

III. Armed conflict and peace processes in South East Asia

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South East Asia—comprising the states of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam—is mainly tropical and includes a wide range of ethnicities and religions. The many coastal communities in the island-studded region are highly vulnerable to the growing threats from climate change, with sea-level rises predicted to displace millions of people.¹ Another non-traditional security threat in 2019 was the rapid spread of African swine fever across the region, which threatened food security and the livelihoods of millions of households reliant on pig farming.² Some of Asia's most organized Islamist extremist groups are active in the region, most notably in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.³ This section focuses on the four countries in the region with subnational armed conflicts: one high-intensity armed conflict (i.e. more than 1000 deaths) in Myanmar and two low-intensity armed conflicts in Indonesia and Thailand (i.e. less than 1000 deaths). 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 nearly 1700, making it also a high-intensity armed conflict.

Armed conflict in Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the world's major emerging economies. The country faces demands for independence in the two provinces on the island of Papua and increasing attacks by Islamist armed groups. In particular, the country has become one of the main focal points of the Islamic State in South East Asia.⁴ However, in 2019 it was the long-simmering insurgency in Papua that was the

¹ Babson, E., 'Strained stability: Climate change and regional security in Southeast Asia', American Security Project, June 2018; and Nordqvist, P. and Krampe, F., 'Climate change and violent conflict: Sparse evidence from South Asia and South East Asia', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2018/4, Sep. 2018.

² Normile, D., 'African swine fever keeps spreading in Asia, threatening food security', *Science Magazine*, 14 May 2019.

³ Abuza, Z. and Clarke, C. P., 'The Islamic State meets Southeast Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 Sep. 2019.

⁴ On the rise of the Islamic State in Indonesia, see Schulze, K. E. and Liow, J. C., 'Making jihadis, waging jihad: Transnational and local dimensions of the ISIS phenomenon in Indonesia and Malaysia', *Asian Security*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2019), pp. 122–39; and Sheikh, M. K., 'Islamic State and al-Qaeda in a thriving Indonesian democracy', ed. Sheikh, M. K. et al., *Global Jihad in Southeast Asia: Examining the Expansion of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda* (Danish Institute for International Studies: 2019), pp. 39–58. On the role of social media in the rise of Islamist extremism in Indonesia, see Nuraniyah, N., 'The evolution of online violent extremism in Indonesia and the Philippines', Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology, Paper no. 5, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies and Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, July 2019. On attempts to reintegrate extremists, see Sumpter, C., 'Reintegration in Indonesia: Extremists, start-ups and occasional engagements', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 19 Feb. 2019.

Table 4.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Myanmar, 2013–19

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	300	358	1 078	155	196	118	1 238
Explosions/remote violence	45	53	27	35	30	31	85
Protests, riots and strategic developments	91	9	0	0	9	9	30
Violence against civilians	29	84	162	221	1 018	67	132
Total	465	504	1 267	411	1 253	225	1 485

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', [n.d.].

focus of most of the combat-related armed violence in the country. In March 2019 for example, fighting between Indonesian Government forces and the West Papua National Liberation Army left at least 15 people dead.⁵ Further deaths resulted from clashes between Indonesia's security forces and protesters in Wamena city and the provincial capital Jayapura in September.⁶

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) there were 213 conflict-related deaths in Indonesia in 2019, with 61 of these being related to armed conflict (battles or explosions/remote violence). However, the ACLED data shows disorder on the rise in Indonesia in 2019, with 152 fatalities in 2019 attributed to protests, riots and violence against civilians.⁷ This disorder was linked to growing intercommunal tensions (between religious minorities and the majority Muslim population) and growing political divisions.⁸ It also raised concerns about the Indonesian armed forces' growing political influence and the risk of a return to authoritarian rule.⁹

Armed conflict in Myanmar

Insurgencies have persisted for much of the past seven decades in Myanmar's Chin, Kachin, 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 natural resources.¹⁰ Off-budget funding of the Tatmadaw has contributed to its ability to operate without civilian oversight in conducting counter-

⁵ Associated Press, 'West Papua: Up to 15 feared dead as rebels and Indonesian soldiers clash', *The Guardian*, 8 Mar. 2019.

