

II. Armed conflict and peace processes in West Africa

VIRGINIE BAUDAIS AND ANNELIES HICKENDORFF

Six countries experienced armed conflict in West Africa in 2020 (out of a total of 17 states or territories in the subregion, see figure 7.1): Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria. However, in this section, the focus is on the high-intensity armed conflicts in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the Lake Chad region (Niger and Nigeria, as well as the Central African states of Cameroon and Chad).¹ Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger and Nigeria were involved in armed conflicts in 2020 that all worsened in terms of conflict-related fatalities (compared with in 2019). In addition, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea experienced election-related violence, but only the latter two were classified as armed conflicts in 2020 (with more than 25 battle-related fatalities).²

This section is divided into four core discussions: (a) on the key general developments in the region; (b) on the armed conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, within the context of developments within the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region; (c) on the internationalization of counterterrorism activities alongside more traditional multinational United Nations peace operations; and (d) the armed conflict in the Lake Chad region and Nigeria.

Key general developments in the region

Many states in West Africa face severe governance problems linked to state weakness, extreme poverty, economic fragility and growing insecurity—issues compounded in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the exact number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in West Africa in 2020 is uncertain—estimates range between 77 000 and 112 000 fatalities—the border closures and the global slowdown seriously affected socio-economic developments in a region already heavily dependent on foreign aid.³ On top of this, unequal economic growth and the impact of climate change in a region where more than 80 per cent of the population relies essentially on agriculture and pastoral activities have led to increased food insecurity.⁴ Irregular migration, corruption, illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime also flourish, especially where states are challenged by various armed groups.

¹ Also see the discussion of armed conflict in Cameroon and Chad in section III of this chapter.

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

³ Rougier, A., 'Afrique: le continent résiste à la pandémie de Covid-19' [Africa: The continent resists the Covid-19 pandemic], RFI, 8 Apr. 2021; and 'Coronavirus in Africa tracker', BBC News, 19 Apr. 2021.

⁴ 'Food and nutrition crisis 2020: Analyses & responses, maps & facts', no. 3, Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Nov. 2020.

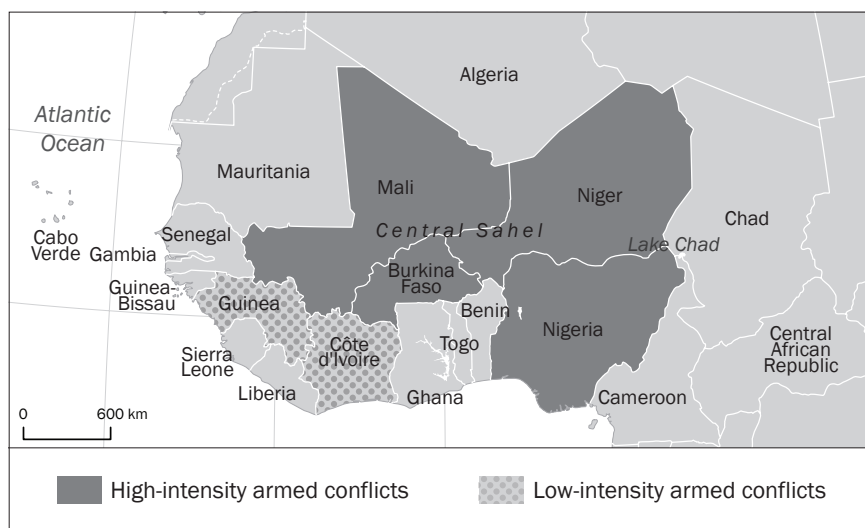


Figure 7.1. West Africa, Central Sahel and Lake Chad

The security situation is aggravated by the strength of transnational armed groups and violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, and the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Ansarul Islam and Katiba Serma in the Liptako-Gourma region.⁵ Extremist groups are interwoven with local self-defence militias and armed groups, and exacerbate local and community tensions.

