

II. Armed conflict and peace processes in West Africa

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Five of the 15 states in West Africa experienced internal armed conflict in 2021: Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.¹ The focus of this section is, however, on high-intensity armed conflicts (1000–9999 conflict-related deaths in the year), thereby excluding Benin (which had less than 100 estimated conflict-related deaths in 2021). Conflict-related fatalities decreased in Mali compared to 2020, but increased in Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. This section is divided into three main themes: (a) key developments in the region; (b) multilateral peace and counterterrorism operations; and (c) internal armed conflicts, including the role of self-defence armed groups and current circumstances in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.

Key general developments in the region

Many states in West Africa face severe governance and security challenges. These are linked mainly to state weakness, political and economic mismanagement, economic fragility, and climate change. Several armed groups continue to be active, while state armed forces (military and police) are, in most countries, weak, dysfunctional and under-equipped.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, four presidential elections were held in the region in 2021: in Niger (2nd round, February); in Benin (April); in Cabo Verde (October); and in Gambia (December). In Senegal, anticipated regional and local elections (originally scheduled for June 2019) were postponed for a third time, to January 2022. The opposition asserted that the delay of the polls—widely seen as a test of President Macky Sall’s popularity—was deliberate.² Two military coups occurred—in Mali (May) and Guinea (September)—as well as a failed coup in Niger, which added to regional governance and humanitarian challenges.

The impact of Covid-19 in West Africa appeared to remain relatively limited in 2021 compared to other regions of the world. Vaccination rates, however, were low.³ As of the end of October 2021 only 3 per cent of Burkina Faso’s, 4 per cent of Mali’s, 5 per cent of Niger’s, and 6 per cent Nigeria’s

¹ For conflict definitions and typologies see chapter 2, section I, in this volume.

² Soumaré, M., ‘Macky Sall a-t-il voulu le report des élections locales?’ [Did Macky Sall want to postpone the local elections?], *Jeune Afrique*, 1 Apr. 2021.

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022* (UN OCHA: Geneva, Dec. 2021), p. 37; and United Nations, Security Council, ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel’, S/2021/1091, 15 Dec. 2021.

population had been fully vaccinated, though Cabo Verde registered a 36 per cent vaccination rate.⁴

In addition, with more than 80 per cent of the region's population reliant on agriculture and pastoral activities, the impact of climate change has led to high levels of food insecurity. An international index measuring both climate vulnerability and readiness to respond to climate change effects ranked Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria among the countries most exposed to the physical effects of climate change.⁵

Transnational armed groups

Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria were hotspots of armed conflict in West Africa in 2021. All four countries experienced attacks by armed groups, some operating beyond their respective national borders. In Nigeria the main armed groups were Boko Haram (also known as Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, or JAS) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Both groups launched attacks in the north-east of the country as well as in neighbouring Niger and Cameroon, with Boko Haram claiming some attacks in Chad.⁶

In the Liptako-Gourma region—comprising the tri-border areas of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso—the main transnational armed groups active in 2021 were Ansarul Islam, Katiba Serma, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), an umbrella coalition of al-Qaeda-aligned groups composed of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Eddine, al-Mourabitoune and Katiba Macina.⁷ These groups attacked both state armed forces and civilians.

In Senegal authorities reportedly dismantled a cell affiliated with JNIM in the eastern town of Kidira, prompting President Macky Sall to attend, for the first time, the ordinary session of the summit of the Authority of Heads of State of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel), held in N'Djamena, Chad, on 15 February 2021.⁸

Security forces countering these armed groups included national, regional and international forces, as well as local self-defence groups. These non-state

⁴ UN OCHA (note 3), p. 37.

⁵ Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND GAIN), 'Country index', July 2021, accessed 19 Jan. 2022.

⁶ Kindzeka, M. E., 'Cameroon says Boko Haram has intensified attacks for supplies', VOA, 30 Mar. 2021; and 'Chad army says at least 26 soldiers killed in Lake Chad attack', Reuters, 5 Aug. 2021.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*, Africa Report no. 306 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 10 Dec. 2021).

⁸ Presidency of Senegal, 'Le Président Macky Sall quitte Dakar pour prendre part à la séance élargie du Sommet du G5 Sahel à N'djaména' [President Macky Sall leaves Dakar to take part in the enlarged session of the G5 Sahel Summit in N'djaména], Press release, 15 Feb. 2021; and 'Senegal uncovers Jihadist cell in east of country', Defense Post, 9 Feb. 2021.

armed groups displayed varying degrees of legal recognition by and formal collaboration with state authorities.