⁶ Karmini, N., 'Death toll climbs in Indonesia's Papua protests', *The Diplomat*, 26 Sep. 2019.

⁷ Bynum, E., 'Improving ACLED's Indonesia data (2015–2019)', ACLED infographic, 18 Dec. 2019; and ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

⁸ Lindsay, T., 'Jakarta riots reveal Indonesia's deep divisions on religion and politics', *The Conversation*, 27 May 2019.

⁹ *The Economist*, 'Indonesian politicians are giving the armed forces a bigger role in government', 31 Oct. 2019.

¹⁰ Hart, M., 'Myanmar's peace process on life support', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 10 Jan. 2019.

insurgency campaigns.¹¹ In Kachin and Shan states the ethnic conflict is also fuelled by a growing drugs trade, resource extraction (gems and timber) and money laundering.¹² The repercussions of the forcible displacement in 2017 of the Rohingya—members of a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic group—from Rakhine state continued into 2019.¹³ An ongoing peace process, launched in 2015, made little headway during 2019 against a backdrop of rising violence especially in Rakhine state. According to ACLED there were over 1200 battle-related deaths in Myanmar in 2019 (up from just under 120 in 2018), which accounted for 83 per cent of all conflict-related fatalities in the year (see table 4.4).¹⁴ The table also shows the huge change in the nature of the armed violence: from violence against civilians that dominated 2017 to predominantly battle-related fatalities in 2019.¹⁵

In the north-eastern states of Kachin and Shan over 120 000 people were displaced during 2011–18.¹⁶ In August 2019 fighting escalated in Shan state, as the Brotherhood Alliance—an alliance of three ethnic armed groups: the Arakan Army (AA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army—launched coordinated attacks on military targets, including a military academy, killing about 15 people.¹⁷ A four-month unilateral ceasefire declared by the military of Myanmar in December 2018 in Kachin and Shan states was extended three times during 2019, but ended on 21 September 2019.¹⁸ However, the alliance of three ethnic armed groups announced its own unilateral ceasefire on 9 September 2019 for one month and then extended it to the end of the year.¹⁹

There were also increased clashes during 2019 in Rakhine state between the Myanmar military and the AA, an ethnic Rakhine armed group that is a participant in the Kachin conflict, but which has additional training camps in

¹¹ See chapter 8, section III, in this volume.

¹² International Crisis Group, *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Report no. 299 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 8 Jan. 2019); and Walsh, J., 'Failing drug wars in northern Myanmar', East Asia Forum, 21 Sep. 2019.

¹³ On the Rohingya crisis in 2017, see Davis, I., Ghiasy, R. and Su, F., 'Armed conflict in Asia and Oceania', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 49–52.

¹⁴ On the methodological challenges for the recording of political violence amidst the complexity of the disorder in Myanmar, see ACLED, 'ACLED methodology and coding decisions around political violence in Myanmar', Nov. 2019.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of Myanmar's conflict landscape in 2019, see Bynum, E., 'Dueling ceasefires: Myanmar's conflict landscape in 2019', ACLED, 12 Feb. 2020.

¹⁶ Nickerson, J., 'The Kachin IDP crisis: Myanmar's other humanitarian disaster', Al Jazeera, 2 Dec. 2018; and International Rescue Committee, 'Beyond Rakhine, civilians at risk in Northern Shan and Kachin as violence continues in Myanmar', 30 Apr. 2018.

¹⁷ *The Economist*, 'A Chinese development scheme complicates Myanmar's ethnic conflicts', 29 Aug. 2019; and International Crisis Group, 'Myanmar: A violent push to shake up ceasefire negotiations', Asia Briefing no. 158, 24 Sep. 2019.

¹⁸ Weng, L., 'Renewed fighting in Shan and Rakhine as Myanmar military lets ceasefire expire', *The Irrawaddy*, 24 Sep. 2019.

¹⁹ Nyein, N., 'Myanmar rebel armies extend truce but fighting continues', *The Irrawaddy*, 3 Jan. 2020.