Other violence in West Africa was predominantly generated around contested elections and the enforcement by national security forces of public health and social measures due to the Covid-19 outbreak.⁶ Despite the pandemic, six countries conducted presidential elections (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Niger and Togo), legislative elections took place in Guinea, Liberia and Mali, and Benin, Cape Verde and Niger held local elections. Following contested constitutional changes, incumbent presidents Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire and Alpha Condé of Guinea

⁵ Eizenga, D. and Williams, W., 'The puzzle of JNIM and militant Islamist groups in the Sahel', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Africa Security Brief no. 38, 1 Dec. 2020; and International Crisis Group, *Sidelineing the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, Africa Report no. 289 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 3 June 2020). For further details on groups with a Salafist jihadism ideology in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in the Sahel and Lake Chad Region', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, p. 181.

⁶ United Nations, Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, S/2020/1293, 24 Dec. 2020.

won in the first round of their respective elections in November.⁷ In both countries election-related violence resulted in a sharp increase in protest-related fatalities in 2020. In Côte d'Ivoire the number of such fatalities rose from 16 in 2019 to 51 in 2020, while several thousand refugees from the country's west and south-west regions fled to Liberia.⁸ In Guinea fatalities increased from 22 in 2019 to 104 in 2020.⁹ In Burkina Faso where the outgoing president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, was also re-elected in the first ballot, elections were dominated by a threat of jihadist violence that prevented people from voting in at least one fifth of the country.¹⁰ In Mali post-legislative election contestation and denunciation of insecurity and bad governance ultimately led to a military coup resulting in the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta on 18 August 2020.¹¹

The deteriorating security situation in West Africa was accompanied by a continuous humanitarian crisis: by mid 2020, 31 million people, of whom more than 50 per cent were children, were in need of life-saving assistance. This was an increase of 7 million compared with the beginning of the year.¹² As a result of this insecurity, in December 2020 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported an unprecedented high number of forced displacements in the Sahel with 5 million people, including 4.1 million internally displaced persons and 870 000 refugees.¹³

There were two cross-cutting issues that also contributed to security challenges in West Africa in 2020: (a) the spread of violent extremism and terrorism and (b) the Covid-19 pandemic.

Violent extremism and insecurity

Hotspots of insecurity in West Africa in 2020 were the Liptako-Gourma region of the Sahel (comprising border regions of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and the Lake Chad region, which both confronted violence by extremist religious groups, militias and various armed groups. In the Lake Chad region the main insurgent group, Boko Haram, has spread from Nigeria across the lake-bordering regions in Cameroon, Chad and Niger, causing

⁷ 'Ivory Coast election: Alassane Ouattara wins amid boycott', BBC News, 3 Nov. 2020; 'Guinea elections: Alpha Condé wins third term amid violent protests', BBC News, 24 Oct. 2020; and 'Côte d'Ivoire: An election delay for dialogue', Africa Briefing no. 161, International Crisis Group, 29 Sep. 2020.

⁸ 'Ivorians flee to neighboring countries fearing post-electoral violence', UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 3 Nov. 2020; and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Dashboard, accessed 3 Mar. 2021.

⁹ ACLED (note 8).

¹⁰ 'Burkina Faso election takes place amid jihadist threat', BBC News, 23 Nov. 2020; and 'Burkina Faso's Kaboré wins re-election, according to full preliminary results', France 24, 26 Nov. 2020.

¹¹ Burke, J., 'Mali's president announces resignation after "attempted coup"', *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2020.

¹² United Nations, S/2020/1293 (note 6).