Several leaders among the armed groups were killed in 2021, including Abubakar Shekau, the long-time leader of Boko Haram, with conflicting reports about the circumstances of his death; Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, the leader of ISGS, reportedly killed by forces of the French military-led Operation Barkhane; and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, head of ISWAP, and, subsequently, his immediate successor, Malam Bako, who were both reportedly killed in military operations by Nigerian forces.⁹

Election-related violence

Of the four presidential elections that took place in the region in 2021, only the Cabo Verde election was free of violence. In Niger long-time minister Mohamed Bazoum won the presidency in the second round (first round, 27 December 2020) to succeed Mahamadou Issoufou, who had served the maximum two terms in office allowed by the constitution. Both Bazoum and Issoufou are from the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS-Tarayya), which brought Issoufou to power in 2011. Bazoum defeated former president Mahamane Ousmane (1993–96), becoming the country's first president to take office in a peaceful transfer of power. However, Ousmane rejected the result, claiming irregularities and fraud. This contestation led to violent protests across the country and a government crackdown on protestors. Among hundreds arrested was opposition leader and former prime minister Hama Amadou, who was allied with Ousmane. An attempted military coup took place two days before Bazoum's inauguration on 2 April 2021—the attackers had reportedly come from a nearby airbase but were defeated by the presidential guard.¹⁰

In Benin incumbent president Patrice Talon was declared winner of the April presidential election in the first round, with some 86 per cent of votes. Several opposition leaders had boycotted the election, while others were barred from standing or were arrested. In the weeks around the elections, constitutionalist-turned-opposition leader, Frédéric Joel Aïvo, as well as another prominent opposition leader, Reckya Madougou were arrested and imprisoned, and in December 2021 these two leaders were sentenced to,

⁹ 'ISWAP militant group says Nigeria's Boko Haram leader is dead', Reuters, 7 June 2021; 'Macron says French forces killed Islamic State leader in Sahara', Reuters, 16 Sep. 2021; 'Nigerian military confirms death of ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi', *The Guardian* (Nigeria), 14 Oct. 2021; and 'Nigerian army says Islamic State West Africa's new leader killed in military operation', Reuters, 29 Oct. 2021.

¹⁰ Abdou, N. H., 'Despite post-election violence, Niger achieves democratic breakthrough', United States Institute of Peace, 12 Mar. 2021; Akinpelu, Y., 'Attempted coup foiled in Niger days to historic handover', *Premium Times*, 31 Mar. 2021; and 'Niger "coup" thwarted days before inauguration', BBC News, 31 Mar. 2021.

respectively, 10 and 20 years in jail.¹¹ Violence was registered in parts of the country before and during the election.¹²

In Gambia incumbent Adama Barrow was re-elected for a second term in office, gaining around 53 per cent of the vote in the first round of the 4 December poll, thereby defeating his former ally-cum-rival, Ousainou Darboe, who garnered 28 per cent. Two other candidates shared the remaining votes. Though most observers attested to the credibility and transparency of the electoral process,¹³ contestation by Darboe and the other losing candidates raised tensions, leading the police to disperse their supporters with tear gas. Sporadic violence was registered but largely circumscribed.¹⁴

Military coups and transitional regimes

An attempted military coup was thwarted by security forces in Niger in March 2021 and successful coups registered in Mali in May and Guinea in September.

In Mali it was a ‘coup within a coup’, in that Colonel Assimi Goïta had staged a first coup against elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, on 18 August 2020.¹⁵ Following regional pressure, particularly from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the military junta had appointed a civilian president, Bah Ndaw, and civilian prime minister, Mouctar Ouane, with Goïta retaining the post of vice-president. However, dissatisfied with the transitional government’s ministerial choices in a government reshuffle, Colonel Goïta staged a second coup on 24 May 2021, arresting both the Ndaw and Ouane. Goïta then proclaimed himself head of state and assumed the transitional presidency.¹⁶

In Guinea Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya, head of the army’s special forces, staged a military coup on 5 September 2021 that overthrew President Alpha Condé. In March 2020 the latter had forced through a constitutional change allowing him to stand for a third term in the October 2020 presidential

¹¹ Thantant, M., ‘Bénin: L’opposant Joël Aïvo condamné à dix ans de prison’ [Benin: Opposition leader Joël Aïvo sentenced to ten years in prison], *Jeune Afrique*, 7 Dec. 2021; and AFP, ‘Benin opposition leader sentenced to 20 years in jail’, France 24, 11 Dec. 2021.

