali	946	1747	1 875	2 854	1 910
Niger	240	506	729	1 126	1 460
Nigeria	4 948	6 220	5 416	7 781	9 913
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6 356</b>	<b>8 862</b>	<b>10 359</b>	<b>14 405</b>	<b>15 815</b>
<i>Central Africa</i>					
Angola	67	41 <sup>a</sup>	23 <sup>a</sup>	74	150 <sup>a</sup>
Cameroon	741	1 663	1 303	1 764	1 395
Central African Republic	1 829	1 171	596	446	1 707
Chad	296	259	567	738	831
Congo, Democratic Republic of the	3 211	3 192	3 806	6 056	5 683
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6 144</b>	<b>6 326</b>	<b>6 295</b>	<b>9 078</b>	<b>9 766</b>
<i>East Africa</i>					
Burundi	285 <sup>a</sup>	327	305	331	303
Ethiopia	1 355	1 565	667	4 057	8 958
Kenya	745	407	269	311	391
Madagascar	210	142	350	354	304
Mozambique	129	224	664	1 785	1 158
Somalia	6 143	5 420	4 513	3 249	3 261
South Sudan	4 841	1 700	1 811	2 380	2 156
Sudan	1 291	1 054	776	957	1 652
Uganda	66	146 <sup>a</sup>	163	282	499
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>15 065</b>	<b>10 985</b>	<b>9 518</b>	<b>13 706</b>	<b>18 682</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>27 565</b>	<b>26 173</b>	<b>26 172</b>	<b>37 189</b>	<b>44 263</b>

Notes: Fatality figures are collated from four event types: battles; explosions/remote violence; protests, riots and strategic developments; and violence against civilians—see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019. A country is treated as being in an armed conflict if there were 25 or more battle-related deaths in a given year (see chapter 2, section I, in this volume).

<sup>a</sup> Battle-related deaths were below 25.

Source: ACLED, ‘Dashboard’, accessed 16 Mar.–11 Apr. 2021.

peace processes in 2021, all were either stalled or suffered serious setbacks, with no substantive progress seen in any of them. Even in Sudan, where a series of peace agreements were signed in 2020 with various opposition armed groups, culminating in the October 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, a military coup occurred in October 2021 and conflict-related fatalities nearly doubled during the year (see section IV).

There were 22 multilateral peace operations active in sub-Saharan Africa in 2021<sup>4</sup>—more than in any other region of the world. The European

<sup>4</sup> The peace operations were deployed across 10 countries—see chapter 2, section II, in this volume.

Union (EU) and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) each deployed a new peace operation to Mozambique in 2021: the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) and the EU Military Training Mission in Mozambique (EUTM Mozambique).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the number of personnel in multilateral peace operations in sub-Saharan Africa decreased for the sixth consecutive year, from 94 201 on 31 December 2020 to 88 823 on 31 December 2021—a fall of 5.7 per cent. Nonetheless, the missions deployed in sub-Saharan Africa accounted for over three-quarters of the personnel deployed in multilateral peace operations globally.<sup>6</sup>

As in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to have minimal direct impact on most of the region's armed conflicts in 2021, although there were reports of some Covid-19 responses being 'weaponized' to clamp down on human rights.<sup>7</sup> In the longer term, however, the pandemic may affect some of the key political, social and economic drivers of peace and conflict in the region. In 2020 sub-Saharan Africa's economy registered a record contraction of 1.9 per cent, and the Covid-19 crisis was exacerbated by a shortage of vaccines. Although the region's economy was projected to grow by 3.7 per cent in 2021, this represented the lowest recovery rate among the world's regions (as measured by the International Monetary Fund), thereby widening the income gap between sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup> Four other cross-cutting issues shaped security challenges 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.<sup>9</sup>