¹³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'West and Central Africa', *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021* (UN OCHA: Geneva, 1 Dec. 2020).

a massive humanitarian crisis and increasing internal and cross-border displacements.¹⁴

In the Liptako-Gourma region, the main violent jihadi groups are: JNIM, which includes al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Eddine, Al-Mourabitoune, Katiba Macina and Katiba Serma; Ansarul Islam; and ISGS.¹⁵ On 9 February 2020 a police station was attacked in Keremou, Benin, at the border with Burkina Faso and Niger; on 11 June 2020 violent extremists believed to be members of JNIM shot around 10 soldiers at a frontier post on Côte d'Ivoire's border with Burkina Faso—the first attack in Côte d'Ivoire since the attack in Grand-Bassam in March 2016.¹⁶ A spillover of the conflict beyond the Sahel to the coastal countries remains a potential risk.¹⁷

In Central Sahel the presence of armed groups has increased existing vulnerabilities associated with structural fragility and political instability. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger rank at the bottom of the UN Development Programme's 2020 human development index. According to the World Bank the 2019 poverty rates of these states vary between 40 and 43 per cent.¹⁸ As a result of this protracted crisis, the number of internally displaced people has risen twentyfold since 2018 from 70 000 to 1.5 million.¹⁹ As of 31 December 2020, this number had risen to 1.7 million individuals, of whom 64 per cent were located in Burkina Faso (twice as many as in 2019), while 20 per cent resided in Mali, 12 per cent in Niger and 4 per cent in Mauritania.²⁰ In Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, the number of internally displaced Nigeriens increased by 77 per cent in 2020 to 138 229.²¹

The impact of Covid-19

Whereas the public health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was not as devastating in 2020 as initially feared, the restrictions on movement, lockdowns, market closures and barriers to trade had serious political, socio-economic, humanitarian and security impacts.²² The pandemic has deepened the

¹⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Central Sahel and Liptako Gourma Crisis—Monthly Dashboard #11', Displacement tracking matrix, 7 Dec. 2020.

¹⁵ Eizenga, D. and Williams, W., 'The puzzle of JNIM and militant Islamist groups in the Sahel', Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Africa Security Brief no. 38, 1 Dec. 2020; International Crisis Group (note 5); 'The risk of jihadist contagion in West Africa', Africa Briefing no. 149, International Crisis Group, 20 Dec. 2019.

¹⁶ 'Ivory Coast soldiers killed in attack at border post near Burkina Faso', France 24, 11 June 2020.

¹⁷ 'The risk of jihadist contagion in West Africa' (note 15).

¹⁸ '2020 human development index ranking', UN Development Programme, [n.d.]; and 'The World Bank in Africa', World Bank, [n.d.].

¹⁹ UN OCHA (note 13).

²⁰ UN OCHA, 'Niger update: Sahel situation', Mar. 2021; and IOM (note 14).

²¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Sahel situation', Mar. 2021.

²² Economic Community of West African States Commission et al., 'Covid-19 pandemic: Impact of restriction measures in West Africa', Dec. 2020; Eboko, F. and Schlimmer, S., 'Covid-19 in Africa: A continent's response to a global crisis', *Politique étrangère*, vol. 85, no. 4 (winter 2020–21); and United Nations, Security Council, 'Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel', Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/585, 24 Dec. 2020.

pre-existing gender inequalities in West Africa, and women and girls have been disproportionately affected by the consequences of stay-at-home orders and school closures. Increasing domestic and gender-based violence as well as loss of livelihoods have been reported.²³ National security forces in several states used violence to enforce the Covid-19-related restrictions. According to Human Rights Watch the governments in Ghana, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone used the pandemic as an excuse to censor the media or limit free speech.²⁴

Armed conflict in the Liptako-Gourma region

The 2012 northern Mali crisis has become, over the years, a regionally multidimensional crisis.²⁵ This subsection focuses on the armed conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger with a particular focus on the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region, which includes the provinces of: Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Nord, Est, Nord and Sahel (Burkina Faso); Gao, Ménaka and Mopti (Mali); and Tillabéri (Niger). The Liptako-Gourma region struggles with several interconnected layers of conflict, including: (a) the presence of jihadist groups; (b) intercommunity and intracommunity tensions, farmer–herder competition and land disputes; and (c) other sources of violence, such as banditry, illicit trafficking and organized crime.²⁶

