

WORSENING

BURUNDI: Serious clashes occur in the north of the country amidst a climate of rising political tension

Serious clashes broke out between the Burundian Armed Forces and an armed rebel group coming from DR Congo in the province of Cibitoke, in the northwestern part of the country. The five-day clashes began on 29 December. The circumstances and many details of the attack are still unknown. According to anonymous military sources, 105 of the 121 members of the armed group were killed in the fighting and four were captured. The Burundian Army had seized weapons of different calibre, a mortar and a grenade launcher. A senior Army officer speaking on the condition of anonymity said that two soldiers were killed in the course of the battle, though other military sources claimed that at least 12 had died. According to official sources, the Army and the police, supported by civilian militias, intercepted a group of around 200 combatants trying to reach the Kibira forest in search of shelter, in the north-central part of the country. Kibira had been a sanctuary for various armed groups in the recent conflict that has affected the country since the 1990s. The security forces surrounded the group in the commune of Murwi, where they attacked them relentlessly. The opposition and civil society have denounced the existence of various cases of detained rebels that have been disarmed and then executed extrajudicially. The government has denied these accusations, saying that its intention was to stop the group and make an example of it for other groups, like the FNL of Aloys Nzabampema, which still believes in violence to change the situation in the country. The area bordering DR Congo has previously been the scene of other small attacks claimed by a dissident faction of the FNL, which has denied any link to these most recent events. In the weeks prior, tension in the atmosphere had risen as a result of the many irregularities detected during the voter registration process, which even the government acknowledged and led to the political opposition's unanimous demand for the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) to resign. (Jeune Afrique, 01 and 16/12/14; 30 and 31/12/14; 04, 05/01/15)

CHINA (XINJIANG): The regional government announces more restrictions on the practice of Islam

The government of Xinjiang announced that new legislation will enter into force starting in January that bans prayer or the performance of other religious practices in government buildings, schools and offices, wearing clothing (or logos) associated with religious extremism and distributing videos on jihad, Islamic extremism or terrorism. Moreover, the new legislation will increase the penalties for those that use the Internet to spread messages that undermine national unity or social stability or incite ethnic hatred. Some analysts think that this legislation will restrict religious activity in places especially equipped for it (such as mosques) and will mainly affect thousands of Muslim civil servants that normally perform prayer twice during working hours. Also particularly affected will be people that use telephones or computers to continue their religious studies. A few days after this news became public, municipal authorities in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, declared a ban on the use of veils that cover women's faces as a measure in the offensive against "the propagation of Islam". Although the measure must be ratified by the regional and state Parliaments and despite the fact that there are already informal restrictions on the use of the burqa and other full face veils in different parts of Xinjiang, this is the first legal move of this kind to be approved in the region. (The Times of India, 01/12/14; The Wall Street Journal, 11/12/14)

INDIA (ASSAM): An attack by the armed group NDFB(S) kills over 70 Adivasis

The Bodo armed opposition group NDFB(S), which rejects peace negotiations, killed 72 Adivasis (the original indigenous population of India) in three simultaneous attacks in the districts of Sonitpur, Kokrajhar and Chirang in retaliation for a police operation against the

armed group carried out days before that caused the deaths of two Bodo insurgents. Members of the armed group opened fire indiscriminately on members of the Adivasi population. At least 18 of the victims were children. Seven other people were killed after the attack, four of them in different acts of vengeance in which the Bodo population was targeted by members of the Adivasi community. Three others died as a result of shots fired by police during demonstrations involving thousands of Adivasis to protest the massacre. Following the attacks, the government refused any sort of negotiation with the group (although the NDFB(S) has always been opposed to peace talks with the government, it has recently explored possibilities for dialogue). Furthermore, security operations against the armed group were strengthened. As a result of the violence, 2,500 people were displaced from their places of origin and took refuge in shelters. (The Assam Tribune, 24/12/14; IANS, 25/12/14)

NIGERIA: Boko Haram perpetrates attacks that kill hundreds in Nigeria, capturing dozens and launching an offensive repelled by Cameroon

