

WORSENING

AFGHANISTAN: Violence rises amidst the political crisis

The government of Ashraf Ghani is facing a political crisis over allegations of corruption and inefficiency, an increase in violence (after justifying its dialogue with the Taliban), the inability to reform the electoral law (and the postponement of the parliamentary elections) and terrible relations with neighbouring Pakistan. After a lengthy offensive in the province of Kunduz, on 28 September the Taliban captured the provincial capital from passive Afghan forces. It is the first city that the Taliban have managed to control since 2001. Afghan sources later confirmed that the Taliban had taken the capital. A district in Badakhshan (Raghistan) fell under insurgent control after two days of fighting. The governors of these provinces have complained that the central government has not sent support for the security forces. The weakness of the Afghan security forces is glaring, especially considering that aid has to be flown in. Afghanistan still lacks an air force and depends on the US and NATO troops still remaining in the country. The Afghan security forces asserted that a strike conducted by US or NATO aircraft in Helmand province killed 11 Afghan police officers. In Paktika, the battle to retake police stations captured by the Taliban caused 57 deaths (51 of them insurgents) and wounded 80. In the same province, a suicide attack at the end of the month killed nine and injured over 51. In Nangarhar, the battle between Islamic State and the Taliban raged on. The United States cooperated with the Afghan government with drone strikes that killed five members of Islamic State on 18 September. According to a United Nations report, Islamic State is gaining ground in Afghanistan, where it is recruiting members in 25 of the country's 34 provinces. The Taliban attacked a prison in Ghazni and released over 350 insurgents, including more than 100 commanders. When they took the capital of Kunduz, they did the same with hundreds of other prisoners (Dawn, The Guardian, ToloNews, Afghanistan News, Rapid News Network, 8-30/09/2015).

BURKINA FASO: A new coup d'état destabilises the transition process

On 16 September, members of the Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP), an elite military group created during the government of former President Blaise Compaoré, burst into a meeting of the Council of Ministers and arrested President Michel Kafando and Prime Minister Isaac Zida, proclaiming a coup d'état under the self-styled General Council for Democracy. The coup leaders dissolved the transitional government and institutions and appointed General Gilbert Diendéré to be the new president, who had been Compaoré's right-hand man throughout his rule. The coup leaders justified their action due to the exclusion of candidates close to Compaoré from being eligible to run in the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 11 October. Days before the coup, on 10 September, the Constitutional Council approved the final list composed of 14 candidates that could have run in the elections, eliminating those linked to the previous regime, including the candidacies of two former ministers under Compaoré, former Foreign Minister Djibril Bassolé (who was arrested and accused of participating in the coup) and former Sports Minister Yacouba Ouédraogo. Local media also blamed the coup d'état on an attempt by the controversial RSP to try to prevent its dissolution, since on 14 September the National Reconciliation and Reform Commission submitted a report to Prime Minister Zida recommending the same. Faced with the military coup, Burkinabe civil society led by the civic movement Balai Citoyen ("Citizen Sweep") took to the streets in the main cities of the country to defend the transition. Different organisations and states of the international community, like the UN, AU, ECOWAS, France and the United States, among others, strongly condemned the new destabilisation in the country. Internal and external pressure forced the coup leaders to negotiate under the mediation of ECOWAS, led by Senegalese President Macky Sall and Togolese President Thomas Boni Yayi. ECOWAS demanded the disarmament of the RSP and the immediate return of the transitional government and achieved an agreement to return to normal, which included the provisional postponement of the elections until 22 November, the elimination of the ban on candidates sympathetic to

Compaoré and guaranteed amnesty for those involved in the coup once they disarm. The government was finally restored on 21 September. During the first meeting of the Council of Ministers on 25 September, a decree was signed to dissolve and disarm the RSP, its functions were removed from the ministry of security and a commission was created to establish responsibility. During the week that the military coup lasted, government forces reported that 11 people were killed and 271 were wounded in clashes between demonstrators and members of the presidential guard in the capital, Ouagadougou. (Jeune Afrique, 11, 17, 20/09/15; BBC, 16, 23/09/15; Reuters, 17-19/09/15; El País, 17/09/15; RFI, 17, 21/09/15; Agence France-Presse, 17/09/15; Al Jazeera, 18, 20, 22, 26, 29/09/15; EFE, 23/09/15; Deutsche Welle, 25/09/15; AP, 28/09/15)

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: New fighting breaks out in Bangui, killing scores of people in the absence of the president, who denounces an attempted coup d'état