In 2020 violence in Liptako-Gourma escalated further with over 5000 conflict-related fatalities, most of which occurred in the region's Burkina Faso and Mali provinces (see table 7.3). Violence is directed against civilian populations, local authorities, civil servants and national security forces. Armed groups are kidnapping or killing traditional, religious and community leaders suspected of collaborating with the state. This strategy aims to discourage local populations from cooperating with the state and force them to collaborate with the armed groups, which destroys traditional community ties. The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack noted over 85 attacks on schools in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger between January and July 2020, despite Covid-19-related school closures between late March and May.²⁷ As of April 2020 more than 135 health centres and

²³ 'WHO concerned over Covid-19 impact on women, girls in Africa', World Health Organization, 18 June 2020; and Zara Louan, F., 'Rapid gender analysis—Covid-19: West Africa', CARE, Apr. 2020.

²⁴ 'Covid-19 triggers wave of free speech abuse', Human Rights Watch, 11 Feb. 2021.

²⁵ Baudais, V., 'Mali: Fragmented territorial sovereignty and contested political space', SIPRI Commentary, 16 June 2020.

²⁶ Bodian, M. et al., 'The challenges of governance, development and security in the central regions of Mali', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2020/4, Mar. 2020; Tobie, A., 'Central Mali: Violence, local perspectives and diverging narratives', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2017/5, Dec. 2017; and Matfess, H., 'What explains the rise of communal violence in Mali, Nigeria and Ethiopia?', World Politics Review, 11 Sep. 2019.

²⁷ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 'Supporting safe education in the Central Sahel', Briefing Paper, Sep. 2020.

Table 7.3. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Liptako-Gourma region, 2017–20

Provinces (state)	2017	2018	2019	2020 (%)
Boucle du Mouhoun, Centre-Nord, Est, Nord and Sahel (Burkina Faso)	77	266	2 123	2 261 (98)
Gao, Ménaka and Mopti (Mali)	568	1 409	1 658	2 230 (78)
Tillabéri (Niger)	62	170	263	680 (61)
Total	707	1 845	4 044	5 171

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

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Data export tool', accessed 19 Feb. 2021. Data per region is available from 11 Jan. 2017.

2500 schools were closed in Burkina Faso, depriving 338 000 students of access to education and millions of people of access to essential healthcare.²⁸

Burkina Faso

Since 2015, the situation in Burkina Faso has deteriorated and the country is under constant pressure from armed groups. The weak state presence has left communities with limited protection and allowed for the proliferation of armed groups and militias, including the Koglweogo groups.²⁹ To support the fight against terrorism, the government chose to arm civilians and create the civilian defence volunteers' forces (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie) in January 2020.³⁰ Arbitrary arrests and executions by national armed forces have led to distrust between the central government and large parts of the population. Human Rights Watch reported that Burkina Faso's state security forces were involved in mass extrajudicial executions³¹

Mali

While the military situation in the north of the country stabilized in 2020, the situation in the centre continued to deteriorate as armed and radicalized groups fuelled old and local intercommunity tensions. The implementation of the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali did not make any major advances in 2020 due to the sociopolitical crisis, the coup d'état and the Covid-19 pandemic.³²

²⁸ United Nations, S/2020/585 (note 22); and 'Armed group attacks on teachers, students, and schools in Burkina Faso', Human Rights Watch, May 2020.

²⁹ Da Cunha Dupuy, R. and Quidelleur, T., 'Self-defence movements in Burkina Faso, diffusion and structuration of Koglweogo groups', Noria Research, Nov. 2018.

³⁰ Zutterling, C., 'Armer les civils : La loi des Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie au Burkina Faso' [Arming civilians: When civilian defence volunteers' forces make the law], GRIP, 30 Oct. 2020.

³¹ 'Burkina Faso: Residents' accounts point to mass executions', Human Rights Watch, 8 July 2020.

³² Carter Center, 'Observations on the implementation of the agreement on peace and reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers Process', Report of the Independent Observer, Dec. 2020.