### **The role of armed groups and criminal networks**

Not only were non-state armed groups of varying capacity, size and objectives involved in all the armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa in 2021, they threatened security and civic participation in multiple other countries in the region. A broad typology would include jihadist groups, ethnic separatists (such as the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army and the Ambazonia Restoration Forces), communal or self-defence militias (often state-linked) and criminal networks, but there are few clear demarcation lines and groups

<sup>5</sup> For further details see chapter 2, section II, in this volume. For developments in Mozambique see section IV in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> For further details see chapter 2, sections II and III, in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Amnesty International, 'Sub-Saharan Africa: The devastating impact of conflicts compounded by COVID-19', 7 Apr. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Regional Economic Outlook, Sub-Saharan Africa: One Planet, Two Worlds, Three Stories* (IMF: Washington, DC, Oct. 2021).

<sup>9</sup> On developments in some of these issues in 2018–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 115–21; *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 176–79; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 187–94.

often share overlapping characteristics. The violence is not just between governments and armed groups, but includes inter-group violence.

Armed groups have increasingly developed strong Salafi jihadist ideologies and forged ties with jihadist movements predominantly active in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), namely al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The epicentre of jihadist violence has now shifted from MENA to sub-Saharan Africa, and is particularly pronounced in central Sahel, Lake Chad, the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa, and more recently northern Mozambique.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the influence and inflow of violent extremists from MENA, this rise in jihadist activity has been attributed to a number of factors, including ideology, poverty, corruption, local grievances, separatist movements, pre-existing intercommunal violence between herders and farmers over land rights (aggravated by the effects of climate change), weak state presence, and lack of economic opportunities for young people.<sup>11</sup> The dominant military counterterrorism approach adopted by states and external actors (see below) has often failed to address the influence of foreign jihadist movements or these deeper community grievances, or to strengthen the state's civic presence. Abuses by security force and a perceived lack of access to justice and protection drives recruitment into extremist organizations and other armed groups.<sup>12</sup>

Community-based or village-based self-defence groups (sometimes referred to as communal defence militias or identity militias) in sub-Saharan Africa tend to emerge where state security forces lack influence, resources or trust. Often formed along socio-economic, ethnic or political lines, these groups depend on popular support and frequently cooperate with state security forces or other armed groups. Meanwhile, porous borders, corruption, and weak justice and law enforcement systems have enabled transnational criminal activities by armed and organized crime groups to proliferate.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 'Fourteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat', S/2022/63, 28 Jan. 2022, pp. 4–6.

<sup>11</sup> Stanicek, B. and Betant-Rasmussen, M., 'Jihadist networks in sub-Saharan Africa: Origins, patterns and responses', European Parliament Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, Sep. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Stanicek and Betant-Rasmussen (note 11); Coleman, J. et al., *Dynamics of Support and Engagement: Understanding Malian Youths' Attitudes Towards Violent Extremism* (UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism: Feb. 2021); Faleg, G. and Mustasilta, K., 'Salafi-Jihadism in Africa: A winning strategy', European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief no. 12, June 2021; and International Crisis Group, *A Course Correction for the Sahel Stabilisation Strategy*, Africa Report no. 299 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 1 Feb. 2021).

<sup>13</sup> For a comparative analysis of organized crime in Africa see ENACT, *Africa Organised Crime Index 2021: Evolution of Crime in a Covid World* (ENACT: Nov. 2021).

## External actors

Sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly treated as an arena for geopolitical and commercial competition. In the Horn of Africa, for example, there are actors from Asia, Europe, MENA and North America.<sup>14</sup> Most Western forces deployed in the region are there to train and build capacity in local, national or subregional forces, largely with the aim of countering transnational jihadist groups.<sup>15</sup> France has a long tradition of maintaining a significant military footprint in sub-Saharan Africa, but more recently has made efforts to reduce it through multilateral arrangements with African and European states. This reorientation accelerated in 2021 with the announcement of Operation Barkhane's drawdown (with an expected reduction of French troops in the region from 5100 to roughly 3000) and its gradual replacement by the European Takuba Task Force under French command (see section II).<sup>16</sup> The French presence has been increasingly complicated by Russia's expanding influence, especially in Mali and CAR, and the intervention's lack of visible success.<sup>17</sup> Russia's military relationships in sub-Saharan Africa appear to be growing, with two new military cooperation agreements signed in 2021: with Ethiopia and Nigeria (the latter also has similar cooperation agreements with China and the United States).<sup>18</sup> Also more visible has been Russia's use of private military companies, especially the Wagner Group, reportedly present in at least 10 African countries, including CAR, Mali and Sudan.<sup>19</sup>