According to various sources, clashes in late September between rival militias in the capital, Bangui, forcibly displaced thousands of people and killed at least 40. The UN mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) deployed to try to restore order, although UNHCR ensured that the situation was still tense and that exchanges of fire continued, especially around the airport, in the eighth district. MINUSCA's intervention caused the deaths of three people and wounded seven when MINUSCA troops opened fire to disperse demonstrators headed for the presidential palace in Bangui demanding the resignation of the president. Bangui had been relatively calm for months and the new clashes coincided with the absence of the country's president, Catherine Samba-Panza, who was in New York to attend the UN General Assembly and cut her trip short to return immediately. Upon her arrival on 30 September, the president denounced an attempted coup d'état aimed at affecting the electoral process (the elections were supposed to be held on 18 October) and suspending the political dialogue. Samba-Panza has announced the need to conduct a dialogue to come up with solutions that help to end the crisis and has insisted on the need to disarm militias, including through the use of force. The death in an attack of anti-balaka leader Guy Mazimbele, the former head of the presidential guard of former President François Bozizé (2003-2014) on 26 September, whose funeral coincided with Samba-Panza's return, kept the situation tense. Meanwhile, around 250 combatants of the former Séléka coalition who had left Kaga Bandoro, in the heart of the country, and headed for Bangui to defend their "Muslim brothers", were intercepted in Dékoa by a Burundian MINUSCA contingent, leading to clashes that killed at least two people and injured seven. The UN Human Rights Office expressed concern about the situation and especially about the escape of 500 prisoners from a prison in Bangui, many of them charged with serious crimes. According to OCHA, there are 380,000 internally displaced people in the Central African Republic and another 464,000 have taken refuge in neighbouring countries. Moreover, 2.7 million people—half the population of the country—are in need of humanitarian assistance. Relief organisations have been forced to discontinue aid to the population due to the insecurity and the government has closed the border between the DRC and the CAR. Amnesty International called on the government to control the illicit diamond trade because it could be financing the armed groups. The organisation cited Sodiam as an example, which has accumulated 60,000 diamonds worth 7 million USD that would have been used to fund the anti-balaka militias. (BBC, 26/09/15; Efe, 29/09/15; IRIN, 14/09/15; Jeune Afrique, 04, 27-30/09/15)

CHINA (XINJIANG): 50 people are killed and another 50 are wounded in an attack on a coal mine

Radio Free Asia reported that 50 people were killed, including five police officers, and another 50 were wounded in an attack on a coal mine in Aksu prefecture. According to the reports, the attack may have been committed by a group of people wielding knives who stormed the residence of the mine owner and the sleeping quarters where the mine workers were staying, most of them ethnic Han. According to official local

sources, many additional policemen were deployed to the region to capture the nine suspects of the attack, who fled. The government thinks that the attackers belonged to separatist armed groups, although Uyghur organisations in exile have complained that Beijing has not provided any evidence in this regard and have repeated that the outbreaks of violence rattling the region are mainly due to the population's frustration with discriminatory religious and cultural policies enacted by the government. According to Uyghurs in exile in countries like Sweden and Turkey, the number of fatalities in the attack on the mine in Aksu was really around 110. The attack coincided with the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. (Radio Free Asia, The Guardian, The Daily Star, 30/09/15)

EGYPT: The Egyptian security forces kill tourists by mistake and demolish thousands of homes in Sinai as part of the government's anti-ISIS campaign

An Egyptian military helicopter mistakenly fired on a group of four vehicles carrying tourists in Wahat, a desert area in the west of the country, after confusing them with ISIS militants. The attack killed 12 people, including eight Mexicans, and injured around 10 others. Mexico demanded an investigation into the events, which the Egyptian authorities regretted and described as an accident. Cairo argued that the tourists were in an unauthorised zone, but other sources indicated that they were in a permitted area and were even travelling with a police escort. At the end of the month, the Egyptian government prohibited the media from reporting on the case. Also in September, the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report denouncing that between July 2013 and August 2015, a total of 3,255 homes and buildings were destroyed in the area bordering the Gaza Strip under the pretext of creating a "buffer zone" to limit activities by ISIS. HRW stressed that the demolitions violated international law and that the affected population had not been warned or had been given very little advance notice, has not been relocated and has received inadequate compensation. HRW also stated that there is no evidence that the closure of tunnels connecting Egyptian and Palestinian territory is effective, since there is no proof of alleged collaboration between groups in Gaza and the ISIS branch in Egypt and because there are indications that ISIS had obtained its weapons mainly in Libya or from the Egyptian Army itself. HRW argued that instead of destroying the homes of thousands of people, Egypt could have used sophisticated equipment received from the United States in recent years designed to detect activity in the tunnels. Some experts have warned that the Egyptian government's demolition strategy could alienate local communities and foster support for the insurgents, but the government insists that its policy has the people's support. The HRW report recalled that previous Egyptian governments had taken steps to create this "buffer zone" under pressure from the United States and Israel (which reopened its embassy in Cairo in September after four years). The HRW report cites figures from the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy indicating that over 3,600 people (including civilians, militants and members of the security forces) lost their lives in the conflict between July 2013 and July 2015, although it is not possible to verify this information due to the media blackout imposed by the government. (NYT, 10, 15, 18, 22/09/15; The Guardian, 14/09/15; BBC, 14/09/15; HRW, 22/09/15)