Table 7.4. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Mali, 2013–20

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	547	301	316	210	563	759	831	1 657
Explosions/remote violence	191	39	27	32	144	177	234	262
Protests, riots and strategic developments	7	1	5	7	3	28	4	27
Violence against civilians	138	41	80	71	238	783	806	903
Total	883	382	428	320	948	1 747	1 875	2 849

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 22 Feb. 2021.

In addition to the persistent insecurity, corruption and bad governance fuelled discontent with the government. After weeks of popular mobilization led by the coalition called 5 June Movement–Rally of Patriotic Forces, a military coup removed President Keïta from power on 18 August 2020. Implementation of the 2015 Bamako Agreement remained the goal of the new transitional authorities and international mediators, and the new Malian authorities expressed their willingness to talk to all groups including those that have not signed the agreement.

To address the situation and support the stabilization of the country, several multinational peace operations and other multilateral operations are operating in the country and in the Liptako-Gourma region (as discussed below). Notwithstanding, the situation worsened in 2020 (see table 7.4).

Niger

The rise in fatalities on a national level from 719 in 2019 to 1114 in 2020 can be explained by the increasing violence in the Liptako-Gourma region, which was responsible for 61 per cent of the total national fatalities (see table 7.3). In Tillabéri, the high number of refugees and displaced people forced authorities to manage the local economy and to avoid the disruption of local dynamics and tensions around natural resources.³³ The crisis also led to a deterioration of the relationship among communities and weakened traditional authorities, which are targeted by armed groups. Although the number of violent events in Diffa increased from 150 in 2019 to 167 in 2020, Niger suffered fewer fatalities involving Boko Haram in 2020 than in 2019 (see table 7.6). Incidents involving Boko Haram in 2020 included an assault

³³ Baudais, V., ‘The impact of the Malian crisis on the Group of Five Sahel countries: Balancing security and development priorities’, SIPRI Commentary, 18 May 2020.

Table 7.5. Active external national and multilateral peace and counterterrorism operations in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, 2020

Launched or established	Name	Contributing countries/organizations	Force level (No. of personnel deployed)	Country of deployment
2012	European Union (EU) Capacity Building Mission Sahel Niger	EU member states	123	Niger
2013	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali	United Nations (mainly African countries, Bangladesh, China, Egypt and Germany)	15 050	Mali
2013	EU Training Mission in Mali	EU member states	726	Mali
2014 ^a	Multinational Joint Task Force	Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria	10 620	Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria
2014 ^b	Operation Barkhane	France	5 100	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	5 000	Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger
2020	Task Force Takuba	France, special forces from European states (Estonia, France)	[.] ^c	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 January 2013 and ended in July 2014.

^c No estimate for 2020.

Sources: SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, accessed 1 Apr. 2021; 'G5 Sahel—Pau Summit—statement by the heads of state', French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 13 Jan. 2020; van der Lijn, J., 'Multilateral non-peace operations', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 141–42; Dieng, M., 'The Multi-National Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel Joint Force: The limits of military capacity-building efforts', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2019), pp. 481–501; and French Ministry of Defence, *Operation Barkhane*, Press pack (French Ministry of Defence: Feb. 2020).

in Toumour on the Diffa border, which killed 28 people and injured hundreds more on 13 December, the day of local and regional elections.³⁴

³⁴ 'Attack in Niger kills 28, and Boko Haram is blamed', *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2020; and Boko, H., 'Why Boko Haram's attack on Toumour, Niger is a stark warning to neighbouring states', *France 24*, 18 Dec. 2020.