Rakhine state. In January 2019 for example, the AA carried out attacks on four police stations, and in October the group abducted almost 60 police officers, soldiers and government workers in Rakhine state.²⁰ The upsurge in fighting in parts of Rakhine state led to further population displacement (over 30 000 people as at 1 November 2019) and reduced the already low prospects of voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya from camps in Bangladesh.²¹

The crisis in Rakhine state and referral to the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice

At the beginning of 2019 more than 900 000 Rohingya remained in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in southern Bangladesh after being driven out by the Tatmadaw in late 2017 and 2018.²² Displacement continued in 2019, albeit at much lower rates, and Cox's Bazar remained the largest and densest refugee settlement in the world.²³ With no guarantees of citizenship and security if the Rohingya were to return to Myanmar, repatriation plans have been delayed indefinitely, and their future remains uncertain.²⁴

The Independent International Fact-finding Mission (IFFM) on Myanmar, established in March 2017 by the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate allegations of human rights violations by military and security forces in Kachin, Rakhine and Shan states, concluded in its 2018 report that the Tatmadaw's actions constituted crimes against humanity, war crimes and possible genocide.²⁵ In September 2019 the IFFM's final report stated that over 600 000 Rohingya remaining in Myanmar continued to face 'serious risk' of genocide and called for the situation to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC), or for the creation of a special mechanism, to prosecute

²⁰ International Crisis Group, 'A new dimension of violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state', Asia Briefing no. 154, 24 Jan. 2019; and Nang, S. and Ives, M., 'A daring helicopter rescue after rebels capture a ferry in Myanmar', *New York Times*, 28 Oct. 2019.

²¹ Al Jazeera, 'Myanmar: UN "disturbed" over attacks against civilians in Rakhine', 5 Apr. 2019; and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Myanmar: Conflict between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar Military, Update on humanitarian needs and response in Rakhine and Chin states', 1 Nov. 2019.

²² On developments in 2018, see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in Asia and Oceania', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 66–68.

²³ Wake, C. et al., 'Rohingya refugees' perspectives on their displacement in Bangladesh: Uncertain futures', Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, June 2019. On the international humanitarian response, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *2019 Joint Response Plan for Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, January–December* (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: 15 Feb. 2019). On the socio-economic impact on the host community, see UN Development Programme, 'Impacts of the Rohingya refugee influx on host communities', 27 July 2019.

²⁴ Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Myanmar and Bangladesh to start sending back thousands of Rohingya', *The Guardian*, 16 Aug. 2019; and International Crisis Group, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Report no. 303 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 27 Dec. 2019).

²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, 'Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar', A/HRC/39/CRP.2, 17 Sep. 2018.

Tatmadaw generals.²⁶ In an August report the FFM focused on the continued use of sexual and gender-based violence by the Myanmar armed forces and allied militias in operations against Kachin, Shan and other ethnic minorities in northern Myanmar.²⁷

The FFM's mandate ended in September when it transferred the information it collected about serious crimes under international law to the UN's new Independent Investigative Mechanism (IIM) for Myanmar. The IIM will build on this evidence and conduct its own investigations to support prosecutions in national, regional and international courts of perpetrators of atrocities in Myanmar.²⁸ The Government of Myanmar has continued to reject the FFM's findings. It established its own Independent Commission of Enquiry in August 2018 to investigate the Tatmadaw's conduct, and is expected to report its findings in early 2020. The government has also argued that any misconduct by individuals from the state security forces should be tried in military courts.²⁹

In February 2019 UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched an investigation into UN conduct in Myanmar, following accusations it ignored warning signs of escalating violence ahead of the attacks on the Rohingya in 2017.³⁰

Accountability and justice for alleged atrocities committed against the Rohingya people and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar remain elusive, despite legal efforts pending at both the ICC and International Court of Justice (ICJ). In March 2019 the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) unanimously approved a measure establishing the legal rights of the Rohingya people before the ICJ. This paved the way for individuals to bring cases against the Government of Myanmar for crimes committed against them by state armed forces in Rakhine.³¹ In October Yanghee Lee, the special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, reported no change in the situation, called for sanctions against military-run companies and commanders

²⁶ UN Human Rights Council, 'Detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar', A/HRC/42/CRP.5, 16 Sep. 2019. For further details on the ICC, see annex B, section I, in this volume.

