

II. Peace processes

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Like the conflicts that they attempt to address, peace processes are also increasingly complex, multidimensional and internationalized, involving a wide range of actors, activities and outcomes. However, not all peace processes lead to positive or sustainable outcomes. Inconclusive political settlements, a failure to address the root causes of a conflict, and ongoing insecurity and tensions have often led to non-compliance with a peace agreement—or outright violations—and to a recurrence of armed conflict. Since the mid 1990s most armed conflicts have been renewed outbreaks of old conflicts, indicating that root causes are not being sufficiently addressed.¹ As discussed in section I of this chapter, there were both positive steps and setbacks in 2023 in political processes designed to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of armed violence in cases including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kosovo, Libya, the Philippines and Syria.

However, as also noted in section I, only a limited number of peace processes linked to armed conflict advanced in 2023. The previous edition of the SIPRI Yearbook pointed to four promising peace processes: those in Colombia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. Of these, the one in Sudan collapsed completely with the outbreak of fighting in April 2023, but there were differing levels of progress in the other three cases.

Colombia

The Colombian government pursued its goal of achieving ‘total peace’ with political armed groups through the course of 2023 in an effort to build on its existing agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerza Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC). On 31 December 2022 the government announced that it had agreed an initial ceasefire with the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN), the largest remaining active militant organization.² The government also announced a six-month ceasefire with four other armed groups including a FARC splinter faction known as FARC–Central General Staff (FARC–Estado Mayor Central, FARC-EMC).³

¹ von Einsiedel, S. et al., *Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict*, UN University (UNU) Centre for Policy Research Occasional Paper 10 (UNU: Tokyo, Mar. 2017). On the peace agreement provisions consistently associated with successful transitions from war to peace see Fontana, G., Siewert, M. B. and Yakinthou, C., ‘Managing war-to-peace transitions after intra-state conflicts: Configurations of successful peace processes’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2020).

² Gowen, R., ‘International conflict management and peace processes’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, p. 60.

³ AFP, ‘Colombia agrees ceasefire with five largest armed groups’, *France 24*, 1 Jan. 2023.

Firming up these agreements proved difficult. In early January the ELN denied having come to an agreement at all, but it proceeded to hold talks with government representatives in Venezuela and Mexico.⁴ The process stalled after ELN forces killed nine Colombian soldiers in March, but the two sides finally settled on another ceasefire in June, although this was only scheduled to take effect in August.⁵ While the ceasefire reduced the level of armed conflict once it began, the ELN created public outrage by continuing to kidnap individuals for ransom.⁶ In further talks in December in Mexico, the ELN offered to end kidnappings if the government was willing to offer it compensatory financial aid, but the two sides struggled to agree on the terms for continuing their ceasefire beyond its initial expiry date in January 2024.⁷

Government talks with FARC-EMC got off to a good start in January and February 2023, but these also turned into a stop–start process. After the two sides agreed to ceasefire-monitoring mechanisms to be backed by the church and the Organization of American States (OAS) in February, there were hopes that broader talks would start in May.⁸ However, both sides accused the other of ceasefire breaches, and the government partially suspended the pause of hostilities in May.⁹ The government and FARC-EMC continued to try to get talks back on track despite incidences of violence, and they eventually agreed a new three-month ceasefire in mid October.¹⁰ This nearly fell apart in November after tensions around local elections, but by the end of the year there were signs of the talks making progress, and in January 2024 they were able to agree on an extension of their ceasefire.¹¹

The government's efforts to talk to smaller armed groups made less progress. There was also controversy as to whether the 'total peace' effort should extend to criminal organizations. While in February the government proposed legislation enabling outreach to criminal gangs, its efforts to engage with one of the most powerful groups—the Gaitanist Self-defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, often called the 'Gulf Clan')—stalled in March, and criminal violence remained high throughout

⁴ 'ELN rebel group denies ceasefire with Colombian government', Al Jazeera, 3 Jan. 2023.

⁵ Acosta, N., 'Colombia, ELN declare ceasefire as latest cycle of talks end', Reuters, 9 June 2023.

⁶ Shuldiner, H., 'Kidnappings surge in Colombia amid ELN peace negotiations', InSight Crime, 18 July 2023.

⁷ 'ELN reaches agreement with Colombian government to end kidnappings for profit', EFE, 17 Dec. 2023.

⁸ Alsema, A., 'Illegal armed groups to join Colombia's ceasefire verification commission: Govt', Colombia Reports, 3 Jan. 2023.

⁹ 'Colombian government partially suspends ceasefire with armed dissident group', People's Dispatch, 24 May 2023.

¹⁰ Rueda, M., 'Colombia signs 3-month ceasefire with FARC holdout group', AP, 16 Oct. 2023.

¹¹ Rueda, M., 'Colombia extends ceasefire with FARC splinter group in bid to reduce rural violence', AP, 15 Jan. 2024.

the year.¹² The Gaitanistas also clashed with the ELN, FARC-EMC and other armed groups on multiple fronts.