Multinational peace and counterterrorism operations

To address insecurities in West Africa, several multinational peace and counterterrorism operations have been deployed, mainly in the Sahel region (see table 7.5). The largest of these is the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, which focuses on peacekeeping and stabilization.³⁵ However, it continued to face enormous difficulties in implementing its protection of civilians mandate in 2020. The United States, the European Union (EU) and several European states are centrally involved in the fight against transnational jihadist and criminal networks in the region, albeit rarely directly: most Western forces train and build capacity in local forces, including the two ad hoc counterterrorism task forces: the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad region and the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) Joint Force.³⁶ Since March 2020 the EU Training Mission in Mali has been mandated to improve the operational capacity of the Malian army and also to assist the national armed forces of the other G5 Sahel countries.³⁷ On the civilian side, the EU Capacity Building Mission Sahel Mali and the EU Capacity Building Mission Sahel Niger support the internal security forces (see table 7.5).³⁸

At the 13 January 2020 Pau Summit in France, France and the G5 Sahel countries launched the Coalition for the Sahel, a broader coordinating framework. The coalition is based on four pillars: the fight against terrorism, capacity building for Sahelian forces, restoration of state authority and development assistance. The counterterrorism pillar comprises special forces from European states—Task Force Takuba officially launched on 27 March 2020. The European task force is placed under Operation Barkhane's command, and advises, assists and accompanies Malian Armed Forces.³⁹ An initial operational capability for Task Force Takuba, consisting of French and Estonian units, was in place by the end of 2020, and a 150-troop contingent from Sweden was due to be deployed in early 2021.⁴⁰ Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal have also

³⁵ United Nations, Security Council, 'Security Council renews Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, unanimously adopting Resolution 2531 (2020)', Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 29 June 2020.

³⁶ Davis, I., 'Key general developments in the region', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 176–77.

³⁷ Council of the European Union, 'EUTM Mali: Council extends training mission with broadened mandate and increased budget', Press release, 23 Mar. 2020.

³⁸ European External Action Service, 'EUCAP Sahel Mali', [n.d.].

³⁹ The European signatories of the political statement are Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Niger, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom. 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.

⁴⁰ Swedish Armed Forces, 'Mali (Task Force Takuba)', 18 Jan. 2021.

Table 7.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Lake Chad region, 2017–20

Province (state)	2017	2018	2019	2020 (%)
Far North (Cameroon)	583	322	456	592 (37)
Lac (Chad)	217	126	259	441 (60)
Diffa (Niger)	147	307	404	338 (30)
Adamawa, Borno and Yobe (Nigeria)	3 022	2 591	2 221	3 465 (45)
Total	3 969	3 346	3 340	4 836 (43)

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

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Dashboard, accessed 22 Feb. 2021. Data per region is available from 11 Jan. 2017.

pledged future contributions.⁴¹ France also increased its military personnel under Operation Barkhane from 4500 to 5100 in 2020.⁴²

The effectiveness of these peace and counterterrorism operations has been mixed, whether at the military level or in the restoration of state authority, while more needs to be done to differentiate between civilians and combatants in the areas where they operate.⁴³ From February until April 2020 national and foreign forces intensified their counterterrorism operations in the Liptako-Gourma region, which is reflected in a concurrent peak in battle deaths and in violence against civilians.⁴⁴ The involvement of the defence and security forces and international forces in human rights violations committed during military operations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger increased in 2020 compared to in 2019.⁴⁵ Since late 2019 the crack-down on terrorism by the security forces of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has resulted in more than 600 extrajudicial killings of civilians during counterterrorism operations.⁴⁶

Armed conflict in the Lake Chad region

Armed conflict, forced displacement and grave human rights violations, including killings, sexual violence, abduction and recruitment of child soldiers, remained widespread in the Lake Chad region, which includes

⁴¹ See chapter 2, section II, in this volume.

⁴² 'France's thankless war against jihadists in the Sahel', *The Economist*, 12 Nov. 2020. On France's military role in Africa more generally see Recchia, S. and Tardy, T., 'French military operations in Africa: Reluctant multilateralism', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2020), pp. 473–81.

⁴³ 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).

⁴⁴ ACLED, Dashboard, accessed 22 Feb. 2021; and Amnesty International, *Human Rights Violations by Security Forces in the Sahel* (Amnesty International: London, 2020).

⁴⁵ Berger, F., 'Human rights abuses: A threat to security sector reforms in the Sahel', Commentary, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 3 Mar. 2021; Amnesty International, 'Sahel: Soldiers rampage through villages killing people under guise of anti-terror operations', 10 June 2020.