The armed group Boko Haram (BH) continued to perpetrate periodic attacks in northeastern Nigeria that claimed at least 300 lives according to media accounts and led to the abduction of dozens of people in December. One of the bloodiest incidents occurred early in the month, when an assault on the main mosque in Kano killed more than 100 people and left many others wounded. Another bomb attack in the town of Jos killed more than 30 people in mid-December. A week later, media reports blamed BH for killing 35 people and kidnapping another 185 in the town of Gumsuri, near Chibok, where the armed group captured over 200 girls in April. On Christmas Eve, another 27 people were killed in a dual attack against a bus station and a market in the vicinity of Maiduguri. Given the threat of massive attacks by the radical organisation during Christmas, the authorities of Borno State and Yobe State imposed a travel ban that prevented vehicles from entering or leaving the area. At the year's end, another 15 people were killed in an armed attack in Kautikari, which was also attributed to BH. At the end of the month, Cameroon launched air strikes on BH positions for the first time after over 1,000 suspected combatants attacked five towns and a military base in the north of the country. Cameroonian officials stated that the clashes claimed the lives of at least 41 militiamen and one soldier. Meanwhile, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan stressed his determination to defeat the group, but his government continued to be criticised for some of the strategies it has pursued in its struggle against BH. In December, human rights organisations reported that death sentences were given to Nigerian soldiers that refused to participate in operations against the radical group, citing a lack of equipment. A local NGO asked the UN to intervene to stop the execution of 44 soldiers sentenced to death while another 45 were still awaiting a verdict. (BBC, 24, 29/12/14 and 01/01/15; Foreign Policy, 29/12/14; The New York Times, 24/12/14; Reuters, 23/12/14)

PAKISTAN: An attack on a school in Peshawar kills 145 people, most of them children

The armed Taliban opposition group TTP carried out an assault on a school in the city of Peshawar and killed 145 people, of which 132 were boys and girls attending there. Seven insurgents died during the attack. This was a Pakistani Army school where most of the students are children of members of the Armed Forces. The insurgents stormed the school and hosed it with gunfire, also killing 10 members of the school staff, including the director, and three soldiers. The armed Taliban opposition group TTP said that the attack was an act of vengeance for military operations under way against the insurgency and for the deaths of hundreds of insurgents in North Waziristan, South Waziristan and Khyber Agency. After the attack, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif withdrew the moratorium on the death penalty for cases of terrorism. In December, at least 190 Taliban rebels were killed as a result of clashes with security forces and drone strikes in different parts of the tribal areas. Nevertheless, sources indicated that some of the deceased may have been civilians,

although this could not be confirmed due to the lack of media access to the areas affected by the armed conflict. Some of those killed may have been responsible for the attack on the school in Peshawar. (The Guardian 16 and 17/12/14; AFP, 2/12/14; Dawn, 5, 8, 10, 17, 21, 24, 27, 28/12/14; Reuters, 19/12/14)

RUSSIA (CHECHNYA): Large-scale clashes in the capital of Chechnya kill and wound dozens and the Chechen authorities announce new collective punishment

Clashes between security forces and Chechen insurgents in the capital, Grozny, in early December caused the deaths of 14 police officers and 10 combatants, while 28 other agents were wounded, according to figures released by the Russian authorities, in one of the most serious incidents in 2014. The insurgents opened fire against the security forces after they tried to stop the vehicles in which they were travelling and later took refuge in the Press House, where the battle continued, according to Caucasian Knot. The independent media website also reported that other insurgents closed off a school. The authorities imposed “counterterrorist operation” emergency measures. Unlike the high levels of violence in the neighbouring Republic of Dagestan, the military security situation in Chechnya has remained more stable in a context of strong authoritarianism and omnipresent security forces under President Ramzan Kadyrov, an ally of the Kremlin. After the incidents in early December, Kadyrov said that collective punishment would be meted out to the families of the suspected insurgents by expelling them from Chechnya and demolishing their homes. Thus, at least eight homes of relatives of the suspected rebels were burned down in various Chechen towns in the days that followed. Furthermore, Kadyrov stepped up pressure against human rights activists, claiming possible collusion between Western security services, the activist and leader of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Igor Kalyapin (who requested an investigation into Kadyrov’s orders against insurgent family members) and the insurgency. The headquarters of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture was attacked and Kalyapin was harassed. The international NGOs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch urged the Russian authorities to put an end to the persecution of human rights advocates in Chechnya. However, the general atmosphere in Russia is also affected by intense pressure, stigmatisation and harassment directed at human rights defenders and activists. (Caucasian Knot, Reuters, Jamestown Foundation, RFE/RL, Interfax, 4-15/12/14)

SOMALIA: Parliament forces the resignation of Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Mohamed and appoints Omar Abdirashid Ali Shamarke to be the new prime minister

As part of the permanent political crisis in the country, on 6 December the Federal Parliament approved the expulsion of Prime Minister Abdiweli Sheikh Mohamed after one month of impasse. He had been the third prime minister under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in two years. The disputes between the prime minister and the president had been constant and resulted in the virtual paralysis of the Somali government. Days later, on 24 December, Omar Abdirashid Ali Shamarke, a former prime minister of Somalia and former ambassador to the United States, was unanimously approved for the post. In December 2013, Abdiweli’s predecessor, Shirdon, was also deposed by Parliament. The new prime minister is expected to appoint a more inclusive cabinet so the international community, the main funder of Somalia, will approve the election schedule planned for 2016. Meanwhile, one of the leaders of the Islamist group al-Shabaab, Zakariya Ismail Ahmed Hersi, turned himself in. Hersi had contacted the Somali authorities and AMISOM and surrendered as a result of the serious internecine tension within the armed group in the last few months after its leader Godane was killed. (Garowe Online, 24, 26 and 27/12/14)