²⁷ UN Human Rights Council, 'Sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar and the gendered impact of its ethnic conflicts', A/HRC/42/CRP.4, 22 Aug. 2019.

²⁸ UN Human Rights Council, 'UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar hands over to Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar', Media advisory, 9 Sep. 2019.

²⁹ Independent Commission of Enquiry website; Reuters, 'Myanmar army chief denies systematic persecution of Rohingya', 15 Feb. 2019; and Reuters, 'Myanmar military court to probe Rohingya atrocity allegations', 18 Mar. 2019.

³⁰ Stoakes, E. and Ellis-Petersen, H., 'Rohingya crisis: UN investigates its "dysfunctional" conduct in Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 27 Feb. 2019.

³¹ *Daily Star*, 'OIC okays legal action against Myanmar at ICJ', 4 Mar. 2019. For further details on the OIC and ICJ, see annex B, section I, in this volume.

responsible for serious violations and urged the UN Security Council to refer the situation to the ICC.³²

In November, Gambia (on behalf of the OIC) filed a lawsuit at the ICJ in an attempt to have Myanmar's leadership tried for genocide, while the ICC approved a request from the prosecutor's office to mount its own investigation.³³ In December Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader (officially known as State Counsellor), appeared at the ICJ to respond to the initial charges.³⁴ While a decision on whether Myanmar acted with genocidal intent could take years to reach, a decision on provisional measures, including whether judges need to issue an emergency order to protect the Rohingya in Myanmar, is expected early in 2020.

The peace process

The Government of Myanmar has been attempting to push forward a complex peace process, the core of which is the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). The NCA includes a promise for political talks towards the creation of a federal union to guarantee future equality and autonomy for ethnic nationalities.³⁵ China is a major stakeholder in the peace process, not least because of its economic and security interests: numerous Belt and Road Initiative corridors run through insurgent areas in Myanmar, while many of the insurgent groups hold territory along or close to the 2000-kilometre border that Myanmar shares with China.³⁶ At the end of 2018 progress in the peace process had stalled, with most of the country's most powerful militias (including the Kachin Independence Army and TNLA) still refusing to join the accord, and two key signatories (the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army and the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South) suspending their participation in formal peace negotiations.³⁷

³² UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Myanmar: UN human rights expert calls for targeted sanctions', 23 Oct. 2019.

³³ Al Jazeera, 'ICC approves probe into Myanmar's alleged crimes against Rohingya', 15 Nov. 2019; and Simons, M., 'Myanmar genocide lawsuit is filed at United Nations court', *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 2019.

³⁴ Beech, H. and Nang, S., 'As Myanmar genocide hearing closes, focus is on trapped Rohingya', *New York Times*, 12 Dec. 2019, updated 23 Jan. 2020.

³⁵ On the history of questions of autonomy or self-determination in Myanmar, see Kipgen, N., 'The quest for federalism in Myanmar', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 42, no. 6 (2018), pp. 612–26. On the role of civil society and peace movements in Myanmar, see Orjuela, C., 'Countering Buddhist radicalisation: Emerging peace movements in Myanmar and Sri Lanka', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2020), pp. 133–50.

³⁶ Sun, Y., 'Why China is sceptical about the peace process', *Frontier*, 3 Oct. 2019; and United States Institute of Peace, *China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts*, Senior Study Group Report no. 1 (US Institute of Peace: Washington DC, Sep. 2018).

³⁷ On the earlier rounds of peace talks in 2016–18, see Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 13), pp. 48–50; *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (note 22), p. 68; *The Mainichi*, 'Myanmar peace conference reaches more agreements for future union', 17 July 2018; and Nyein, N., 'KNU reiterates hiatus in peace talks', *The Irrawaddy*, 12 Nov. 2018.

Several rounds of peace and reconciliation discussions in 2019 made no or little progress, although temporary and fragile bilateral ceasefires agreed with some individual armed groups helped localized de-escalation of some conflict. The prominent role of the military in politics and government with a set proportion of representation continues to be a major obstacle to constitutional reform.³⁸ At the end of the year the peace process remained burdened with division and uncertainty, with only 10 of the 21 ethnic armed organizations signed up to the NCA.³⁹

Armed conflict in the Philippines

There were two main intrastate armed conflicts in the Philippines in 2019: the Moro insurgency in the southern Philippines and the New People's Army (NPA) insurgency. Although the insurgencies are two of Asia's longest and deadliest conflicts, the peace process in the southern Philippines made major progress in 2019, and it is the more recent war on drugs that appeared to produce the most fatalities during the year (see below).