SYRIA: The internationalisation of the armed conflict intensifies, with direct French and Russian involvement in attacks in the country

The armed conflict in Syria escalated significantly in September, with third countries becoming openly involved. On 27 September, France launched its first air strikes in Syria against ISIS targets as part of the US-led international coalition against the armed group that also operates in Iraq, arguing that they would prevent the organisation from conducting attacks on French soil. Two days later, Russia launched a series of air strikes in Syria in its first action outside the borders of the former Soviet Union since the Cold War. Moscow ensured that it was also targeting ISIS, although there were indications that the strikes were mainly aimed at other groups opposed to Bashar Assad's regime in Hama and Homs,

areas that are not under the control of ISIS. The strikes came after a series of reports during the month that warned of growing Russian military support for Damascus in the form of aircraft and weaponry. Furthermore, after the UN General Assembly, Vladimir Putin criticised Western intervention in the Middle East and proposed the creation of an international anti-ISIS coalition that includes the Syrian government. Washington questioned Moscow's intervention and support for Assad. However, Russia ensured that its action was legally justified since it was responding to a request from the Syrian government, adding that the actions of the US-led international coalition were illegal (the alliance argued that the Assad regime has no legitimacy after the many abuses committed during the war). At the end of the month, senior Russian and US diplomats discussed formulas to avoid crossfire situations. At the same time, it was also announced that they would launch a new diplomatic initiative to assess a political solution. In September the British newspaper *The Guardian* revealed that in 2012 the Russian ambassador to the UN raised a three-point proposal that included the search for a "graceful exit" of Assad from power, but the West ignored it at the time due to the belief that the Syrian leader would soon be deposed. This information was revealed by former Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Marti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland, who met with representatives of the member countries of the UN Security Council on behalf of The Elders in 2012. Finally, the US plan to train 15,000 moderate opposition fighters within one year (5,000 per year) failed. Only around 60 militiamen have been trained to date, of which "only four or five" were still fighting, with the others having surrendered their weapons to the al-Qaeda branch in Syria. (*The Guardian*, 15, 24/09/15 and 01/10/15; Reuters, 11/09/15; *Le Monde*, 28, 29/09/15; *Foreign Policy*, 29, 30/09/15)

TURKEY: The war between Turkey and the PKK intensifies, increasing the impact on the civilian population

The intensity of the war between Turkey and the Kurdish PKK guerrillas escalated seriously in September. One quarter of Turkish territory was the scene of armed conflict. Turkish media outlets counted over 100 casualties among the security forces and several hundred among members of the PKK in September (the state news agency Anatolia reported that more than 1,000 PKK fighters had died, whereas the PKK stated that 526 members of the security forces and 48 of their own fighters had been killed). Some particularly deadly attacks and fighting occurred during the month. Among other serious episodes, the PKK killed 16 soldiers in Dağlica (Hakkari) on 6 September, which triggered a massive Turkish Army operation. The Turkish Armed Forces said that around 100 guerrilla fighters were killed in its response. Fourteen police officers died in a minibus on 8 September when it was attacked by the PKK in the province of Iğdır. International actors like the UN condemned the PKK's attacks. The Turkish Army conducted bombardments in northern Iraq and in southeastern areas of Turkey that it claimed killed dozens of people and undertook special operations in various cities with impacts on the civilian population. A special forces operation carried out in Cizre (120,000 inhabitants) between 4 and 11 September, which the government described as a preventive measure due to the alleged presence of guerrilla fighters, involved a curfew, a blockade on the area (including journalists and international observers) and disruptions in power supply, healthcare and access to food, according to the media accounts and "serious allegations" received by the Council of Europe. The pro-Kurdish party HDP stated that 21 civilians had been killed by the security forces, while the government said that 40 guerrilla fighters died, 25 policemen were wounded and 17 people were arrested. The Kurdish movement and related delegations denounced the impact on the civilian population, including impact related to gender. Throughout the month, attacks by the PKK also killed and wounded civilians. Meanwhile, the social atmosphere in Turkey became seriously worse. Kurdish politicians and activists were arrested, including human shields. Ultranationalist groups attacked HDP offices and Kurdish people. HDP leaders warned of the risks of a drift towards civil war. At various moments, the co-chair of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtas, called on the Turkish government and the PKK to agree to a mutual ceasefire and restart the peace talks.