Nonetheless, the Colombian government earned significant outside support for its overall peace effort, with the United Nations Security Council agreeing to expand the mandate of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia (UNVMC)—originally designed to monitor the implementation of the government’s agreement with FARC—to cover the ELN in August.¹³

Ethiopia (Tigray)

After the Ethiopian government and Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) agreed a ceasefire in November 2022, the two sides worked on its implementation throughout 2023 with the support of a small African Union (AU) monitoring mission, the AU Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mission (AU-MVCM).¹⁴

Having faced a decisive battlefield defeat, the TPLF began handing over heavy weapons in January. In return, the government allowed more aid to flow into Tigray.¹⁵ Eritrea—which had supported the Ethiopian government—also started to withdraw its forces from Tigray, although TPLF officials and outside observers accused Eritrean forces of continuing to terrorize civilians during the year.¹⁶

The Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, held a reconciliation meeting with TPLF leaders in February, and in March the government stopped designating the group as a terrorist organization.¹⁷ While TPLF officials remained barred from national politics, they were allowed to retain key posts in the regional administration. As the year progressed, relations between the TPLF and national authorities remained solid, although there were tensions between the Tigrayans and neighbouring Amhara region, which had taken control of parts of Tigray during the war.¹⁸ External observers have concluded that many of the 2022 ceasefire terms remained unimplemented, and by the end of 2023 Tigray was also enduring a large-scale drought-induced famine.¹⁹

¹² International Crisis Group (ICG), *The Unsolved Crime in ‘Total Peace’: Dealing with Colombia’s Gaitanistas*, Latin America Report no. 105 (ICG: Brussels, 19 Mar. 2024).

¹³ United Nations, ‘Security Council unanimously expands mandate, personnel strength of mission in Colombia, unanimously adopting Resolution 2964 (2023)’, UN News, 2 Aug. 2023.

¹⁴ On the ceasefire in 2022 see Gowan (note 2), pp. 59–60.

¹⁵ ‘Ethiopia’s Tigrayan rebels start handing over heavy weapons’, Al Jazeera, 11 Jan. 2023; and Harter, F., ‘Tigray aid access improves as peace deal makes headway’, New Humanitarian, 31 Jan. 2023.

¹⁶ ‘Eritrean troops “committed war crimes” in Ethiopia after peace deal: Report’, Al Jazeera, 5 Sep. 2023.

¹⁷ ‘Ethiopian PM meets Tigray region leaders for first time since peace deal’, Reuters, 4 Feb. 2023; and Ethiopian House of Peoples’ Representatives, ‘The House removed TPLF from the terrorist designation’, 22 Mar. 2023.

¹⁸ Yibeltal, K. and Muia, W., ‘Ethiopia plans vote to solve Tigray–Amhara dispute’, BBC, 7 Nov. 2023. On the parallel conflict between Amhara and the central government see section I of this chapter.

¹⁹ de Waal, A. and Berhe, M. G., ‘Ethiopia back on the brink’, *Foreign Affairs*, 8 Apr. 2024.

Yemen

In Yemen, the United Nations and Omani mediators began 2023 attempting to restart a truce between the Houthi movement and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition supporting the UN-recognized government. While this truce had collapsed in October 2022, both sides appeared interested in keeping levels of violence relatively low.²⁰ The restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran (allies of the Houthis) and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 created an optimistic context for engagement.²¹

By April there were positive signs, as the Saudis lowered restrictions on shipping to Yemen and the Houthis unilaterally released hundreds of prisoners.²² It was also noteworthy that Saudi Arabian officials held direct talks with the Houthis in the national capital Sana'a for the first time since the group captured it in 2014.²³ The talks nonetheless stalled as the Houthis proposed a range of conditions on financial issues, transport links inside Yemen and oil revenues that the Saudis would not accept.²⁴ Despite occasional clashes, a Houthi delegation visited Saudi Arabia in September—again a first since 2014—to go through these issues.²⁵ The UN scored a separate technical success in August when it succeeded in offloading over 1 million barrels of oil from the FSO *Safer*, a floating storage and offloading vessel moored off the Yemeni coast that had threatened to cause an environmental disaster since 2015.²⁶

The outbreak of the Israel– Hamas war and ensuing Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea did not derail these Saudi–Houthi contacts. On 23 December 2023 the UN-recognized government and the Houthis pledged to develop a road map for a new ceasefire, oil exports and opening up transport inside Yemen.²⁷

²⁰ United Nations, 'Situation in Yemen remains stable, special envoy tells Security Council, highlighting importance of resuming political process, ceasefire', SC/15176, 16 Jan. 2023.

²¹ International Crisis Group (ICG), 'The impact of the Saudi–Iranian rapprochement on Middle East conflicts', 19 Apr. 2023.

²² Wintour, P., 'Red Cross announces exchange of nearly 900 prisoners in Yemen war', *The Guardian*, 14 Apr. 2023.

²³ El Yaakoubi, A., 'Saudi, Omani envoys hold peace talks with Houthi leaders in Sanaa', Reuters, 9 Apr. 2023.

²⁴ Nagi, A., 'Catching up on the back-channel peace talks in Yemen', International Crisis Group, 10 Oct. 2023.

²⁵ El Yaakoubi, A. and Alghobari, M., 'Houthis leave Riyadh after talks with Saudis, some progress reported—Sources', Reuters, 19 Sep. 2023.

²⁶ International Maritime Organization, 'FSO Safer: Ship-to-ship transfer of oil completed', 21 Aug. 2023.

²⁷ 'Yemen warring parties commit to ceasefire, UN-led peace process, says envoy', Al Jazeera, 23 Dec. 2023.