

III. Armed conflict and peace processes in South East Asia

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This section focuses on the low-intensity subnational armed conflicts (i.e. less than 1000 deaths) in Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand. 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 over 1400. Some of Asia's most organized Islamist extremist groups are active in South East Asia, most notably in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.¹ 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.²

Armed conflict in Indonesia

Indonesia faces demands for independence in the two provinces on the island of Papua, where there has been a low-level separatist insurgency since the 1960s.³ Indonesia has also become one of the main focal points of the Islamic State in South East Asia.⁴ However, in 2020 it was the long-running insurgency in Papua that was the focus of most of the combat-related armed violence in the country. Although the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM) offered the Indonesian Government a ceasefire in April 2020 in an effort to contain the spread of Covid-19, it was conditional on the government withdrawing some police and troops from Papua.⁵ Although there did not appear to be a government response, there was a pause in the activity of the West Papua National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the OPM) following the ceasefire announcement.⁶ At the end of November the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

¹ United Nations, Security Council, 'Twenty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities', S/2020/717, 23 July 2020, pp. 16–17.

² 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.

³ On the origins and recent developments in the conflict see Blades, J., 'West Papua: The issue that won't go away for the Melanesia', Lowy Institute, 1 May 2020; and Sara, S., Worthington, A. and Mambor, V., 'The battle for West Papuan independence from Indonesia has intensified with deadly results', ABC News, 12 May 2020.

⁴ United Nations, S/2020/717 (note 1). On Indonesia's counterterrorism policy see Haripin, M., Anindya, C. R. and Priamarizki, A., 'The politics of counter-terrorism in post-authoritarian states: Indonesia's experience, 1998–2018', *Defense & Security Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2020), pp. 275–99.

⁵ Nirmala, R., 'Indonesian forces kill 2 suspected Papuan rebels', Benar News, 10 Apr. 2020; and Pacific Media Watch, 'OPM proposes West Papua ceasefire to help contain spread of Covid-19', Asia Pacific Report, 11 Apr. 2020.

⁶ Miller, A., 'Call unanswered: A review of responses to the UN appeal for a global ceasefire', Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 13 May 2020.

warned of escalating violence in the provinces of Papua and West Papua.⁷ According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), there were 117 conflict-related deaths in Indonesia in 2020 (down from 219 in 2019), with 57 of these being related to armed conflict (battles or explosions/remote violence).⁸

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. All of these decades-old armed conflicts are now structured along complex ethnic and/or religious lines and include about 20 ethnic armed groups and hundreds of armed militias mainly located in the country's border regions.⁹

The armed conflict between government forces and the ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army in western Myanmar was the most serious by far in 2020. At the end of April 2020 the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar warned of possible war crimes in Chin and Rakhine states, where armed clashes between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw escalated, with increasing numbers of civilian casualties.¹⁰ The upsurge in fighting in parts of Rakhine state led to further population displacement (at least 60 000 people by early May 2020) and reduced the already low prospects of voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya from camps in Bangladesh.¹¹

A series of unilateral ceasefires in recent years has done little to reduce or stop the fighting. On the same day as the UN appeal on 23 March 2020 for a global Covid-19 ceasefire, the Myanmar Government designated the Arakan Army as a terrorist group and began a crackdown on media reporting of the

⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'Comment by UN Human Rights Office spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani on Papua and West Papua, Indonesia', 30 Nov. 2020.

⁸ ACLED, 'Data export tool', accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

⁹ International Crisis Group, *Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, Asia Report no. 312 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 28 Aug. 2020). On the rise of Buddhist religious extremism see Subedi, D. B. and Garnett, J., 'De-mystifying Buddhist religious extremism in Myanmar: Confrontation and contestation around religion, development and state-building', *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2020), pp. 223–46.

¹⁰ OHCHR, 'Myanmar: "Possible war crimes and crimes against humanity ongoing in Rakhine and Chin states"—UN special rapporteur Yanghee Lee', 29 Apr. 2020; Lian, S. S., 'In southern Chin state, civilians fear bombs more than Covid-19', *Frontier Myanmar*, 17 Apr. 2020; ACLED, 'Coronavirus cover: Myanmar civilians under fire', 6 May 2020; and International Crisis Group, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Report no. 307 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 9 June 2020).

¹¹ International Crisis Group, 'Conflict, health cooperation and Covid-19 in Myanmar', Asia Briefing no. 161, 19 May 2020, p. 3.