¹² West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), ‘Élection Présidentielle de 2021: La violence électorale passera-t-elle encore par le Bénin?’ [2021 Presidential Election: Will electoral violence again pass through Benin?], WARN Policy Brief, Apr. 2021; and CIVICUS, ‘Benin: Protests and violence precede controversial presidential elections without main opposition’, 5 May 2021.

¹³ Price, N., ‘Presidential election in the Gambia’, press statement, US Department of State, 7 Dec. 2021; Busari, K. and Olawoyin, O., ‘#GambiaDecides2021: Adama Barrow wins Gambia presidential election’, *Premium Times*, 5 Dec. 2021; and Crowe, P., ‘Gambian opposition parties reject election results’, *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2021.

¹⁴ Saine, P., ‘Gambia police disperse protesters contesting president’s re-election’, Reuters, 7 Dec. 2021.

¹⁵ See *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 195–202.

¹⁶ Wing, S. D., ‘Another coup in Mali? Here’s what you need to know’, *Washington Post*, 28 May 2021.

elections.¹⁷ Doumbouya was sworn in as transitional president on 1 October 2021 and, six days later, appointed Mohamed Beavogui—an international civil servant recently retired from the United Nations system—as prime minister.¹⁸

As per their agreed policy against military coups, both ECOWAS and the African Union suspended Mali and Guinea from their decision-making organs.¹⁹ ECOWAS held two extraordinary summits on both countries and imposed sanctions on the juntas running them, which in turn pledged a swift return to civilian rule.

In Mali it was agreed that the transition would last for a maximum of 18 months from the first coup, culminating in presidential elections in February 2022. However, in December 2021 the military junta organized a general gathering for ‘state reformation’, at the end of which it asked for the transition to be prolonged for up to five years, which as of the end of 2021 it seemed likely ECOWAS would reject.²⁰ In Guinea the transitional authorities had, as of the end of 2021, not yet fixed a timeline for the transition.

Human security

The human security situation in West Africa, and particularly in the Sahel, in 2021 was marked by general insecurity, political violence, forced displacement, malnutrition, the spread of diseases among displaced populations—both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees—droughts, food insecurity, school closures, and the abduction and abuse of young girls and women. In 2021 the UN designated several parts of the Sahel as having become humanitarian high-risk zones since 2020, with deterioration observed in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria.²¹ More than 2 million people in the Central Sahel became or remained internally displaced in 2021, while about half a million resided as refugees in other countries in the region.²²

In its September 2021 update the *Global Report on Food Crises* reported a global rise in the number of people facing catastrophe—that is, households extremely food deprived and experiencing a collapse in livelihoods. Along

¹⁷ Foucher, V. and Depagne, R., ‘Condé’s removal clears the way for army to regain control of Guinea’, *International Crisis Group*, 8 Sep. 2021.

¹⁸ ‘Guinea junta names development veteran Mohamed Beavogui prime minister’, *Africanews*, 7 Oct. 2021.

¹⁹ Souaré, I. K., ‘The African Union as a norm entrepreneur on military coups d’état in Africa (1952–2012): An empirical assessment’, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Mar. 2014), pp. 69–94.

²⁰ *Africanews*, ‘Assises nationales au Mali : une transition jusqu’à 5 ans?’ [National Conferences in Mali: A transition up to 5 years?], *Africanews*, 31 Dec. 2021.

²¹ UN OCHA, ‘Sahel INFORM/Indice de risque 2017–2021’ [Sahel INFORM/Risk Index 2017–2021], accessed 15 Feb. 2022.

²² UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), ‘Decade of Sahel conflict leaves 2.5 million people displaced’, 14 Jan. 2022.

with Yemen and South Sudan, Burkina Faso falls in the highest phase classification of this index.²³

Schools, colleges and universities in northern Nigeria were the target of a wave of kidnappings for ransom in 2021.²⁴ Between January and September there were some 20 attacks on schools, with 1436 children abducted, 16 murdered and over 200 missing. Mass kidnappings included the seizure of 279 students from a female secondary school in Zamfara State on 26 February, the abduction of 200 children in Niger State in June and the snatching of 140 pupils in Kaduna State in July.²⁵ The insecurity forced hundreds of schools to close, deepening the humanitarian and educational crisis. As of 29 November 2021, 934 schools in northern Nigeria were closed, depriving over a million children of education.²⁶

Multinational peace and security operations

Several multinational peace and security operations have been deployed to address insecurities in West Africa, mainly in the Sahel region. The largest of these is the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was established in 2013. MINUSMA focuses on peacekeeping and stabilization of the country through supporting implementation of the Algiers agreement (2015), the political transition, the restoration of state authority, and the protection of civilians.²⁷ A number of other missions were conducting security-related, often counterterrorism, operations, rather than traditional peace operations.²⁸ The French military Operation Barkhane deployed in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger since 2014, with its headquarters in the Chadian capital, is a key example of a security-related force focused on regional counterterrorism.²⁹

²³ Global Network Against Food Crisis, '2021 Global Report on Food Crisis, September 2021 update', Sept. 2021

²⁴ Obasi, N., 'Halting repeated school kidnappings in Nigeria', International Crisis Group, 5 Mar. 2021.

²⁵ Obiezu, T. '279 Kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls released by their captors', VOA, 2 Mar. 2021; 'Nigeria rules out paying ransom for hundreds of kidnapped school children', France 24, 2 June 2021; and Maishanu, A. A., 'Police confirm abduction in Kaduna school, say 26 students rescued', *Premium Times*, 5 July 2021.

²⁶ UNICEF Nigeria, 'First day of school "indefinitely postponed" for at least 1 million Nigerian students', Press release, 15 Sep. 2021; and UN OCHA, 'Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian snapshot', 2 Dec. 2021.

²⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 2584, 29 June 2021.

²⁸ For a discussion on the differences between 'multilateral peace operations' and 'multilateral other operations' see chapter 2, section II, in this volume.

²⁹ France describes Operation Barkhane as having a counterterrorism role. See France Ministry of the Armed Forces, 'Operation Barkhane', accessed 1 Apr. 2021. Given there is no single internationally accepted definition of what constitutes terrorism, however, counterterrorism measures can generate controversy. Counterterrorism instruments vary from heavily securitized responses (including killing armed fighters on the battlefield) to holistic national and international strategies aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.

Table 7.2. Active external national and multilateral peace and counterterrorism operations in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, 2021

Launched or established	Name	Contributing countries/ organizations	Force level (No. of personnel deployed)	Country of deployment
2012	EU Capacity Building Mission Sahel Niger	EU member states	124	Niger
2013	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali	UN (mainly African countries, Bangladesh, China, Egypt and Germany)	14 917	Mali
2013	EU Training Mission in Mali	EU member states	1212	Mali
2014 ^a	Multinational Joint Task Force	Benin (no troops), Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria	10 620	Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria
2014 ^b	Operation Barkhane	France	4 800	Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger
2015	EU Capacity Building Mission Sahel Mali	EU member states	152	Mali
2017	Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel	Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger	5 300	Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger
2020	Task Force Takuba	Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Hungary, Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden	800	Liptako-Gourma region

^a Initiated as a solely Nigerian force in 1994; expanded to include Chad and Niger in 1998.

^b Succeeded Operation Serval, which was launched in Jan. 2013 and ended in July 2014.

Source: SIPRI, Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 1 Apr. 2022.

Operation Barkhane collaborates closely with the G5 Sahel Joint Force, one of the two regional counterterrorism task forces in the region. The second regional operation is the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), created by the AU and the Lake Chad Basin Commission to fight Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region. The force has so far consisted of troops from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.³⁰

Since March 2020 the mandate of the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) in Mali has been broadened to include not only capacity building of the Malian army, but providing assistance to the national armed forces of the other G5 Sahel countries, with priority placed on Burkina Faso and Niger.³¹

³⁰ See *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 197–202.

³¹ European Union External Action, 'General Maïo visits Niger to discuss the new mandate of EUTM Mali', 21 May 2021.