SOUTH SUDAN: The peace negotiations are postponed and combat persists between the government and the SPLM-IO while the humanitarian situation worsens

The violence rocking South Sudan since December 2013 continued with no end in sight and in December clashes were reported between government troops and SPLM-IO rebels. Meanwhile, South Sudan is still in the grips of a grave humanitarian crisis that has taken the country to the brink. Although the authorities continue to deny the threat of famine, the UN has started sending food aid across the Nile River to cope with what is already forecast to be a catastrophic situation of starvation. Thus, the UN's Food and Agriculture Association (FAO) and its partners have detected new disease patterns and intensified fighting over access to land for grazing due to the loss of livestock, which plays a crucial role in South Sudan. Furthermore, the National Elections Commission of South Sudan has announced that elections will be held in June 2015, although this date could change if the government of South Sudan achieves a peace agreement with the rebellion led by former Vice President Riek Machar. However, in the final days of December, the special envoy of the regional organisation IGAD, Seyoum Mesfin, said that the negotiations over the conflict were postponed during the Christmas holiday. He added that no specific date was set to resume them and that they had not made convincing progress due to growing rumours that both sides were preparing fresh attacks. (Europa Press, 03/12/14; BBC, 05/12/14; Guin Guin Bali, 29/12/14; UN, 31/12/14; eldiario.es, 31/12/14; La Información, 03/01/15)

SUDAN (SOUTH KORDOFAN AND BLUE NILE): The signing of the peace agreement between the government and the SPLM-N falls through as sporadic clashes continue

In early December, the Sudanese government and the armed group SPLM-N reported their failure to sign an agreement after three weeks of ceasefire and negotiations to put an end to the conflict. The collapse of the negotiations led various members of the opposition to symbolically join the rebel forces. This bolstered the SPLM-N's position, although the government warned that whoever joined the rebels would pay the price and arrested two of them after the agreement was signed. After the mediation over South Kordofan fell through, both parties reported sporadic clashes. In early December the Sudanese Army took credit for killing around 50 rebels in South Kordofan in a battle in the towns of Balanja and Al Atmour. However, the opposition denied that the battle had taken place, even though a rebel group attacked Sudanese Army positions days later. The offensive led to open confrontation between the Sudanese Army and the SPLM-N insurgents that left dozens dead and wounded. Moreover, there was evidence that conditions for new negotiations were being set, such as the commitment of the SPLM-N's leader to destroy its stockpiles of antipersonnel land mines at the third meeting of Geneva Call and the willingness of both sides to participate in a large-scale operation to free all prisoners of war. However, a recent statement of operations from SPLM-N confirmed that a series of operations were still under way in different parts of the area of Kadugli and accused the Sudanese Armed Forces of using child soldiers in combat. (Europa Press, 03 and 09/12/14; ABC, 12/12/14, Sudan Tribune, 02/01/15; Radio Tamazuj, 03/01/15)

SYRIA: 2014 becomes the bloodiest year since the start of war in the country, with a death toll of 76,000 according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that 2014 was the bloodiest year since the beginning of the armed conflict in Syria in 2011, with 76,000 people killed. The death toll could not be proven due to the complex scenario of war in the country, but the SOHR supports the data with a network of informants based in Syria. According to the organisation, at least 17,790 of the total people killed were civilians, while another 22,627 were soldiers or members of pro-government militias, 17,000 were members of radical groups like Islamic State (ISIS) or al-Nusra Front and 15,000 were combatants from other rebel factions. Therefore, the body count in 2014 was higher than in 2013, when 73,477 people lost their lives. According to the United Nations, the total

number of people killed in the armed conflict in Syria has exceeded 200,000. In December, the SOHR also reported that from the declaration of the caliphate in Syria by ISIS on 28 June until 27 December, a total of 1,878 documented executions had been carried out. Those executed included 1,175 civilians (of which four were children and eight were women) that were hanged, shot or stoned to death in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, as well as 502 soldiers or government employees, 81 members of the jihadist organisation al-Nusra Front (a rival of ISIS) and other rebel groups and 120 members of Islamic State itself, allegedly for trying to desert. The SOHR recognises that the number of people executed by ISIS may be much higher, given the difficulties in gathering information and the large amount of people that have disappeared or been detained in the lands under the radical organisation's control. The SOHR also estimated that at least 1,170 people had died in the three months of air strikes conducted by the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, most of them militiamen. Meanwhile, in December international organisations highlighted the serious situation experienced by the Syrian population after four years of conflict. The UN called for more than 8.4 billion USD for 2015 for the purpose of aiding 18 million people, including both those within the country and those that have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. The WHO stated that one million people have been wounded in the conflict. (BBC and al-Jazeera, 01/01/15; SOHR, 28/12/14; UNHCR, 18/12/14; Reuters, 23/12/14)