Demirtas also accused Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of blocking the resumption of the talks. Meanwhile, the PKK and Ankara traded blame for the failure of the dialogue process. (AFP, BBC, Reuters, Foreign Affairs, NYT, Hürriyet Daily News, Today's Zaman, Dicle, Firat, JINHA, 01-29/09/15)

YEMEN: Hundreds of people die in the ongoing violence while Hadi's government attempts to regain control of the country from Aden

Many acts of violence in Yemen claimed over 500 lives in September, according to partial counts, in an armed conflict that has already caused the deaths of 4,500 people in the last six months, half of them civilians. In the first two weeks of September, two Red Cross workers were murdered and at least 64 members of the international coalition led by Saudi Arabia (45 from the UAE) were killed in a Houthi missile attack that caused the most fatalities for the alliance since the violence escalated in March. The coalition launched retaliatory attacks against Houthi positions that killed at least 27 people in the days that followed. During the second half of the month, new coalition air strikes killed 236 people in four days, according to the Houthi-controlled Saba agency. Meanwhile, around 40 Houthi combatants lost their lives in clashes in the vicinity of Hathera, a Saudi town near the border with Yemen, according to the Saudi television station al-Arabiya. At the end of the month, an air strike attributed to the international coalition killed at least 135 people participating in a wedding, most of them women and children. In addition, the branch of the armed group ISIS in Yemen claimed responsibility for two suicide attacks against mosques frequented by Houthis in the capital, Sana'a, which killed 38 people in all. Amidst this atmosphere of persisting violence, the prime minister and President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi returned to Yemen after months of exile in Saudi Arabia. Their return to Yemen was considered a sign that the international coalition had managed to secure enough territory to restore the administration in the country, albeit partially, since the Houthis maintain their positions in Sana'a and in the central and northern part of Yemen. During the month, the UN announced that the disputing parties had agreed to meet in Oman to discuss a negotiated end to the conflict, but days later Hadi's government refused to participate until the Houthis retreated from the land they had conquered and complied with other conditions included in Resolution 2216 approved by the UN Security Council in April. In a speech before the UN in late September, Hadi accused Iran of pursuing the destruction of Yemen and praised Riyadh's "determination" in its fight against the Houthis. Meanwhile, Riyadh blocked an initiative to promote an independent UN investigation into the abuses committed during the conflict. (Deutsche Welle, 05, 06, 10, 13, 16/09/15; Reuters, 02, 22, 24/09/15; Le Monde and The Guardian, 29/09/15; UN, 15,22, 28, 29/09/15; IRIN, 18/09/15; NYT, 30/09/15)

ALERT

BURUNDI: The escalation of political violence pushes the country to the brink of a new armed conflict

An escalation of political violence in the country included pressure on the media in what seemed like a pre-war atmosphere given the continuous trickle of reports of extrajudicial executions, attacks and harassment of the political opposition. The most prominent events included the death of opposition leader Patrice Gahungu, the spokesman for the opposition party UPD, and the attempted assassination of the chief of the Armed Forces, General Prime Niyongabo, who escaped unscathed, though it caused the deaths of seven people in the capital. The assailants could be soldiers in the Burundian Army, which demonstrates the serious division also affecting the security forces, according to some sources. However, senior government officials who claimed they supported the need for a political dialogue between the authorities and the opposition blamed Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni for the stalemate in the talks. At the beginning of the month, demonstrations were staged in some neighbourhoods of Bujumbura as a result of the disarmament operations carried out

by the police. The US State Department called for the disarmament of both opposition and pro-government militias (in reference to the Imbonerakure) to prevent an escalation of violence. At the end of the month, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights announced the alarming rise in killings and arrests in the country since the president won a new term in the elections in July and renowned Burundian human rights activist Pierre Claver Mbonimpa called on the EU to suspend aid to the government to pressure it to end the spiral of violence. Notable was the pressure on Iwacu, the last private and independent media outlet that is still being published despite the grave crisis gripping the country, as well as the attacks and arrests suffered by various journalists. Burundi has been seriously affected by the violence following the president's announcement in April that he would run for a third term in the presidential election in July, which he won due to the boycott of the opposition. At least 100 people have died in the violence. (AP, 02/09/15; VOA, 03/09/15; East African, 05/09/15; RSF, AFP, 11/09/15; Reuters, 21/09/15; The Guardian, 01/10/15)