⁴⁶ 'Sahel: End abuses in counterterrorism operations', News release, Human Rights Watch, 13 Feb. 2021.

the provinces of Far North (in Cameroon); Lac (in Chad); Diffa (in Niger); and Adamawa, Borno and Yobe (in Nigeria). Boko Haram, which started its violent uprising in 2009, and the growing influence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (a Boko Haram splinter group) with deepening roots in civilian populations, contributed to a continued humanitarian crisis and increased internal and cross-border displacement of people.⁴⁷

The security situation in the Lake Chad region worsened in 2020, with a sharp increase in conflict-related fatalities of 44 per cent. There were 3340 fatalities in 2019 versus 4836 in 2020 (see table 7.6).⁴⁸ The high number can partly be explained by the battles between Boko Haram and Chad's military. Chadian troops claimed to have killed 1000 Boko Haram members around Lake Chad in response to the ambush that killed almost 100 of their soldiers in Boma, Chad, on 23 March 2020.⁴⁹

As of 23 November 2020, 2.7 million people in the region were internally displaced and another 257 000 were refugees in neighbouring countries. An estimated 12.5 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, of whom 10.6 million were in north-eastern Nigeria where an estimated 4.3 million people faced emergency levels of food insecurity. With increasing attacks on education, 1117 schools in the Lake Chad region remained closed during 2020, of which 934 were in Nigeria.⁵⁰

Chad has been one of the most important regional actors in the fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel. Its troop withdrawals from Borno in Nigeria in January 2020 heightened the risk of attacks in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria.⁵¹ On 23 March 2020 an estimated force of 400 Boko Haram fighters killed around 100 Chadian soldiers in an unprecedented large attack on a garrison on Bohoma Peninsula, confirming the threat of violent extremism in the country and the region.⁵² In response, Chadian troops—mainly outside of the auspices of the MNJTF—claimed to have killed 1000 Boko Haram members during operation Wrath of Boma.⁵³ This unprecedented attack in Bohoma confirmed the growing threat of violent extremism in the country and the region.

⁴⁷ International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, Africa Report no. 273 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 16 May 2019). On the historical processes that produced Boko Haram see MacEachern, S., *Searching for Boko Haram: A History of Violence in Central Africa* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2018).

⁴⁸ ACLED (note 44).

⁴⁹ 'Boko Haram militants kill nearly 100 Chadian soldiers in attack', Reuters, 25 Mar. 2020; and 'Chad's army says 52 soldiers, 1,000 Boko Haram fighters killed in operation', Reuters, 9 Apr. 2020.

⁵⁰ UN OCHA, 'Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian snapshot', 23 Nov. 2020.

⁵¹ Ahmen, K., 'Fears for civilians in Chad after army suffers devastating Boko Haram attack', *The Guardian*, 1 Apr. 2020. Also see the discussion on Chad in section III of this chapter.

⁵² 'Boko Haram militants kill nearly 100 Chadian soldiers in attack', Reuters (note 49).

⁵³ 'Chad's army says 52 soldiers, 1,000 Boko Haram fighters killed in operation', Reuters (note 49); and 'Behind the jihadist attack in Chad', Commentary, International Crisis Group, 6 Apr. 2020.

Table 7.7. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Nigeria, 2013–20

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	2 326	4 031	3 329	2 191	1 779	2 470	2 475	3 336
Explosions/ remote violence	255	1 311	1 938	681	1 424	759	770	1 900
Protests, riots and strategic developments	66	252	366	138	144	161	111	244
Violence against civilians	2 039	5 794	5 285	1 886	1 600	2 853	2 075	2 280
Total	4 686	11 388	10 918	4 896	4 947	6 243	5 431	7 760

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 22 Feb. 2021.