An end to the Moro insurgency in the southern Philippines?

The establishment in March 2019 of a new autonomous region in the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines could mark the end of the almost 50-year Moro separatist conflict, although many challenges remain. Over the years, the web of Muslim-majority actors involved in this conflict coalesced into two main separatist groups: the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)—both signing peace agreements with the Philippine Government, in 1996 and 2014, respectively.⁴⁰ Pro-Islamic State groups also emerged in the region and were involved in a violent insurgency in the city of Marawi in 2017.⁴¹ Since then tensions have remained high, and martial law was extended in Mindanao by President Rodrigo Duterte until the end of 2019.⁴²

³⁸ Lintner, B., 'Peace march kicks up more war in Myanmar', *Asia Times*, 19 Mar. 2019; Aung, S. H., 'Four years after truce deal, peace remains a dream', *Myanmar Times*, 31 Oct. 2019; and International Crisis Group (note 17).

³⁹ Mon, S. L., 'Not a good year for peace process', *Myanmar Times*, 31 Dec. 2019.

⁴⁰ On Moro nationalism and Islamism, see Andersen, L. E., 'Transnational jihadism in the Philippines', ed. Sheikh, M. K. et al., *Global Jihad In Southeast Asia: Examining the Expansion of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda* (Danish Institute for International Studies: 2019), pp. 19–38. On the peace process with the MILF, see Svensson, I. and Lundgren, M., 'Mediation and peace agreements', *SIPRI Yearbook 2014*, pp. 51–52; and Vizcarra Tobia, I. N., 'Populism, politics and peace processes: Analysing the nexus between peacebuilding and the Philippines' Populist Politics', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2018), pp. 115–20.

⁴¹ On the conflict in Marawi, see Davis, Ghiasy and Su (note 13), pp. 54–55; and Franco, J., 'Philippines: Addressing Islamist militancy after the battle for Marawi', International Crisis Group commentary, 17 July 2018.

⁴² Reuters, 'Philippine Congress extends Mindanao martial law until end-2019', 12 Dec. 2018.

In July 2018 President Duterte signed the Bangsamoro Organic Law—a legal instrument deriving from the 2014 peace agreement. Among the prominent features of the law was the replacement of the current Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (created in 1989) with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The new law was overwhelmingly endorsed in a two-stage plebiscite in January and February 2019. The new autonomous region includes additional provinces, and its government will have greater devolved powers. An 80-member Bangsamoro Transition Authority (with 41 representatives nominated by the MILF and 39 selected by the national government) is now responsible for governing the region until 2022 when elections for a Bangsamoro Parliament and Government are due to take place.⁴³

One of the main challenges still to be addressed is the decommissioning of the MILF's armed force: the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). Under the 2014 peace agreement, 30 per cent of the BIAF was to be decommissioned after passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, and in March 2019 the MILF submitted a list of 12 000 combatants to the Independent Decommissioning Body (comprising representatives from Brunei Darussalam, Norway and Turkey), which is responsible for verifying and registering combatants and stockpile management of MILF weapons. Over 8000 of this first group of fighters had been decommissioned by the end of 2019, and two further decommissioning stages are due to be completed by the end of the transition phase in 2022. The benefits package promised to former combatants will be a crucial part of the decommissioning process.⁴⁴

Over time these new autonomy and decommissioning arrangements could end the Moro insurgency and act as a dampener on militant Islamist recruitment. A small number of Islamist armed groups outside of the peace process with links to the Islamic State—principally the Abu Sayyaf Group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the Maute Group—pose the greatest ongoing threat, to state security forces and as potential spoilers of the peace process within local communities.⁴⁵ A few days after the plebiscite, for example, a cathedral bombing attributed to Abu Sayyaf/Islamic State in Sulu province killed at least 22 soldiers and civilians. A further twin bomb attack similarly attributed in the same province in June 2019 killed three

⁴³ International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, Asia Report no. 301 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 27 June 2019).