INDIA – PAKISTAN: Ceasefire violations are followed by mutual accusations

The month started out with various clashes along the border, killing a soldier and an insurgent in Baramullah and four militants and one soldier in Kupwara. Moreover, a civilian was killed and five were wounded from fire coming from the Pakistani side in Poonch and two soldiers and two militiamen lost their lives in Kupwara. In recent months, the number of ceasefire violations has topped 100. Both countries continue to blame each other for provoking them. A delegation of 16 Pakistani border rangers, led by the Director General of Pakistan Rangers (Punjab), Major General Umar Farooq Barki, met with their Indian counterparts (Border Security Force) in New Delhi for three days (9-12 September). Also participating were members of the interior ministry, the Survey of Pakistan and the narcotics enforcement agency. During one of the meetings with the Pakistani delegation, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh announced that "India will not fire the first shot". The parties agreed not to respond to fire automatically until the causes were investigated. Meanwhile, the International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Kashmir published a report on human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir. The report was sent to the United Nations Security Council so it may be submitted to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. According to the report, between 650,000 and 750,000 Indian soldiers are deployed in Kashmir and the people of the region have suffered 1,080 summary executions and 172 cases of forced disappearance. The report stated that 972 military and paramilitary officers were responsible for these crimes. An increase in the number of militants was also reported. In addition, rumours about the restoration of the ban on the slaughter and consumption of beef sparked many protests. In one of them, the police detained the leader of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, Yasin Malik. The All Parties Hurriyat Conference called for a strike after one of its members and his three-year-old son were killed in Sopore by unidentified gunmen. Four days later, the bodies of four members of the Hizbul Mujahideen were recovered. (The Hindu, Dawn, 07-22/09/2015)

MEXICO: OAS experts question the official version of the disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa

Consisting of five international experts appointed by the Organisation of American States' (OAS) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), on 6 September the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts presented its report on the Ayotzinapa case, which investigates the events that occurred in Iguala, Guerrero, on 27 September 2014 that resulted in the disappearance of 43 students, six murders and over 20 people wounded. The report reconstructs in detail the facts and possible causes of the attack and comes to the conclusion that the official version of events is incorrect, contradicting the argument of the Mexican prosecutor general (PGR) that the students were cremated in the Cocula dump trash. Furthermore, the group of experts has demonstrated that different police corps (municipal police from Iguala and Cocula, ministerial and federal police) were present at different moments of the operation, as well as soldiers and military intelligence agents,

thereby implicating the Mexican Army. The report urged the Mexican authorities to rethink the investigation and redirect its searches for the missing students. The director for the Americas at Amnesty International said that the case of Ayotzinapa is one of the most serious human rights tragedies in Mexico's recent history. The NGO denounced the magnitude of the enforced disappearance crisis in the country, which has exceeded 26,000 cases in the last eight years, according to the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Human Rights Centre. In February 2015, the Mexican government had already recognised before the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances that the country has no exclusive register for disappeared persons. However, during the current legislature, the government has reported that it is planning to approve the General Law on Enforced Disappearances to comply with the constitutional reform of Article 73, ratified by Congress in September 2013. (EFE, 24, 28/07/15, 06/08/15; El País, 07, 08, 16, 26/09/15; La Jornada, 07/09/15; AI, 18/09/15)

MYANMAR: The signing of the nationwide ceasefire agreement is in jeopardy

The signing of the nationwide ceasefire agreement planned for October was in danger after only nine armed groups agreed to sign it if the government does not extend it to all the armed groups. At the start of September, the government and nine insurgent groups tentatively agreed to sign the agreement in early October, although the armed groups postponed it for another meeting. The government pledged to continue addressing the issue of inclusion during September. However, at a meeting held by 20 armed groups at the end of the month, only seven of them (ABSDF, ALP, CNF, DKBA, KNLA-PC, KNU and PNLO) consented to sign the agreement. Several of the main insurgent groups (KIO, NMSP, SSPP and KNPP) indicated that they would not sign it unless it was open to everyone. The government refused to allow three groups currently fighting against it, the TNLA, MNDAA and AA, to sign the agreement. The armed groups also agreed to dissolve the new negotiating format represented by the senior delegation and said that the Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiation Team would remain active to continue negotiations to include all armed groups, a possible political dialogue, a code of conduct and the formation of a joint monitoring committee. The government had informed representatives of 78 political parties of the evolution of the negotiations before they were broken off and had stressed that the political dialogue could begin in January. There were also more clashes between the Burmese Armed Forces and various rebel groups in September, especially the RCSS, SSA-A, KIA and TNLA. (The Irrawaddy, 09/09/15)