Nigeria

With 71 per cent of the total conflict-related fatalities in the Lake Chad region, Borno in Nigeria (the birthplace of Boko Haram) continued to be the epicentre of the conflict in 2020 (see table 7.6).⁵⁴ In the most violent direct attack on civilians in 2020, at least 110 people were killed near the Borno capital Maiduguri on 28 November 2020.⁵⁵ Boko Haram's area of operation also expanded into the north-west region of Nigeria in 2020, where it forged alliances with increasingly overlapping and intertwining bandits and criminal gangs. Banditry, including armed robbery, cattle rustling, murder, kidnapping and sexual violence, surged in 2020: after a lull at the end of 2019, more than 1600 fatalities were recorded in the north-west region between January and June 2020.⁵⁶ In mid December 2020 Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of hundreds of students in the state of Katsina, far from its original bases.⁵⁷ Some of the kidnapped boys were reportedly released on 17 December 2020.⁵⁸

Aside from the intensifying Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east and the surge in banditry in the north-west, Nigeria experienced additional security challenges in 2020. Against the backdrop of an economic recession due to Covid-19 coupled with a collapse in oil prices, the country faced protests against police brutality, increasing violence between farmers

⁵⁴ ACLED (note 44); and 'The Islamic State franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad', Commentary, International Crisis Group, 29 Oct. 2020.

⁵⁵ 'Statement on attack against civilians in Koshobe, Borno', UN OCHA, 29 Nov. 2020; 'At least 110 dead in Nigeria after suspected Boko Haram attack', *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 2020; and Ewang, A., 'Gruesome Boko Haram killings in northeast Nigeria', Dispatches, 1 Dec. 2020.

⁵⁶ Wodu, N., 'Not all violent problems require violent solutions: Banditry in Nigeria's north-west', Council on Foreign Relations, 23 July 2020; and 'Nigeria: Banditry violence and displacement in the northwest', ACAPS, 24 July 2020.

⁵⁷ Akinwotu, E., 'Nigerian schoolboys meet president after kidnap ordeal', *The Guardian*, 18 Dec. 2020; and Campbell, J., 'Release of Nigerian school boys: Questions and hypotheses', Council on Foreign Relations, 21 Dec. 2020.

⁵⁸ 'Nigeria's Katsina school abduction: Boko Haram says it took the students', BBC News, 15 Dec. 2020; Akinwotu (note 57); and Campbell (note 57).

and herders in the Middle Belt and the north-west, and the long-running militancy in the Niger Delta.⁵⁹

In 2020 Nigeria's conflict-related fatalities were at the highest level since the peak in 2014–15, when the Nigerian armed forces recaptured territory from Boko Haram (see table 7.7).⁶⁰ This can partly be explained by the rise in fatalities in the Lake Chad region and banditry in the north-west. Violence by national security forces also contributed to the rise in fatalities: the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission, for instance, reported by mid April that violent enforcing of the lockdown caused almost twice as many fatalities as the officially reported Covid-19 deaths at that time.⁶¹ Nigeria's military spending increased by 29 per cent to reach \$2.6 billion in 2020.⁶²

⁵⁹ Lenshie, N. E. et al., 'Desertification, migration, and herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria: Rethinking the ungoverned spaces thesis', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2020); 'Niger Delta annual conflict report: January–December 2020', Linking Partners for Niger Delta Development, 10 Feb. 2021; ACAPS (note 56); and 'Nigeria's #EndSARS protest: De-escalate tensions, start deep police reform', Statement, International Crisis Group, 26 Oct. 2020. For more on Nigeria's economic challenges in 2020 see World Bank, 'World Bank Group to boost Nigeria's efforts to reduce poverty', Press release 2021/072/AFR, 15 Dec. 2020; and 'Finding the balance: Public health and social measures in Nigeria', Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 19 Aug. 2020.

⁶⁰ 'Most territory regained from Boko Haram, Nigeria says', Voice of America, 17 Mar. 2015.

⁶¹ 'Report on human rights violations following the implementation of Covid-19 regulations 2020 and directives issued by federal and state governments from 31st March to 13th April 2020', National Human Rights Commission, 8 July 2020.

⁶² On Nigeria's military spending see chapter 8, section II, in this volume.