On the civilian side, the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger are building the capacity of, respectively, the Malian and Nigerien internal security forces, while a EUCAP Sahel Mali's Regional Advisory and Coordination Cell (RACC) in Mauritania supports regional and cross border cooperation in the Sahel (see table 7.2).³²

Coordination between these complex constellations of multilateral peace (and other) operations has been a challenge and their effectiveness mixed, whether at the military level or in terms of restoring state authority. In particular, more needs to be done to differentiate between civilians and combatants in the areas they operate.³³ Furthermore, national and regional security forces regularly face accusations of human rights abuses, including conducting extrajudicial killings during counterterrorism operations.³⁴

On 10 June 2021, amid rapidly escalating tensions between Mali and France,³⁵ President Emmanuel Macron announced a drawdown of the 5000 Barkhane troops in Mali.³⁶ French soldiers were to be replaced by the European multinational Task Force Takuba, which had been set up for this purpose in 2020 under Operation Barkhane's command. Composed of special forces and logistical and tactical support from some 12 European countries, Takuba is tasked with advising, assisting and accompanying Malian Armed Forces and regional troops.³⁷ French forces closed their bases in Kidal and Tessalit in northern Mali in November, and in Timbuktu on 15 December.³⁸

Against a background of increasingly widespread anti-French resentment in the region, Mali's transitional government engaged in closer security cooperation with Russia. On 23 December 2021 France and 15 other Western nations issued a statement condemning the alleged deployment of Russian

³² EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) Sahel Mali, 'EUCAP Sahel Mali', accessed 19 Jan. 2022; and EUCAP Sahel Niger, 'EUCAP Sahel Niger', accessed 19 Jan. 2022.

³³ International Crisis Group, *What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram*, Africa Report no. 291 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 7 July 2020).

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2022: Events of 2021* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 2022); and Zandonni, G., Staius T. and Aksar, M., "'No room for dialogue": How abuses by Niger's foreign-funded army derail its anti-jihadist fight', *New Humanitarian*, 30 Nov. 2021.

³⁵ Bensimon, C. and Vincent, E., 'Au Sahel, un convoi de l'armée française face à la colère populaire' [In the Sahel, a French Army convoy faces popular anger], *Le Monde*, 30 Nov. 2021; and Melly, P., 'Why France faces so much anger in West Africa', *BBC News*, 5 Dec. 2021.

³⁶ Emmanuel Macron annonce "La fin de l'opération Barkhane en tant qu'opération extérieure" [Emmanuel Macron announces 'the end of Operation Barkhane as an external operation'], *RFI*, 10 June 2021; and Irish, J., 'Mali junta wiping its feet on blood of French soldiers, says angry France', *Reuters*, 29 Sep. 2021.

³⁷ Task Force Takuba: Political statement by the governments of Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Niger, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom', 23 Mar. 2020; and 'Europe deploys Takuba task force in Mali as France draws down troops', *RFI*, 16 Dec. 2021.

³⁸ United Nations, Security Council, 'Situation in Mali', Report of the Secretary-General, S/2021/1117, 4 Jan. 2022.

Table 7.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Liptako-Gourma region, 2017–21

Provinces (state)	2017	2018	2019	2020 (%)	2021 (%)
Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Nord, Est, Nord and Sahel (Burkina Faso's part of Liptako-Gourma)	77	266	2 123	2 261 (98)	2 219 (94)
Total Burkina Faso				2 303	2 372
Gao, Ménaka and Mopti (Malian part of Liptako-Gourma)	568	1 409	1 658	2 230 (78)	1 375 (72)
Total Mali				2 852	1 910
Tillabéri (Nigerien part of Liptako-Gourma in Niger)	62	170	263	680 (60)	905 (62)
Total Niger				1 126	1 460
Total Liptako-Gourma	707	1 845	4 044	5 171	4 482

Note: Percentages are of total national conflict-related fatalities.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Data export tool', accessed 16 Mar. 2022. Data per region is available from 11 Jan. 2017.

private military company the Wagner Group.³⁹ The situation at the end of 2021 not only raises questions about potential impacts on the Western military presence in the Sahel—particularly France and Task Force Takuba—but the consequences for MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, which rely on French strategic and logistical support.⁴⁰

Internal armed conflicts (including the role of armed self-defence groups)

In 2021 armed violence in West Africa mainly manifested itself through attacks by armed groups, intercommunity and intracommunity tensions, violent disputes between farmers and herders, and banditry and organized crime, with a particular hotspot of insecurity being the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region. While the number of conflict-related fatalities in this tri-border region decreased, mainly because of a decrease in fatalities in Mali, it remained higher than the 2019 level (see table 7.3).