NEPAL: The crisis drags on after the new Constitution is approved

The Constituent Assembly of Nepal approved a new Constitution with two thirds of legislators voting in favour amidst significant social tension. The approval of the Constitution came after a long process that began in 2008 with the election of a Constituent Assembly that did not achieve its goals and had to be re-elected in 2013. The Constitution establishes a republican, federal and secular system with seven states. The protests spread to the region of Terai and were staged by Madhesi and Tharu groups expressing their discontent with the territorial delimitations of the new states. The districts where these peoples live are divided into various states, which are composed of districts containing all three geographical areas of the country: plains (or Terai), hills and high mountains. The ethnic minorities also claimed that the new electoral system harmed them. Women's organisations also complained that the Constitution institutionalises gender-based discrimination because it establishes inequalities in access to Nepalese citizenship for men and women. Since the start of August, 45 people died as a consequence of the unrest, 35 of them shot dead by police. The other 10 were police officers attacked and killed by protestors. At the end of September, the government, whose prime minister cancelled attendance of the UN General Assembly to deal with the crisis, decided to withdraw the soldiers deployed in the conflict zones as a measure to build the people's trust. The Indian foreign secretary travelled to Nepal to conduct consultations with the Nepalese government

about the situation created by the promulgation of the Constitution and urged more intense dialogue. (Al-Jazeera, 14, 20/09/15; BBC, 19/09/15)

NORTH KOREA: Tensions rise over North Korea's nuclear programme

Concerns rose around North Korea's nuclear programme after Pyongyang announced that the main nuclear reactor in the country (Yongbyon) was operating normally following several years of inactivity. In addition, satellite imagery suggested a significant improvement in the largest satellite launching facility in North Korea (in Sohae). Furthermore, in September the North Korean government made progress in its intention to use its ballistic technology to put weather satellites in orbit and threatened to use nuclear weapons if the United States and other governments persisted in their hostile policies. Even though North Korea officially maintains that it has the right to develop a peaceful satellite programme, various governments fear that Pyongyang wants to launch long-range ballistic missiles to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party on 10 October. In this regard, the North Korean ambassador to the United Kingdom warned that the threat of sanctions from the international community would not deter his country from any action it had planned. According to some sources, the South Korean government is concerned about the possibility that a launch of long-range missiles or projectiles by North Korea could spell the end of the reunions of families separated by the Korean War (1950-53) planned for 20 October in Mount Kumgang, North Korea. Meanwhile, during her speech before the UN General Assembly, South Korean President Park Geun-hye urged the international community to follow the example of the agreement with Iran and resolve the conflict over North Korea's nuclear programme, which in her opinion is the last major hurdle regarding nuclear non-proliferation in the international community. In this regard, she said that if North Korea chose the path of dialogue rather than of confrontation, her government and the international community would get actively involved in the economic reconstruction of the country. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), 70% of the North Korean population suffers food insecurity or is highly vulnerable to food shortages. (The Guardian, 30/09/15; UPI.com, 29/09/15)

PAKISTAN: Regional tension rises amidst mutual accusations of supporting rebels

Through various representatives, India and Afghanistan continued to ask Pakistan to do more to wipe out armed groups' strongholds. Pakistan counter-attacked, denouncing its neighbours for supporting the Balochi insurgencies and the Taliban movement of Pakistan (TTP). The most public display of this exchange of accusations took place at the UN General Assembly where, despite expectations, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not meet. Despite the positive results reported by the Pakistani government regarding the anti-terrorist Operation Zarb-e Azb, a TTP splinter group loyal to Islamic State managed to attack the Badaber air base, near Peshawar. The attack targeted a mosque on the base where 40 people died, 13 of them Taliban who had infiltrated with paramilitary uniforms. Sartaj Aziz, a Pakistani defence and foreign affairs consultant, publicly declared that the attack had been planned in Afghanistan. The Afghan president called Nawaz Sharif to deny it. Evidence was found that the attack that killed Punjab Home Minister Shuja Khanzada in Attock in mid-August was perpetrated by TTP. In late September, Pakistan executed Ansar Iqbal after 16 years in prison. He had been convicted of murder when he was between 14 and 15 years old. Pakistani law prohibits the execution of convicts that were minors when they were arrested. Indeed, the moratorium on the death penalty was lifted under the premise of the fight against terrorism, but common criminals are being executed. Meanwhile, a bomb exploded in Multan, killing 11 people and injuring scores more. The Pakistani Parliament passed a law against cybercrime that it is feared could be used to stifle the freedom of expression. (Dawn, ToloNews, The Express Tribune, 04-30/09/2015)