YEMEN: Over 1,500 people are killed in 2014 as a result of the many conflicts in the country, the worst death toll in three years

The various inter-related armed conflicts in Yemen claimed the lives of more than 1,500 people in 2014, the worst figure since the ouster of Ali Abdullah al-Saleh's regime, according to media reports. It is estimated that around 2,000 people lost their lives in 2011, while in 2012 and 2013 the number of people killed in the violence was around 1,100 and 600, respectively. The main sources of conflict involved the Houthis, an armed group from the north of the country that expanded its area of influence significantly in 2014, and AQAP, al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen. Several incidents of violence related to these disputes took place throughout December, including a suicide attack against a cultural centre where the Houthis were having a religious celebration that killed 33 people in late December; the deaths of various AQAP militants at the hands of security forces near the border with Saudi Arabia in the middle of the month; the deaths of 25 people, including 15 children, in a double bomb attack on a Houthi checkpoint and an assault on the home of a leader of the group in al-Bayda governorate that was blamed on AQAP; a failed rescue operation undertaken by US special forces that ended with the death of an American journalist and South African professor abducted by AQAP; and an attack on the residence of the Iranian ambassador in Sana'a that claimed several lives. International and humanitarian aid organisations warned of the critical situation in the country. According to OCHA, 16 million people will be in need of urgent humanitarian aid in 2015. The UN special envoy on Yemen also warned of the possibility that the state will not be able to pay its public employees within a few months. (BBC, 07, 13, 16, 31/12/14; IRIN, 22/12/14; UN News, 04, 17/12/14)

ALERT

AFGHANISTAN: NATO and US combat missions end in a context of political instability and insecurity

The NATO mission in Afghanistan, the ISAF, officially ended and was replaced by Operation Resolute Support to assist and train Afghan security forces. Meanwhile, the USA also ended Operation Enduring Freedom, replacing it with Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Although this is also a support mission, US President Barack Obama authorised the possibility of conducting combat operations against forces that threaten US or Afghan troops and the clauses signed with the Afghan government also provide for self-defence. In

total, 10,800 US soldiers will remain deployed in Afghanistan, joined by several thousand more NATO troops that raise the number of foreign soldiers in the country to 13,500, although the final figure could be even higher. The withdrawal occurred in a political context fraught with fragility, since despite the agreement to form a national unity government with the presidential candidates of the country, a cabinet has still not taken shape. The security situation is also of enormous concern, with a rise in attacks in recent months including a spiral of suicide attacks in Kabul, the capital of the country. Alongside these developments, information emerged that President Ashraf Ghani had initiated contacts with the insurgency with the expectation of resuming possible peace talks in Qatar and, according to statements by a member of the High Peace Council, was planning a meeting in December that would involve representatives of the Council, the Taliban and Pakistan. However, the information about the meeting was denied by other representatives of the Council. Meanwhile, the first vice president, warlord and former commander of the Northern Alliance, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who stands accused of war crimes by human rights organisations, travelled to the north of the country to begin a negotiating process with the Taliban insurgency at the behest of the president, according to which at least 500 Taliban would lay down their arms in exchange for promises of employment. Dostum said that thousands of insurgents are joining the process. (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 7/1/15; The Guardian, 28/12/14; Tribune, 1/12/14; Khaama Press, 9, 16, 28, 31/12/14; Washington Post, 30/11/14)

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: The transition is officially extended as violence and insecurity persist in the country

The Congolese president and official mediator of the crisis affecting the country, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, gave his approval to extend the transition phase that was supposed to end in February by another six months. As a result, the transition phase will last until August. In December, various clashes took place in the country between anti-balaka militias and former Séléka coalition rebels in Bambari, in the centre of the country, which caused the deaths of at least 20 people and wounded scores of others. Fighting has occurred in Bambari since June, where the senior command of the former Séléka coalition has become established, killing at least 100 people and injuring around 200. In another recent outbreak of violence in December, 28 people were killed in Mbrès, a town 300 km north of Bangui, near Kaga-Bandoro, as a result of clashes between anti-balaka militias and the former Séléka coalition rebels that controlled the town. In mid-December, UNHCR certified that there were 420,000 refugees in neighbouring countries and 182,986 people internally displaced as a consequence of the violence persisting in the country in recent years. (Jeune Afrique, 18/12/14)

DR CONGO (EAST – ADF): The Congolese Armed Forces and MONUSCO carry out a joint operation against the ADF