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group (note 43), pp. 10–12; Felongco, G. P., 'Philippines: Demobilised Moro fighters to receive Dh70,784 each', *Gulf News*, 8 Sep. 2019; and Tomacruz, S., 'Over 8,000 MILF fighters decommissioned in 2019—OPAPP', *Rappler*, 19 Jan. 2020.

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group (note 43), pp. 14–19.

soldiers and three civilians.⁴⁶ However, the nature of transnational jihadism in the Philippines, which is mixed up with criminality, drug crime and political struggle, makes it difficult to evaluate and attribute such attacks.⁴⁷ The Philippine military confirmed in April 2019 that it killed the leader of the Maute Group, and self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic State in the country, Benito Marohombsar (known as Abu Dar), in clashes a month earlier.⁴⁸

While a large part of the instability problems in Mindanao is due to the high number of non-state armed groups, there is also a blurring between some of those groups and state actors due to the activities of private militias and clan feuds.⁴⁹ Thus, the Mindanao conflict theatre is complex, and achieving a settlement with the MILF may not be sufficient to bring peace to the region.

The New People's Army insurgency

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.⁵⁰ Violence between the Philippine armed forces and the NPA continued throughout the year, despite fruitful negotiations between local rebel commands and government officials. Instead of negotiating with the NPA leadership, the government is trying to exploit the distinctly local qualities of the insurgency by holding a series of peace talks across the various regions with regional NPA representatives. This localized peace drive is designed to winnow the ranks of the NPA, which is now estimated at around 4000 fighters (down from a peak of 26 000 in the 1980s).⁵¹

The war on drugs and contested casualty statistics

While the number of civilians killed in the Philippines in 2019 is uncertain and disputed, indications are that the government's war on drugs, initiated when President Duterte took office in 2016, resulted in twice as many deaths as the

⁴⁶ *The Economist*, 'Jihadists bomb a church in the Philippines', 2 Feb. 2019; Hart, M., 'Abu Sayyaf is bringing more of ISIS' brutal tactics to the Philippines', *World Politics Review*, 22 July 2019; and Agence France Press, 'Philippines: Isis claims bombing that killed five on Jolo island', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2019.

⁴⁷ Andersen (note 40).

⁴⁸ Fonbuena, C., 'Leader of Isis in Philippines killed, DNA test confirm', *The Guardian*, 14 Apr. 2019.

⁴⁹ Herbert, S., 'Conflict analysis of The Philippines', K4D helpdesk service, UK Department for International Development, 29 July 2019.

⁵⁰ For further details on the peace talks, see GMA News Online, 'Timeline: The peace talks between the government and the CPP-NPA-NDF, 1986–present', 6 Dec. 2017. On the efforts to create a community-led peace zone in the Sagada region, see Macaspac, N. V., 'Insurgent peace: Community-led peacebuilding of indigenous peoples in Sagada, Philippines', *Geopolitics*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2019), pp. 839–77.

⁵¹ Lischin, L., 'Think national, start local: Taming the Philippines communists', *The Interpreter*, 27 May 2019; Armas, S. G., 'Communist insurgency completes 50 years in Philippines with no end in sight', *Agencia EFE*, 29 Mar. 2019; and Santos, D. J., 'Philippine Defense chief rejects truce with NPA rebels', *Benar News*, 9 Dec. 2019.

Table 4.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Philippines, 2016–19

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	856	1 955	587	533
Explosions/remote violence	67	64	37	48
Protests, riots and strategic developments	10	2	0	4
Violence against civilians	3 269	2 067	1 161	1 108
Total	4 202	4 088	1 785	1 693

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’, [n.d.].

insurgencies (the latter are shown in table 4.5). According to the government the estimated death toll in the anti-drugs campaign between 1 July 2016 and 30 November 2019 was 5552, with 220 728 drug suspects arrested, although the release of conflicting official data raises questions over the reliability of these figures.⁵² Human rights groups suggest that drug-war killings could be over 20 000.⁵³ ACLED estimated that about 75 per cent of the civilian deaths in the first half of 2019 was due to the war on drugs.⁵⁴