PHILIPPINES (MINDANAO-MILF): The MILF threatens to halt its demobilisation if a Bangsamoro Basic Law that respects the contents of the peace agreement is not approved

Unease within the MILF increased again after both houses of Congress raised serious doubts about the possibility of approving the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) and two of the main MPs involved in its legislative proceedings declared that it was dead. Following several delays since the proceedings began in September 2014, it emerged that the potential approval of the BBL had been postponed once again until mid-December. However, some experts thought that the urgency and importance of the debate about the 2016 budgets and the start of the election campaign and elections in May left little time and room for the BBL to be approved. In addition to these problems of timing, in mid-September the MILF slammed the drafts of the BBL written by both the Senate and the House of Representatives on the grounds that they significantly reduced the contents of the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and provided for an even lower level of self-government than the current Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), whose institutional design was described as a failure even by President Benigno Aquino. The MILF also said that some of the changes made to the original version of the BBL were clearly unconstitutional. In this regard, the MILF released an official statement indicating that if Congress finally approves a BBL that strays substantially from the letter and the spirit of the peace agreement, the MILF will halt its delivery of weapons and demobilisation of combatants, which began symbolically in June. The MILF also darkly cautioned of the possibility that failing to resolve the conflict in Mindanao could strengthen demands for secession in the region. However, in late September the senior leader of the MILF, Ebrahim Murad, was optimistic about the BBL due to the commitment expressed by the president and related political forces and the support for the peace process coming from the international community and particularly the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Murad also said that approving the BBL is not the only important aspect of the peace process in recent years and urged appreciation of the significance of the peace process and the reduction of violence to virtually inexistent levels in the last three years. For its part, the government negotiating team also expressed its conviction that despite the difficulties and delays, the BBL would finally be approved. Finally, the MNLF declared that the current drafts of the BBL are unacceptable and called for the establishment of a Bangsamoro Constitutional Convention to address the difficulties in the legislative proceedings of the BBL and other issues affecting the Moro people. (Philippine Star, 30/09/15; Manila Bulletin, 27/09/15; Anadolu Agency, 11/09/15)

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: The political opposition rebels against Denis Sassou-Nguesso's plans to change the Constitution to remain in power

President Denis Sassou-Nguesso's announcement on 22 September that a constitutional referendum would be held so he could run for a new term of office in the 2016 elections was rejected by the political opposition in the country and sparked widespread protests. The political opposition rebelled against Denis Sassou-Nguesso's plans to change the Constitution to extend presidential term limits, as well as the age limit, which is also established under the 2002 Constitution that he approved himself. The political opposition described his announcement as a constitutional coup d'état. Denis Sassou-Nguesso has been in power for over 30 years. The international community's response has been limited to pointing out that electoral processes in the country must be based on free and transparent elections and that any constitutional change must be made in a context of freedom of expression and association. The Sibiti national dialogue was held in July, taking its name from the town where it was held, in which the president's supporters were in favour of holding a referendum on a possible amendment to the Constitution, a conclusion that was conveyed to the president. The opposition held an alternate discussion that

rejected the conclusions of the Sibiti dialogue. (Jeune Afrique, 28/09/15; RFI, 28/07/15; RFI, 24 and 25/09/15)

VENEZUELA: Cross-border tensions persist with Colombia and Guyana

According to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the bilateral crisis between Venezuela and Colombia due to the closing of the border they share has led to the deportation of 1,467 Colombians by the Venezuelan government, in addition to the 18,619 Colombians who have left the country of their own volition. The border was decreed closed by the government of Nicolás Maduro on 19 August following allegations of paramilitary attacks and smuggling. President Santos and President Maduro met in Quito, Ecuador on 21 September to talk and try to resolve the conflict and reached an agreement for their respective ambassadors to return and for an investigation into the causes of the crisis. Intermediaries present at the discussion table included the presidents of Uruguay (Tabaré Vázquez) and Ecuador (Rafael Correa) on behalf of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), respectively. Meanwhile, tensions rose between the governments of Venezuela and Guyana regarding the conflict over the bordering Esequibo area in Guyana after the Guyanese government denounced an extraordinary build-up of Venezuelan troops along the border, which it described as aggressive and hostile. Guyanese President David Granger took the opportunity at the UN General Assembly to denounce Venezuela and demand that the organisation act to reach a final agreement. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon mediated in the conflict by organising a bilateral meeting between both presidents where an agreement was reached to return their respective ambassadors. In other developments, on 11 September Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López was publicly sentenced to 13 years and nine months in prison. Among other charges, López had been accused of political instigation and blamed for the deaths of three people in an anti-chavista demonstration on 12 February 2014. The sentence has been condemned by the Venezuelan opposition and by various international organisations. (EFE, 03, 08, 28, 30/09/15; Infolatam, 11/09/15)