Table 4.5. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Myanmar, 2013–20

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	300	358	1 078	155	196	118	1 248	380
Explosions/remote violence	45	53	27	35	30	31	85	128
Protests, riots and strategic developments	91	9	0	0	9	9	30	8
Violence against civilians	29	84	162	221	1 018	67	132	138
Total	465	504	1 267	411	1 253	225	1 495	654

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 24 Jan. 2021.

conflict.¹² On 1 April (and again on 3 May) members of three ethnic armed groups known collectively as the Three Brotherhood Alliance—the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army—extended their own unilateral ceasefire, framing it as a response to the pandemic.¹³ Other armed groups in the country also called on the Tatmadaw to announce a ceasefire, which it did from 10 May to 31 August, but it excluded the conflict with the Arakan Army.¹⁴ However a Japanese-brokered ceasefire between the Arakan Army and Myanmar’s military in November (discussed below) enabled a resumption of dialogue. According to ACLED, conflict-related deaths in Myanmar declined by 56 per cent in 2020 compared to 2019 (see table 4.5).¹⁵

The refugee crisis

State-backed systematic persecution in 2017 forcibly displaced more than 700 000 Rohingya people—members of a predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic group—from Rakhine state.¹⁶ Continuing persecution and the armed conflict with the Arakan Army led to further displacement. At the beginning of 2020 more than 850 000 Rohingya remained in refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar in southern Bangladesh—the largest and densest refugee settle-

¹² Lintner, B., ‘Covid-19 restores Myanmar military’s lost powers’, *Asia Times*, 2 Apr. 2020.

¹³ Three Brotherhood Alliance, ‘Emergency press release of the Three Brotherhood Alliance in the time of the spread of Covid-19’, 1 Apr. 2020.

¹⁴ ‘Tatmadaw releases statement on ceasefire and eternal peace’, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 9 May 2020; and Weng, L., ‘Myanmar rebel coalition calls for military to extend ceasefire to Rakhine’, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 May 2020.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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. Also see Ahmed, I., ‘Special issue on the Rohingya crisis: From the guest editor’s desk’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2020), pp. 85–88; and Nishikawa, Y., ‘The reality of protecting the Rohingya: An inherent limitation of the responsibility to protect’, *Asian Security*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2020), pp. 90–106.

ment in the world.¹⁷ With no guarantees of citizenship and security if the Rohingya were to return to Myanmar, repatriation plans have been delayed indefinitely.¹⁸ Moreover, conditions in the camps have deteriorated, forcing some Rohingya refugees to seek perilous trafficking routes in search of safer locations in the region. The situation worsened amid the Covid-19 pandemic, with countries such as Malaysia closing their borders to enforce lockdowns.¹⁹ In December 2020 the Bangladeshi Government began transporting several hundred refugees from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal.²⁰

Accountability and justice for alleged atrocities committed against the Rohingya people and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar remained elusive in 2020, despite legal efforts pending at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).²¹ The Government of Myanmar's own Independent Commission of Enquiry, established in August 2018 to investigate the Tatmadaw's conduct, dismissed allegations of genocide against the Rohingya—according to the executive summary of a report published on 21 January 2020.²² Two days later the ICJ issued an injunction ordering Myanmar to take action to protect the approximately 500 000 Rohingya remaining in the country.²³ In September during video testimony to the ICC two Myanmar soldiers confessed to atrocities carried out against the Rohingya. This first confession of human rights abuses by members of Myanmar's military could prove significant in the ICC case against Myanmar's military leaders.²⁴

¹⁷ Ahmed, K., 'Stop ignoring us: Rohingya refugees demand role in running camps', *The Guardian*, 5 Feb. 2020.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Report no. 303 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 27 Dec. 2019).

¹⁹ Paul, R. and Das, K. N., 'As other doors close, some Rohingya cling to hope of resettlement', Reuters, 21 Aug. 2020; Ahmed, K., 'Gang violence erupts in Bangladesh Rohingya camps forcing families to flee', *The Guardian*, 9 Oct. 2020; and Mallick, A. H., 'Rohingya refugee repatriation from Bangladesh: A far cry from reality', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2020), pp. 202–26.

²⁰ Regan, H. and Wright, R., 'Fears of forced removals as Bangladesh moves hundreds of Rohingya refugees to remote island', CNN, 8 Dec. 2020; and Thoopkrajae, V., 'Bangladesh moves more Rohingyas to remote island despite rights concerns', *The Guardian*, 28 Dec. 2020.

²¹ See Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in South East Asia', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 102–104.