While the USA claims to maintain a 'light and relatively low-cost footprint' in Africa as a whole, independent estimates suggest at least 6000 military personnel are deployed across 13 countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region.<sup>20</sup> China's military presence in sub-Saharan Africa is linked to its growing

<sup>14</sup> Melvin, N. J., 'The foreign military presence in the Horn of Africa region', SIPRI Background Paper, Apr. 2019; and Lanfranchi, G., 'Geopolitics meets local politics in the Horn of Africa', *Clingendael Spectator*, 1 Dec. 2021. Also see section IV in this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Garamone, J., 'US engagement needed to build security, prosperity on African continent', US Department of Defense, 12 Apr. 2021; and Hickendorff, A. and Acko, I., 'The European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic: An assessment', SIPRI Background Paper, Feb. 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Salaün, T. and Irish, J., 'France ends West African Barkhane military operation', Reuters, 10 June 2021; and French Presidency, 'Propos liminaires du Président de la République à l'occasion de la conférence de presse conjointe à l'issue du Sommet du G5 Sahel' [Opening remarks by the President of the Republic at the joint press conference following the G5 Sahel Summit], 9 July 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Kante, M. I., 'France has started withdrawing its troops from Mali: What is it leaving behind?', *The Conversation*, 25 Oct. 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Morsy, A., 'Russia rejects attempts to link its military cooperation with Ethiopia with GERD dispute', *Ahram Online*, 24 July 2021; and Bedarride, D., 'Nigeria signs major military cooperation agreement with Russia to expand influence in Africa', *Ecom News Afrique*, 1 Sep. 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Dalaa, M. and Aksoy, H. A., 'Russia's Wagner Group reportedly deployed in Africa', Anadolu Agency, 5 Mar. 2021; and Jones, S. G. et al., *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies* (Center for Strategic and International Studies: Washington, DC: July 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Turse, N., 'Pentagon's own map of US bases in Africa contradicts its own claim of "light" footprint', *The Intercept*, 27 Feb. 2020; and Husted, T. F. et al., *Sub-Saharan Africa: Key Issues and US Engagement*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R45428 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 17 Feb. 2021), pp. 16–19.

economic presence, as well as its role as a leading supplier (compared to other permanent members of the UN Security Council) of UN peacekeepers in the region.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the region has also become a theatre for Middle East and North African power struggles, with Turkey and the Gulf states particularly active in the Horn of Africa (section IV).<sup>22</sup>

### **Election-related violence**

Election transition processes can be a major source of instability in sub-Saharan Africa. The causes of electoral instability and violence in the region are multidimensional but broadly fall into two categories: the underlying power structures in new and emerging democracies, and flaws in the electoral process itself.<sup>23</sup> Several important national and local elections taking place in the region in 2021 faced the risk of pre- or post-election violence.<sup>24</sup> However, while some elections were marred by serious irregularities and security clampdowns, most took place without incident. Of the electoral violence that did flare up, the most serious occurrences were seen in CAR, Ethiopia, Niger, Uganda and Zambia.<sup>25</sup> Somalia's protracted indirect election process was repeatedly delayed during 2021 amidst political instability and violence (see section IV).<sup>26</sup>

A further indication of the fragility of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa was the occurrence of four successful military coups (in Chad, Mali, Guinea and Sudan) and three failed coups (in CAR, Niger and Sudan) in 2021, compared to just one coup in 2020 (in Mali). The number of coup attempts in Africa averaged around four a year between 1960 and 2000, before dropping to around two a year until 2019.<sup>27</sup> In September 2021 UN Secretary-General

<sup>21</sup> 'America worries about China's military ambitions in Africa', *The Economist*, 11 Dec. 2021.