In mid-December, the Congolese Armed Forces and the UN mission in the country (MONUSCO) launched a joint military operation in the northern part of North Kivu province to deal with the ADF, an armed group of Ugandan origin accused of committing serious human rights violations in recent months. It is estimated that since early October, around 250 civilians had died in the vicinity and region of the town Beni, in northern North Kivu, allegedly at the hands of the ADF, in an atmosphere of escalating actions and attacks. The UN Secretary-General's special representative announced the collaboration at a press conference and said that it is imperative that the Congolese Armed Forces, MONUSCO and civilians cooperate more actively to put an end to the situation and to rebuild trust among the different parties. The civilian population accused the Congolese Army and MONUSCO of inaction and incompetence. Months before, the Congolese Army had halted operations against the ADF, believing that the group and its bases had been totally destroyed. This allowed the group to reorganise, according to various analysts and civil society sources. (Jeune Afrique, 07, 10, 16/12/14)

GEORGIA (SOUTH OSSETIA): Russia and South Ossetia ready a new treaty for greater integration, which Georgia criticises as an attempt at annexation

The authorities in Russia and South Ossetia are preparing a new bilateral treaty that aims to deepen relations between both territories even further and whose signature is planned for early 2015. Russia formally acknowledged the independence of South Ossetia in 2008 following the war with Georgia that lasted several days that same year and signed various treaties establishing military and economic ties, among others, amidst South Ossetia's heavy economic dependence on Russia. The new deal provides for even closer relations and, according to some media outlets, plans for the integration of various South Ossetian structures, including defence, security and customs, under the umbrella of Russian ministries and agencies, as long as there are no changes to the draft. In the case of Abkhazia, there were some modifications to the initial proposals after Abkhazia raised some criticism. The Georgian government has criticised what it considers an attempt at annexation by Russia. In that vein, South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov said in December that he had asked Moscow to consider the possibility of South Ossetia's full absorption by Russia. (Civil Georgia, 1-23/12/14; Itar Tass, 26/12/14)

ISRAEL-PALESTINE: The proposal to end the Israeli occupation in 2017 fails in the UN Security Council and the PA moves toward joining the ICC in response

The resolution promoted by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and 22 Arab countries demanding an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory at the close of 2017 and the adoption of a comprehensive peace agreement within one year failed in the vote held in the UN Security Council. Officially presented by Jordan, which urged that the negotiations use the pre-1967 borders as their starting point, the proposal received eight votes in favour (Russia, China, France, Argentina, Chad, Chile, Jordan and Luxemburg) and two against (the United States and Australia), while five countries abstained (the United Kingdom, Lithuania, South Korea, Rwanda and Nigeria, which according to media accounts had promised to support the Palestinian motion). To succeed, the resolution would have required nine votes in favour, which would have forced the USA to exercise its veto power. The US government stressed that its vote against should not be interpreted as agreement with the current status quo, but as a reflection of Washington's conviction that the conflict must be resolved at the negotiating table. Israel described the proposal as a unilateral stunt and Hamas and Fatah also criticised it because they were not consulted about it. Less than 24 hours after the Security Council vote, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decided to sign various international treaties, including the Rome Statute. This signature is considered the first step for Palestine to join the International Criminal Court (ICC), which could enable the Palestinian authorities to press charges against Israel. Other experts said that joining the ICC is a political act loaded with symbolism. Various demonstrations of support for recognising a Palestinian state were reported in Europe in November and December. The European Parliament voted overwhelmingly in this regard and the legislatures of the UK, Ireland, Spain and France approved non-binding initiatives to recognise a Palestinian state, while Sweden officially recognised Palestine as a state. (BBC, 17, 31/12/14; al-Jazeera, 31/12/14)

MYANMAR: The peace process stagnates after an attack by the Burmese Armed Forces in Laiza in November

A new round of negotiations to achieve a nationwide ceasefire agreement was held without representatives of the Burmese Armed Forces or the main leaders of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), although insurgent groups were represented at a lower level. The significant absences were due to the crisis that surfaced in the negotiations after the attack carried out by the Burmese Armed Forces against a training centre of the armed group KIA that claimed the lives of 23 insurgents from different armed groups. This new crisis in the negotiating process raises concerns that although the government intends

to reach an agreement by February, such an objective will be difficult to attain. This was the first high-level meeting since September. During the meeting, the NCCT representatives proposed holding a meeting between the government and armed ethnic groups in the capital of Kachin State to ease tensions. The government indicated that it was studying the proposal, for which a date had not been set, although the next round of negotiations was planned for January. The negotiations have been stalled in recent months and the disagreement is rooted in differences over the issue of federalism, the creation of federal armed forces and the establishment of a code of conduct. (The Irrawaddy, 22 and 23/12/14)

PHILIPPINES (MINDANAO-MILF): Attacks by the BIFF, a MILF splinter group, increase in the southern Philippines