²² Ratcliffe, R., 'Myanmar inquiry into treatment of Rohingya condemned as "cover-up"', *The Guardian*, 22 Jan. 2020; and Office of the President of Myanmar, 'Executive summary of Independent Commission of Enquiry-ICOE final report', 21 Jan. 2020.

²³ Paddock, R. C., 'UN court order Myanmar to protect Rohingya Muslims', *New York Times*, 23 Jan. 2020.

²⁴ Beech, H., Nang, S. and Simons, M., "'Kill all you see": In a first, Myanmar soldiers tell of Rohingya slaughter', *New York Times*, 8 Sep. 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.²⁵ China is a major stakeholder in the peace process, not least because of its economic and security interests. In January 2020 President Xi Jinping made a two-day visit to Myanmar, the first by a Chinese president in almost two decades, with the aim of deepening ties between the two countries.²⁶ 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.

Eight armed groups signed the NCA in 2015 (and only two more smaller groups since then), leading to a complex, twin-track peace process: negotiations with NCA signatories and bilateral ceasefire discussions with non-signatories. Two further armed groups—the Karen National Union and the Restoration Council of Shan State—returned to the peace process in 2020. Formal meetings with all signatories were convened during the year, and a three-day peace conference took place in August.²⁷ However, overall the peace process with NCA signatories made little headway in 2020 due to a backdrop of continuing violence and the focus on the country's second general election since the end of full military rule.²⁸

Elections and a ceasefire in Rakhine state

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) was returned to power for another five-year term after achieving a landslide victory in the November 2020 general election. However, voting was cancelled in several areas dominated by ethnic minorities (mainly Rakhine state and some parts of Shan state), ostensibly because of security concerns. This disenfranchised an estimated 1.5 million people (out of a total of about 38 million eligible to vote), in addition to about 1.1 million Rohingya who have long been denied

²⁵ On the history of the 2015 NCA see Bertrand, J., Pelletier, A. and Thawngnhmung, A. M., 'First movers, democratization and unilateral concessions: Overcoming commitment problems and negotiating a "nationwide cease-fire" in Myanmar', *Asian Security*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2020), pp. 15–34. 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.

²⁶ International Crisis Group, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, Asia Report no. 305 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 30 Mar. 2020).

²⁷ Nyein, N., 'Myanmar peace conference ends with participants praising "meaningful" principles, post-election plan', *The Irrawaddy*, 21 Aug. 2020.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, *Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, Asia Report no. 308 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 19 June 2020); and 'Why the stalemate in Myanmar persists', *The Economist*, 18 Aug. 2020.

citizenship and voting rights.²⁹ However, four days after the election, Japan's special envoy to Myanmar, Yohei Sasakawa, brokered a diplomatic breakthrough, with the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw agreeing to hold supplementary elections by late January 2021 in areas where they had been cancelled.³⁰ The agreement also marked the beginning of a de facto ceasefire between the two groups that was holding at the end of 2020.³¹ Although the NLD government had still to approve the election, the agreement created a vital space for dialogue and the return of several thousand displaced people. But without reforms to address the discrimination and marginalization of ethnic minorities, in Rakhine state and more widely in Myanmar, the prospects for the peace process remained uncertain.

In addition, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party claimed widespread fraud during the November elections and called for a rerun of the elections with military involvement.³² The NLD rejected such claims; as a result, civil–military relations remained strained at the end of 2020.

Armed conflict in the Philippines

Two intrastate armed conflicts emerged in the Philippines in the late 1960s: one in the Muslim-majority areas of the Mindanao region of the southern Philippines and another involving the New People's Army (NPA) of the Communist Party of the Philippines.³³ However, as was the case in 2019, it was the war on drugs that appeared to produce the most fatalities during 2020.

The establishment in March 2019 of a new autonomous region—the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region—in the southern Philippines was a major step towards ending the almost 50-year Moro separatist conflict, although many challenges remained.³⁴ An 80-member Bangsamoro Transition Authority is now responsible for governing the region until 2022 when elections for a Bangsamoro parliament and government are due to take

²⁹ International Crisis Group, 'Majority rules in Myanmar's second democratic election', Asia Briefing no. 163, 22 Oct. 2020; Ratcliffe, R., 'Aung San Suu Kyi's party returns to power in Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 13 Nov. 2020; and Ratcliffe, R., 'Myanmar minorities, including Rohingya, excluded from voting in election', *The Guardian*, 6 Nov. 2020.

³⁰ 'Statement no. 41/2020', United League of Arakan/Arakan Army, 12 Nov. 2020; and 'Statement on ceasefire and eternal peace', Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services, 12 Nov. 2020.