Burkina Faso

The security situation in Burkina Faso continued to deteriorate in 2021, with armed groups continuing their attacks against government forces and public infrastructure, as well as against unarmed civilian populations. The total

³⁹ Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, 'Statement on the Deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali', 23 Dec. 2021.

⁴⁰ Lebovich, A., 'After Barkhane: What France's military drawdown means for the Sahel', European Council on Foreign Relations, 2 July 2021.

number of IDPs in Burkina Faso rose to more than 1.5 million by the end of 2021, meaning that six in ten of the Sahel's IDPs are now Burkinabe.⁴¹ On 5 June the village of Solhan in the north-eastern Sahel region was attacked by gunmen, who reportedly executed some 138 civilians.⁴² In August about 80 people were killed in an attack on a civilian convoy that was being escorted by gendarmes near the town of Arbinda in the north of the country. The death toll included about 20 gendarmes and pro-government militia.⁴³ Similar attacks killed about 53 gendarmes and civilians in Inata in the Sahel region bordering Mali in November; and an estimated 41 members of the pro-government Homeland Defence Volunteers (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, VDP) in the northern Loroum province in December.⁴⁴ The legalization and use of the VDP was one of the various strategies—which included changing the defence minister and the army chief of staff—deployed by the Burkina Faso government in its attempts to find solutions to these attacks.⁴⁵ Explanations given for the persistence of the attacks include the alleged dysfunctionality of the defence and security forces; a lack of equipment and adequate resources; and the weakness of the state presence in the most affected localities.

Mali

Mali registered less conflict-related fatalities in 2021 compared to 2020, although the security situation remained poor. More than 400 000 people were displaced inside the country—a 30 per cent increase from the previous year.⁴⁶ There was little progress in implementing the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, particularly regarding some of the fundamental pending issues, such as the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, the finalization of institutional and political reforms, and the effective implementation of development projects. Even so, the signatory parties appeared to maintain good working relations, with improved dialogue observed between them.⁴⁷

⁴¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Decade of Sahel conflict leaves 2.5 million people displaced', 14 Jan. 2022.

⁴² Amnesty International, 'Burkina Faso: In the wake of the Solhan massacre, the priority must be to protect the people', 7 June 2021.

⁴³ Ndiaga, T., 'Death toll from Burkina Faso attack rises to 80', Reuters, 20 Aug. 2021.

⁴⁴ 'Burkina Faso President criticizes army "dysfunctions" after deadly attack', Africanews, 18 Nov. 2021; and 'Burkina Faso begins two-day mourning period after dozens killed in ambush', France 24, 26 Dec. 2021.

⁴⁵ Tisseron, A., *Pandora's Box: Burkina Faso, Self-Defense Militias and VDP Law in Fighting Jihadism* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: Dakar, 2021).

⁴⁶ UNHCR (note 41).

⁴⁷ Carter Center, *Report of the Independent Observer: Observations on the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Resulting from the Algiers Process* (Carter Center: Bamako/Atlanta, Aug. 2021).

Table 7.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Mali, 2013–21

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	547	301	316	210	563	759	831	1657	1159
Explosions/remote violence	191	39	27	32	144	177	234	262	285
Protests, riots and strategic developments	7	1	5	7	3	28	4	27	10
Violence against civilians	138	41	80	71	238	783	806	903	456
Total	883	382	428	320	948	1 747	1 875	2 849	1 910

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, 'Data export tool', accessed 17 Mar. 2022.

Throughout the year civilians and security forces were subject to deadly attacks by armed groups, particularly in the centre of the country where extremist groups are interwoven with local self-defence militias and armed groups, exacerbating local and community tensions. With 20 hostile deaths in 2021, compared to 6 in 2020, there was a clear uptick in MINUSMA fatalities due to malicious acts, which returned to the levels seen prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (see chapter 2). On 8 August 2021 suspected members of ISGS reportedly raided several villages in the Gao region (north), killing at least 51 civilians. On 3 December suspected Katiba Macina elements ambushed a public bus near Songho village, in the Mopti region (centre), reportedly killing 32 civilians. A few days later Katiba Macina militants clashed with elements of the self-defence militia called Dana Ambassagou, leaving some 10 militia members dead near Baima village.⁴⁸ In addition, landmines and improvised explosive devices killed 285 people (see table 7.4).