Eleven people were killed and 43 were wounded when a device exploded in a bus in the town of Maramag, in Bukidnon province. Most of the victims were university students. The Philippine Army accused the BIFF, a MILF breakaway group, of orchestrating the attack for the purpose of hindering progress in the peace process in the south of the country, although it also did not rule out Al Khobar, a criminal organisation primarily dedicated to extorting transport companies that has carried out attacks on buses in the past. The BIFF denied any involvement and declared that its strategy does not include attacks on civilians. In November, the government had accused the BIFF of being behind the detonation of a bomb device in the town of M'lang (North Cotabato province) that killed three people and wounded 22, as well as another bomb attack on a school that killed one and injured 17 others. Two days after the attack in Maramag, two BIFF fighters were killed in a battle with the Philippine Armed Forces in the province of Maguindanao. In early January, six people (five of them BIFF combatants) were also killed in simultaneous BIFF attacks in the provinces of Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao. (GMA News, 11/12/14; Mindanao Examiner, 10/12/14)

THE GAMBIA: An attempted military coup d'état fails in the president's absence

The capital of The Gambia, Banjul, was the scene of a failed coup d'état on 30 December led by a former commander, Lamin Sanneh, and a group of soldiers from the presidential guard, while President Yahya Jammeh was out of the country. The coup participants entered The Gambia from Senegal. Their attack involved shooting near the presidential palace. The country's security forces thwarted the coup, killing three participants, and dozens of people were arrested. The situation went partially back to normal the next day, with the reopening of trade. Two of the detainees, one with dual US and Gambian citizenship and the other a US resident, were accused by US prosecutors of conspiracy to overthrow the Gambian government. The Gambian president initially denied that there had been a coup attempt, though he later admitted the attack, which he described as an attempt to topple his legitimate government. Jammeh came to power through a military coup himself in 1994 and later won four elections in a context of political repression of the opposition and media control. (All Africa, BBC, 30-31/12/14)

UKRAINE: The Ukrainian government and rebel leaders agree on a prisoner exchange, but negotiation attempts to develop the truce agreement in September fall through

In late December, Ukrainian representatives and rebels reached an agreement for a partial exchange of prisoners of war from both sides (225 rebels and 125 Ukrainian soldiers) as part of new talks held in Minsk on 24 December. Despite the progress of that agreement, the outcome of the negotiations was not as expected and the round planned for 26 December was cancelled. That round was supposed to tackle key issues such as the withdrawal of heavy weaponry (an aspect provided for in the agreement on 5 September, which stipulates that it pull back 15 kilometres from the front line on both sides), the end of the economic blockade in the conflict zones and the withdrawal of state funding (social

assistance, pensions, education, healthcare), with serious effects on the population, as well as definition of the final status of the provinces in conflict. Despite the cancellation, the prisoner exchange agreement was implemented. The round held on 24 December had been preceded by an international teleconference involving Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. At the beginning of December, there had been various attempts to renew the truce, including a failed truce attempt at the Donetsk Airport agreed on 1 December that remained in effect for only a few hours of the following day. In reference to the truce, Ukraine announced a “Day of Silence” for 9 December that the rebels did observe, though it was not until 12 December that Poroshenko said that the truce was real, with various fatalities occurring in the days prior. Around this time, the parties traded accusations of delaying the negotiations, which finally took place on 24 December. The United Nations provided a new assessment of the impact of the war in mid-December, which amounted to 1,357 fatalities since the start of the ceasefire in September and 4,707 deaths and 10,322 people wounded since mid-April. Moreover, around one million people have been displaced, including internally displaced people and refugees, most of them women and children, according to the IDMC. In its December report, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights warned of the growing and extremely desperate situation of the population in the east, especially the elderly, minors and people in need of social assistance. It also cited abuses and infringements of human rights committed by both sides in the conflict. Furthermore, the general international and local context of the Ukrainian crisis continued to be marked by antagonism. In his annual speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin lambasted the West, while the Ukrainian Parliament temporarily cut off the electrical supply to Crimea and blocked transport to the peninsula. It also announced plans to double military spending in 2015 and asked the West for urgent financial aid. Meanwhile, some violent incidents took place in other eastern and southern areas outside the zones of armed conflict during the month and the Ukrainian government announced a counterterrorist operation in Odessa. (The New York Times, ONU, Reuters, El País, IWPR, RFE/RL, 1-30/12/14)