³¹ International Crisis Group, 'From elections to ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine state', Asia Briefing no. 164, 23 Dec. 2020.

³² Strangio, S., 'What's next for Myanmar's military proxy party?', *The Diplomat*, 26 Nov. 2020.

³³ For background on these two conflicts see Åkebo, M., 'Ceasefire rationales: A comparative study of ceasefires in the Moro and Communist conflicts in the Philippines', *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2020).

³⁴ On key developments in 2019 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2020* (note 21), pp. 105–107.

Table 4.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Philippines, 2016–20

Event type	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	856	1 955	589	514	537
Explosions/remote violence	67	64	37	48	34
Protests/riots and strategic developments	10	2	0	4	19
Violence against civilians	3 268	2 067	1 164	1 056	858
Total	4 201	4 088	1 790	1 622	1 448

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', accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

place. Nonetheless, tensions in the region remained high, with clan-based politics a principal challenge to the ongoing peace process.³⁵ A small number of Islamist armed groups outside of the peace process with links to the Islamic State posed the greatest ongoing threat, to state security forces and as potential spoilers of the peace process within local communities.³⁶ For example, clashes in April and August 2020 in Sulu province in the southern Philippines highlighted the ongoing threat from militant networks.³⁷ While a large part of the instability in the region was due to the high number of non-state armed groups, there was also a blurring between some of those groups and state actors due to the activities of private militias and clan feuds.³⁸

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.³⁹ Prior to the UN Covid-19 global ceasefire appeal, President Rodrigo Duterte announced a one-month unilateral ceasefire with the NPA on 18 March 2020, to allow government forces time to prioritize the fight against Covid-19. In turn, the NPA enacted its own ceasefire on 26 March.⁴⁰ However, the fighting continued despite the ceasefires.⁴¹ On 16 April the NPA extended its ceasefire until the end of the month, but the government allowed its ceasefire to expire, citing continued attacks by the

³⁵ International Crisis Group, *Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report no. 306 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 14 Apr. 2020).

³⁶ International Crisis Group, *The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, Asia Report no. 301 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 27 June 2019), pp. 14–19.

³⁷ 'Philippine special forces kill Abu Sayyaf militants in Sulu gunbattle', Benar News, 6 Apr. 2020; and Engelbrecht, G., 'Violence in southern Philippines highlights resilience of militant networks', *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 16 Sep. 2020.

³⁸ Herbert, S., 'Conflict analysis of the Philippines', K4D helpdesk service, British Department for International Development, 29 July 2019.

³⁹ For further details on the peace talks see 'Timeline: The peace talks between the government and the CPP-NPA-NDF, 1986–present', GMA News Online, 6 Dec. 2017.

⁴⁰ Central Committee, Communist Party of the Philippines, 'Ceasefire order: 00.00H of 26 March 2020 to 23.59H of 15 April 2020', 24 Mar. 2020; and Gomez, J., 'Philippines: Communist rebels declare ceasefire amid coronavirus pandemic', *The Diplomat*, 25 Mar. 2020.

⁴¹ Miller, A., 'CDT spotlight: Philippines', ACLED, 2 Apr. 2020.

NPA.⁴² By May organized violence between the NPA and government forces had surpassed pre-ceasefire levels, and at the end of 2020 there appeared to be no clear strategy for ending the insurgency.⁴³

The war on drugs and contested casualty statistics

While the number of civilians killed in the Philippines in 2020 is uncertain and disputed, indications are that the government's war on drugs, initiated when President Duterte took office in 2016, continued to result in more deaths than the insurgencies (see table 4.6). Concerns about the war on drugs are part of wider concerns about repression of human rights and the targeting of political opponents, activists and journalists.⁴⁴ According to the government the estimated death toll in the anti-drugs campaign between 1 July 2016 and 30 September 2020 was 5903. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated the number of such fatalities at more than 8600, while domestic human rights groups suggest drug-war killings could be up to triple that number.⁴⁵ A new Anti-Terrorism Act introduced during the year was also expected to add to political repression and was heavily criticized by human rights groups.⁴⁶

Armed conflict in Thailand

The decades-old non-international armed conflict in the south of Thailand between the military government and various secessionist groups continued in 2020.⁴⁷ More than 7000 people have been killed in the conflict since 2004, with little progress in Malaysian-brokered peace talks that started in 2015

⁴² Gotinga, J. C., 'CPP-NPA extends ceasefire until April 30', *Rappler*, 16 Apr. 2020; and Hallare, K., 'Palace: Ceasefire extension with reds up to task force, Duterte', *Inquirer*, 19 Apr. 2020.