Niger

There was a rise in conflict-related fatalities in Niger from 1126 in 2020 to 1460 in 2021, which can partly be explained by increasing violence in the Liptako-Gourma region (accounting for 62 per cent of total national fatalities). For example, on 15 March 2021 gunmen killed at least 58 civilians as they were returning from a weekly market in the Tillabéri region, while a week later unidentified gunmen attacked the villages of Intazayene, Bakorate and Wistane in Tahoua region, killing at least 137 people.⁴⁹ In early December an attack on the Fianto base of the G5 Sahel's Joint Force in the Tillabéri region killed about 29 soldiers.⁵⁰ The number of IDPs in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions increased by 53 per cent over the course of 2021.⁵¹

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, 'Tracking conflict worldwide, Africa—Mali', CrisisWatch, Dec. 2021.

⁴⁹ United Nations, 'UN chief reaffirms solidarity with Niger, as second deadly attack rocks country', UN News, 24 Mar. 2021.

⁵⁰ 'West Africa: Explosions, attacks in Mali, Niger kill over 100', Deutsche Welle, 5 Dec. 2021.

⁵¹ UNHCR (note 41).

Table 7.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Nigeria, by region, 2017–21

States	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Adamawa, Borno and Yobe (north-east)	3 022	2 591	2 221	3465	3 212
Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara (north-west)	146	1 095	1 920	2793	3 523
Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Niger (Middle Belt)	424	1 441	347	617	1 750
Ebonyi, Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia (south-east)	325	160	114	110	649
Delta (south)	97	60	55	121	84
Total	4 869	4947	6 243	7781	9 913

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Dashboard', accessed 13 Jan. 2022.

Nigeria

The security situation in Nigeria worsened in 2021, with a 27 per cent increase in conflict-related fatalities compared to 2020 (see table 7.5). This can be explained by 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.⁵² In 2021 conflict-related fatalities in the north-west were on the same level as in the north-east of the country (Adamawa State, Borno State and Yobe State). These states, and particularly Borno State, remained the epicentre of the Boko Haram-related armed conflict in the Lake Chad region, comprising parts of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. As of 22 December 2021 the Lake Chad region hosted an estimated 5.5 million displaced people, of whom 76 per cent were in Nigeria.⁵³ Forced displacement and grave human rights violations, including killings, sexual violence, abduction and the recruitment of child soldiers, remained widespread.

There was some cautious optimism in 2021 regarding the conflict with Boko Haram following the surrender of thousands of its fighters. The surrender was attributed to a combination of infighting between armed groups, pressure from security forces, and a controversial amnesty programme aimed at senior jihadist commanders introduced following the death of Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau in May.⁵⁴

⁵² Beaumont, P., 'Failed state? Why Nigeria's fragile democracy is facing an uncertain future', *The Guardian*, 25 Oct. 2021; Tanko, A., 'Nigeria's security crises—five different threats', BBC News, 19 July 2021; and International Crisis Group, *Ending Nigeria's Herder–Farmer Crisis: The Livestock Reform Plan*, Africa Report no. 302 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 4 May 2021).

⁵³ International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Regional Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM): Lake Chad Basin crisis', IOM Monthly Dashboard no. 39, 22 Dec. 2021.

⁵⁴ Anyadike, O., 'Nigeria's secret programme to lure top Boko Haram defectors', *New Humanitarian*, 19 Aug. 2021; and Kurtzer, J., 'Boko Haram's leader is dead: What are the humanitarian and security implications?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 June 2021.

In the south-east, clashes between separatist group the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and state authorities intensified, with an almost sixfold increase of conflict-related fatalities in 2021—to 649—compared to 2020. Violent protests broke out following the arrest of IPOB's leader, Nnamdi Kanu, in June.⁵⁵ IPOB has been accused of attacks on police stations, government offices, prisons, and the homes of politicians and community leaders. An alleged IPOB attack on Owerri prison, Imo state, in early April 2021 resulted in one of the country's largest ever jailbreaks, with 1844 prisoners escaping.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Orjinmo, N., 'Nnamdi Kanu's arrest leaves Nigeria's Ijob separatists in disarray', BBC News, 4 July 2021.

⁵⁶ Akinwotu, E., 'Nearly 2,000 prisoners escape jail in south-east Nigeria', *The Guardian*, 5 Apr. 2021.