PROGRESS

COLOMBIA: The FARC declare an indefinite ceasefire and cessation of hostilities

At the beginning of December, the International Criminal Court (ICC) warned that a possible peace agreement with the FARC should be consistent with the Rome Statute and recalled that legal proceedings that do not meet this condition and are described as “inauthentic” or “not genuine” could fall under its jurisdiction. Meanwhile, in Havana, the immediate aim was to reduce the impact of the conflict. At mid-month, the International Crisis Group (ICG) published a report on the FARC and the end of the conflict that recommended granting the FARC a role in reintegration; taking advantage of its cohesion; developing local transitional justice measures; establishing a bilateral ceasefire immediately after the peace accord is signed, with previous de-escalation of the conflict; urgently implementing development measures in the FARC’s areas of influence; forming an international commission to monitor the disarmament and ceasefire; reforming the security sector; setting up a commitment to long-term funding; moving demobilised combatants to broad buffer zones; storing weapons under international supervision instead of delivering them directly to the state; establishing a detailed schedule of the first phase of the transition; setting up a joint mechanism for monitoring implementation of the peace agreements in their entirety; having FARC members participate as rural police or in building roads and conducting demining activities; extending the possibility of admitting FARC members into individual or group integration plans; giving the FARC joint responsibility for managing the reintegration programmes with an ethnic and gender focus; and ensuring that mechanisms of transitional justice are compatible with incentives for the reintegration of low-ranking combatants. Meanwhile, on 17 December, the FARC announced a unilateral ceasefire and a cessation of hostilities for an indefinite period of time starting on 20 December, which

should turn into an armistice. The FARC declared that they hoped for oversight from UNASUR, CELAC, ICRC and the Broad Front for Peace, but this was quickly rejected by the government, which did not want any kind of international supervision. Obviously, the FARC said that a unilateral ceasefire would be terminated only if they saw that their guerrilla structures were attacked by government forces. They also made the ceasefire conditional upon the approval of international oversight, which made the offer worthless following the government's response. (ICG, 11/12/14; El Tiempo, 04 and 18/12/14)

PHILIPPINES (NPA): The government and the NPA announce the possibility of resuming peace negotiations

NPA founder Jose Maria Sison announced that peace talks between the government and the NDF could resume in mid-January after Pope Francis visited the country. Sison said that he thinks it is possible to reach a truce and an agreement on economic and social reforms in the short or medium term (one of the four substantive items on the agenda), although he ruled out finalising the negotiations during the term of current President Benigno Aquino, which ends in June 2016. The government was moderately optimistic about a possible resumption of the talks and admitted that there had been discreet contacts in recent months in this regard. However, it said that no formal meetings have yet taken place between both parties, declared that there were still various outstanding issues to clarify to resume the negotiations and cautioned that the negotiating agenda had to be achievable and limited in time if the peace process was to succeed. The government also stated that if an agreement on resuming the talks is reached and both parties demonstrate the political will, there are many possibilities for a meeting to take place between the president and Sison, as the latter has requested on occasion (the last time recently). Furthermore, as a goodwill measure, the NPA announced the release of two soldiers in the province of Bukidnon in late December and pledged to do likewise with three others in January. (Reuters, 26/12/14; Xinhua, 28/12/14; Philippine Daily Inquirer, 27/12/14)

THAILAND (SOUTH): The Malaysian government, which is facilitating the peace process between the Thai government and armed groups in the south of the country, announces a set of principles to resume negotiations

After a meeting in Malaysia between the Thai and Malaysian prime ministers, both governments announced that the peace process between Bangkok and the armed organisations operating in the southern part of the country, facilitated by Kuala Lumpur, will be governed by three principles. The first is to guarantee a period in which the armed groups refrain from engaging in violence and respect the law. In this case, the Thai government would commit to a substantial and gradual reduction of its military presence in the south, shrinking its force from 60,000 soldiers to around 15,000, according to some media reports. Second, all groups behind the violence in the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat must be present at the negotiating table. Thus far, only the BRN participated in the peace negotiations promoted by the former government of Yingluck Shinawatra in early 2013. Third, the insurgent groups must conform in their demands. A few days later, faced with the rumour that Bangkok could invite the Indonesian government to intervene in the peace process, Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha stated that Malaysia is and will remain the sole facilitator. In addition, the Thai government presented its new negotiating team (led by General Aksara Kerdphol, chairman of the Advisory Board for the Armed Forces) and the government's Steering Committee for Dialogue, a 10-person body led by the prime minister and the secretary general of the National Security Council whose main task is to ensure greater consistency between public policies (security, development, education, prevention and conflict management, etc.) in the south of the country. Moreover, at the regional level, an Interagency Coordination Working Group was unveiled that will also ensure greater coverage by government action of the areas affected by the conflict. (The Nation, 08, 11 and 13/12/14; MCOT, 09/12/14)

TUNISIA: The country holds the second round of the presidential election, thereby ending another stage of the transition in a process considered exemplary and promising for the region