⁴³ Miller (note 6); and Broome, J., 'Inside Duterte's failed response to the Philippine's communist insurgency and the appeal of New People's Army among indigenous peoples', *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 19, no. 1 (15 Jan. 2021).

⁴⁴ 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); 'Philippines downgraded as civic freedoms deteriorate', *CIVICUS Monitor*, 8 Dec. 2020; and Ratcliffe, R., 'Philippines: Mother and son murder by police officer ignites calls for change', *The Guardian*, 22 Dec. 2020.

⁴⁵ United Nations, General Assembly, 'Situation of human rights in the Philippines', Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/44/22, 29 June 2020; and Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021: Events of 2020* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 2021), pp. 541–42. Also see Gallagher, A., Raffle, E. and Maulana, Z., 'Failing to fulfil the responsibility to protect: The war on drugs as crimes against humanity in the Philippines', *Pacific Review*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2020), pp. 247–77; and 'Rodrigo Duterte's lawless war on drugs is widely popular', *The Economist*, 20 Feb. 2020.

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, 'Philippines: New Anti-Terrorism Act endangers rights', 5 June 2020; and Amnesty International, 'Philippines: Dangerous anti-terror law yet another setback for human rights', 3 July 2020.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Quinley, C., 'In Thailand's deep south conflict, a "glimpse of hope", but no momentum to sustain a Covid-19 ceasefire', *New Humanitarian*, 3 Aug. 2020.

between the government and Mara Patani, an umbrella organization of Thai Malay secessionists groups.⁴⁸ Although the most significant insurgent group—the National Revolutionary Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, BRN)—had been boycotting the talks, in January 2020 the group met with government officials for the first time in a formal peace dialogue.⁴⁹ However, little progress was made in the talks, and on 17 March 2020 a bomb attack on a government meeting to discuss the Covid-19 pandemic was attributed to the BRN.⁵⁰ On 3 April the BRN released a statement saying it would cease all hostilities on humanitarian grounds as long as the group was not attacked by government forces, but the Thai military dismissed the offer as ‘irrelevant’.⁵¹ Nonetheless, a temporary pause in separatist violence did occur until a further armed clash took place on 30 April.⁵² ACLED recorded 102 conflict-related deaths in Thailand in 2020 (down from 172 in 2019), with 60 of these being related to armed conflict (battles or explosions/remote violence).⁵³

Abductions and attacks on Thai dissidents also occurred during 2020.⁵⁴ The largest pro-democracy demonstration since the 2014 military coup took place in Bangkok in August. The protests escalated in September and October, demanding constitutional and monarchical reform.⁵⁵ The introduction of emergency rules and police crackdowns on activists failed to halt the protests, while the emergence of royalist counterdemonstrations added to the risk of greater violence.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Wheeler, M., ‘Behind the insurgent attack in southern Thailand’, International Crisis Group Q&A, 8 Nov. 2019.

⁴⁹ International Crisis Group, *Southern Thailand’s Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form*, Asia Report no. 304 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 21 Jan. 2020).

⁵⁰ AP News, ‘Bombing of government office in southern Thailand injures 20’, ABC News, 17 Mar. 2020.

⁵¹ ‘Declaration of BRN’s Response to Covid-19’, Ceasefires in a time of Covid-19, 3 Apr. 2020; Pathan, D., ‘Southern Thai rebels score points with Covid-19 ceasefire’, Benar News, 7 Apr. 2020; and Ahmad, M. and Phaicharoen, N., ‘Covid-19 pandemic adds hardship to insurgency-hit Thai deep south’, Benar News, 16 Apr. 2020.

⁵² Ahmad, M., ‘Thailand forces kill 3 suspected insurgents in Pattani’, Benar News, 30 Apr. 2020.

⁵³ ACLED (note 8).

⁵⁴ Beech, H., ‘Thai dissidents are disappearing, and families are fighting for answers’, *New York Times*, 26 June 2020.

⁵⁵ Tanakasempipat, P. and Thepgumpanat, P., ‘Thais defy protest ban in tens of thousands in Bangkok’, Reuters, 15 Oct. 2020; and Wheeler, M., ‘Behind Bangkok’s wave of popular dissent’, International Crisis Group, 16 Oct. 2020.

⁵⁶ AFP, ‘Thai King declares “love” for all after months of pro-democracy protests’, Barron’s, 1 Nov. 2020; and Wheeler, M., ‘Calls to curb the Crown’s writ put Thailand on edge’, International Crisis Group Commentary, 18 Dec. 2020.