<sup>22</sup> 'Gulf rivalries are spilling into Africa's Horn', *The Economist*, 11 Feb. 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Kovacs, M. S. and Bjarnesen, J. (eds), *Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics* (Nordic Africa Institute/Zed Books: Uppsala/London, 2018). See also the discussion in *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 117–20. On the linkages between violence and democracy in Africa see Obiagu, U. C., 'A third wave? Creeping autocracy in Africa', *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Jan. 2021), pp. 114–24.

<sup>24</sup> Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, '2021 African election calendar', Dec. 2021.

<sup>25</sup> 'CAR post-election violence displaces more than 200,000 people: UN', Al Jazeera, 29 Jan. 2021; 'Ethiopia votes in test for PM Abiy amid reports of abuses', AP News, 21 June 2021; 'Niger: 2 killed in protests against election results', Deutsche Welle, 25 Feb. 2021; Human Rights Watch, 'Uganda: Elections marred by violence', 21 Jan. 2021; and 'Zambia deploys army to curb violence ahead of elections', Al Jazeera, 1 Aug. 2021.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations, 'Completion of Somalia elections more important than ever: UN envoy', UN News, 17 Nov. 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Durmaz, M., '2021, the year military coups returned to the stage in Africa', Al Jazeera, 28 Dec. 2021; and Mwai, P., 'Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?', BBC News, 2 Feb. 2022. On reasons for the rise in coups see Goldberg, M. L., 'Why have there been so many coups in Africa recently?', UN Dispatch, 14 Feb. 2022.

António Guterres voiced concern that ‘military coups are back’, blaming a lack of international unity in response to military interventions.<sup>28</sup>

### **Water insecurity and climate change**

Climate-related security risks include ‘forced migration and displacement, livelihood insecurity, food and water insecurity, rising levels of intercommunal conflict between pastoralists and farmers, protracted cross-border resource conflicts and unsustainable resource exploitation’.<sup>29</sup> Insecurity and armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa affects local and national capacities to mitigate and adapt to climate vulnerability. In Mali and Somalia, for example, climate change has amplified existing challenges, including those faced by peace operations, and strengthened radical groups.<sup>30</sup>

Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa are dependent on rain-fed agriculture, making the region particularly vulnerable to changes in climatic conditions, such as seasonal floods and prolonged droughts. Somalia in 2021, for instance, experienced its third consecutive season of below-average rainfall, with the country’s central and southern areas enduring moderate-to-severe drought conditions and water shortages.<sup>31</sup> These climatic conditions were a major driver of conflict in Somalia in 2021 (see section IV). Similarly, conflict over access to water in Cameroon displaced over 21 000 people in August 2021 (see section III). Accessing safe drinking water represents a challenge for more than 300 million people in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>32</sup> Arguably the highest profile water resource dispute in the region is between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the River Nile. These tensions have been exacerbated by Ethiopia’s construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, as well as a shifting regional power struggle.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations, Secretary-General, ‘Secretary-General’s address to the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly’, 21 Sep. 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Aminga, V. and Krampe, F., ‘Climate-related security risks and the African Union’, SIPRI Policy Brief, May 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Eklöv, K. and Krampe, F., *Climate-related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Somalia*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 53 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Oct. 2019); and Hegazi, F., Krampe, F. and Smith E. S., *Climate-related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Mali*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 60 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Apr. 2021).

<sup>31</sup> Oxfam, ‘Parts of Somalia hit by severe, climate-fueled drought’, 14 Dec. 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), *The State of Food and Agriculture: Overcoming Water Challenges in Agriculture* (FAO: Rome, 2020), p. 21.