

7. Armed conflict and peace processes in sub-Saharan Africa

Overview

There were at least 20 states (out of a total of 49 states) with active armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020: Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Guinea, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda. Ten were low-intensity, subnational armed conflicts, and 10 were high-intensity armed conflicts. Except for CAR and Somalia, all the other 18 armed conflicts had higher estimated conflict-related fatalities in 2020 than in 2019. For the region as a whole the increase was about 41 per cent. Sub-Saharan Africa also overtook the Middle East and North Africa in 2020 as the region with the most conflict-related fatalities.

Almost all the armed conflicts were internationalized, including as a result of state actors (whether directly or through proxies) and the transnational activities of violent Islamist groups, other armed groups and criminal networks. The conflict dynamics and ethnic and religious tensions were often rooted in a combination of state weakness, corruption, ineffective delivery of basic services, competition over natural resources, inequality and a sense of marginalization. Five other cross-cutting issues (section I) shaped security dilemmas in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020: (a) the presence of militant Islamist groups, other armed groups and criminal networks; (b) the security activities of external actors; (c) election-related violence; (d) the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; and (e) water insecurity and the growing impact of climate change.

The security situation in West Africa (section II) deteriorated rapidly in 2020, with transnational armed and religious groups extending their grip in the region and a proliferation of community-based militias adding an additional level to the existing violence. The armed conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger worsened, especially within the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region. External national and multilateral counterterrorism operations continued (and were expanded by the start of the new European Task Force Takuba, led by France) in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions alongside more traditional multinational United Nations peace operations, but with mixed results. The armed conflicts in Chad and Nigeria also worsened in the context of increasing instability in the Lake Chad region.

In Central Africa (section III) there was a large upsurge in violence in the eastern DRC, as external and Congolese armed groups engaged in multiple

armed conflicts with the government, as well as a resurgence of intercommunal violence. Much of this violence was driven by competition for resources, corruption and bad governance. The two unrelated armed conflicts in different regions of Cameroon—the anglophone separatist insurgency and the Boko Haram insurgency—also worsened in 2020.

In East Africa (section IV) the increase in estimated conflict-related fatalities from about 25 600 in 2019 to nearly 36 000 in 2020 was driven by deteriorating situations in Ethiopia, Mozambique and South Sudan, as well as ongoing large-scale violence in Somalia. Six of the nine countries in East Africa involved in armed conflicts in 2020 fell within the regional framework of the Horn of Africa, which contains some of the most fragile states in the world. Disputes over resource allocation and access have also been significant in the region. One of the most high-profile interstate disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the sharing of the eastern Nile waters remained deadlocked in 2020.

A new armed conflict broke out in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia in November 2020 between federal government forces and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which killed thousands and forced more than 46 000 refugees to flee into eastern Sudan. Insecurity also rose in many other areas of Ethiopia in 2020 due to simultaneous armed conflicts and high levels of interethnic violence.

The Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado province in the north of Mozambique deepened in 2020. Increased violence against civilians caused the number of internally displaced people to more than quadruple during the year to over 500 000. In Somalia, al-Shabab remained a major threat despite the continued presence of a peace operation led by the African Union and increased United States air strikes.

In South Sudan intercommunal violence fuelled by the proliferation and use of small arms and light weapons rose sharply in 2020, while delays in the implementation of the 2018 peace agreement added to the uncertainty. In Sudan the progress made in the Sudanese peace process in 2019 accelerated during 2020, with further significant peace agreements reached with the main armed groups. These culminated in the Sudanese Government and representatives of several armed groups signing the Juba Peace Agreement on 3 October 2020. This highly complex agreement is a key component of Sudan's larger transition from military to civilian rule. Implementation of the agreement will be difficult amid Sudan's economic problems, as well as ongoing divisions between various actors involved in the political transition and the rejection of the agreement by two armed opposition groups.

The peace process in Sudan was the only one in sub-Saharan Africa to make substantive progress in 2020. There were 22 multilateral peace operations active in sub-Saharan Africa during the year, 2 more than in 2019.