There were also increasing allegations in 2019 that the war on drugs is being used to silence political opponents.⁵⁵ In February 2018 the ICC began an examination of whether the war on drugs involved crimes against humanity. However, the Philippines formally left the ICC on 17 March 2019, a year after the government deposited its withdrawal notice and despite two petitions to prevent the country’s withdrawal still pending before the Supreme Court of the Philippines.⁵⁶

Armed conflict in Thailand

The decades-old, low-intensity armed conflict in the south of Thailand among the military government and various secessionist groups continued

⁵² Al Jazeera, ‘Philippine authorities “getting away with murder” in drug war’, 12 Dec. 2019; Tupas, E., ‘Drug war death toll hits 6,847’, *Philippine Star*, 16 Aug. 2019; and Associated Press, ‘Roger Duterte hands over “war on drugs” to vice-president and critic’, *The Guardian*, 7 Nov. 2019.

⁵³ Matar, L., ‘UN needs to act now to end Philippines killings’, Human Rights Watch, 24 June 2019; and Coronel, S. et al. and the Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism, ‘The undocumented dead in Duterte’s drug war’, *The Atlantic*, 19 Aug. 2019. Also see Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism, ‘Philippine drug war casualties’, Dataset.

⁵⁴ Jones, S., ‘Data confirm wave of targeted attacks in the Philippines’, ACLED press release, 3 July 2019.

⁵⁵ De Lima, L., ‘President Duterte’s war on drugs is a pretense’, *New York Times*, 22 July 2019; ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, ‘*In the Crosshairs of the Presidency*’: Attacks on Opposition Lawmakers in the Philippines (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights: June 2019); and Aspinwall, N., ‘Duterte turns death squads on political activists’, *Foreign Policy*, 10 June 2019.

⁵⁶ Philstar, ‘Philippines won’t cooperate with ICC probe, says Panelo’, 14 Mar. 2019; and Buan, L., ‘PH out of ICC soon: Eyes on the Supreme Court to intervene’, *Rappler*, 11 Mar. 2019.

in 2019.⁵⁷ More than 7000 people have been killed in the conflict since 2004, with little progress in Malaysian-brokered peace talks that started in 2015 between the government and Mara Patani, an umbrella organization of Thai Malay secessionist groups.⁵⁸ The most significant insurgent group, the National Revolutionary Front, continued to boycott the talks.⁵⁹ ACLED recorded less than 80 battle-related deaths in 2019.⁶⁰

More broadly, despite a return to formal elections in March 2019 (the first since a military coup in 2014), the election was widely criticized for being heavily rigged in favour of the military junta.⁶¹ Thus, the outcome of the election—coup-leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha forming a coalition government and continuing as prime minister—further exacerbated divisions in Thai society.⁶²

⁵⁷ See e.g. Agence France-Presse, 'Thailand: At least 15 killed in biggest attack in restive south in years', *The Guardian*, 6 Nov. 2019. On the history of the insurgency in southern Thailand, see Wilson, C. and Akhtar, S., 'Repression, co-optation and insurgency: Pakistan's FATA, southern Thailand and Papua, Indonesia', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2019), pp. 710–26.

⁵⁸ Hart, M., 'Southern Thailand's fractured peace process at a crossroads', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 15 Feb. 2019; and Wheeler, M., 'Behind the insurgent attack in southern Thailand', *International Crisis Group Q&A*, 8 Nov. 2019.

⁵⁹ Watcharasakwet, W. et al., 'Southern Thai peace talks: Malaysian broker says violence can end in 2 years', *Benar News*, 4 Jan. 2019; and International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form*, Asia Report no. 304 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 21 Jan. 2020).

⁶⁰ ACLED, 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

⁶¹ *The Economist*, 'Thailand's military junta gets its way in rigged vote', 24 Mar. 2019; and Suhartono, M. and Ramzy, A., 'Thailand's election results signal military's continued grip on power', *New York Times*, 9 May 2019.

⁶² ASEAN Today, 'There's a boot on the neck of Thailand's democracy undermining its legitimacy', 25 Oct. 2019.