On 21 December, Tunisians went to the polls to choose a new president in the first free presidential election in the country since winning independence from France in 1956. After the first round was held in November, the runoff had a turnout at 60% and handed victory to 88-year-old Beji Caid Essebsi, a former leader under the old regime and head of the secular party Nidaa Tounes, who ran as the opposition candidate to the Tunisian Islamist forces and someone able to curb instability and ensure security in the country. Minister of the interior during the Habib Bourguiba era and speaker of Parliament under Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, Essebsi won 55.6% of the vote, while his rival, interim President Moncef Marzouki, known for his background as a human rights advocate and opponent of the authoritarian government of Ben Ali, finished with 44.3%. After the results were revealed, the president-elect promised to govern without excluding any sector of the country. Marzouki conceded defeat, but also announced the formation of a movement against the return of dictatorship, in reference to Essebsi's links to the former regime. Despite some incidents and protests, the election was viewed positively abroad and highlighted as another milestone of the democratic transition in Tunisia following the ouster of Ben Ali in 2011. The Tunisian experience is considered exemplary and promising in a region marked by upheaval and violence. Nevertheless, experts and analysts recognised that the country must face multiple challenges at this new stage. Specifically, Essebsi must govern as a national leader and not just from his bases, and he must develop a cooperative relationship with the Islamist party Ennahda (which ruled for two years after the fall of Ben Ali's regime until internal tensions in the country forced it to hand power over to a transition government). Ennahda, which did not present a candidate in the presidential election, suffered a setback in the legislative elections in October (winning 69 seats compared to 85 for Nidaa Tounes) due to its difficulties in reviving the economy and tackling security challenges. In addition, some analysts underscored the concern surrounding the presence of former regime officials in the presidential orbit, as well as the advanced age of the country's new leader. Essebsi took the oath of office on 31 December. In his inaugural address, he stressed the need to move towards a process of national reconciliation in the country. (The New York Times, 25/12/14; BBC, 22 and 31/12/14; Le Monde, 23 and 31/12/14; AFP, 23/12/14; Reuters, 31/12/14)

TURKEY (SOUTHEAST): The government and Kurdish opposition increase the pace of dialogue and the Kurds announce a new phase in the process

After the crisis in October and certain approaches in November, the Turkish government and Kurdish representatives accelerated the pace of contacts and meetings in order to strengthen the dialogue process. Thus, in late December the pro-Kurdish party HDP indicated that it had continued discussions with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, with the political and military leadership in its bases in northern Iraq and with the Turkish government, and as a result of these meetings there were no obstacles to moving on to substantive negotiations. Also at the end of the month, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan asserted that the process continued with political determination and desire and that the meetings had picked up speed, based on trust and goodwill. The delegation of Kurdish representatives of the HDP visited Öcalan on 30 November and 17 December in a broad format, including the co-chair of the Kurdish civil platform DTK Hatip Dicle. After the November meeting, Öcalan submitted a draft negotiating framework that the HDP also had to discuss with the government, internally within the party and with Kandil that would later supposedly be open to other public sectors. The document, "Democratic Solution and Negotiation Draft", contained various sections, including a methodology, philosophy, agenda and action plan. The KCK, an umbrella organisation for the guerrillas, political parties and civil society organisations of the Kurdish nationalist movement, said that it fully accepted the document and was willing to implement it if Ankara accepted it as well. The

KCK also emphasised the need for better conditions for Öcalan, including mechanisms enabling direct communication between Öcalan and the organisation. After having initially affirmed that the document envisaged the recognition of autonomy, the HDP later said (after the government denied this aspect) that it included content referring to the democratisation of local administrations. In statements made at the end of the month after a meeting with Akdoğan, the Kurdish delegation said that the dialogue process had encountered various problematic and fragile moments caused by many factors, primarily the parties' lack of negotiating experience. It also indicated that progress had been made since the crisis in October, that the talks from then on would be more in-depth, more frequent and more results-oriented, that the timetable would be a framework to act "as soon as possible" and that it would avoid sharing certain issues with the media until the discussions had made more headway. Moreover, according to the Turkish media, the supposed new phase of the dialogue process includes meetings between Öcalan and the committees created under the umbrella of the Undersecretariat of Public Order and Safety, which the Kurdish delegation will also be able to attend. The co-chair of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtas, said that the official dialogue could begin in early January. Meanwhile, some analysts thought that the AKP was trying to buy time ahead of the general elections in 2015. On one hand, on a trip to Russia, Demirtas said that Moscow should get more involved in the Kurdish issue. On the other hand, there were various incidents in December. A Kurdish youth died in clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Yüksekova during a protest in commemoration of various people killed the year prior. Also, three people died in clashes between supporters of the youth wing of the PKK (YDG-H) and members of the Islamist party Huda-Par. Both organisations blamed each other for attacking first. (AFP, Firat, Hürriyet, al-Monitor, 01-30/12/14)

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Plaça del Coneixement -Edifici MRA (Mòdul Recerca A), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra
 (Barcelona)

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