PROGRESS

COLOMBIA: The government and the FARC reach an agreement on the application of justice as part of the peace negotiations in Havana

On 23 September, President Santos and the leader of the FARC, “Timochenko”, met in Havana to publicly announce the agreement to create a Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition and a Special Jurisdiction for Peace, which will include a courthouse and a tribunal for peace. According to the agreement, the Colombian government promises to grant the broadest amnesty possible for political and related crimes, which could benefit more than 15,000 members of the FARC. However, offences defined in national legislation that correspond to crimes against humanity, genocide, serious war crimes or other serious crimes would not be covered by an amnesty or pardon, whether committed by members of the FARC or agents of the state. There will be two types of proceedings: one for those that acknowledge the truth and their responsibility, and another for those who do not or who are late in doing so. The main purpose of punishment must be restorative and reparative of the damage caused and will have a component of restricted freedoms and rights through the performance of duties, public works and activities. The FARC’s participation in the comprehensive system will be subject to the surrender of weapons, which must begin no later than 60 days after the final agreement is signed. Immediately thereafter, the general prosecutor ordered the suspension of all allegations of charges against the FARC’s leadership, while adjustments of the methodology of the signed agreement went ahead. The president and “Timochenko” also

pledged to end the negotiations before 23 March 2016. (El Tiempo, El Espectador, 24/09/15)

MOZAMBIQUE: The country is declared free of land mines

On 15 September, Mozambican Foreign Minister Oldemiro Baloi officially declared the country free of land mines. The announcement was made official after the British NGO in charge of demining work, The Halo Trust, confirmed the destruction of the last mine known. The NGO reports that it has removed over 171,000 land mines from a total of 1,100 mine fields since the programme began in 1993. Data presented by the Mozambican government have established that 17 million square metres of land have been demined, an area that is now intended to be allocated for agricultural use. Mozambique had become one of the countries with the most land mines due to the civil war between FRELIMO and RENAMO between 1977 and 1992. The country has become the first of the five most heavily mined in the world to meet the mine clearance obligations of the Ottawa Convention (the other four are Afghanistan, Cambodia, Angola and South Sudan), though this required more than the 10 years the convention provided for their eradication. Though official data on the number of incidents caused by land mines are not rigorous, Human Rights Watch (HRW) had estimated in 1994 that land mines has produced between 10,000 and 15,000 victims. (The Halo Trust, 15/09/15; Agencia de Informaçao de Moçambique, 17/09/15; Al-Jazeera, 17/09/15; BBC, 17/09/15)

SUDAN (DARFUR): A peace agreement is reached between the Salamat and Fellata ethnic communities in South Darfur

Representatives of the Salamat and Fellata ethnic communities signed a peace agreement on 22 September to try to end the clashes that have claimed 205 lives and wounded dozens since February 2015. The agreement was preceded by a cessation of hostilities agreement signed on 7 September in the community of Buram, South Darfur, under the mediation of the traditional chief of the Habaniya group. Also attending were representatives of the communities of Tullus, Dimsu, El Radoom, El Sunta and Gireida. According to the peace agreement, each group pledges to compensate the other for the human toll and for property damage and loss. This peace deal is part of the different mediation processes launched across Darfur in an attempt to achieve reconciliation among peoples in conflict. Under the auspices of the UNAMID-backed Darfur-Darfur Dialogue Committee, mediation efforts have also begun with different groups in the town of Mellit, in the region of North Darfur, to achieve peace and stability. In East Darfur, UNAMID-facilitated talks on conflict resolution were arranged between the Rizeigat and Ma'aliya, who sat down for peace talks in the region of West Kordofan on 15 September for the purpose of stopping the prolonged fighting between both peoples. (Radio Dabanga, 02, 04, 08, 15, 23, 25/09/15; Sudan News Agency, 19, 23/09/15)

UKRAINE: A new ceasefire and rapprochement between both sides help to de-escalate the war

In contrast to the high levels of violence in August, in September the armed conflict in the east of the country de-escalated remarkably with the entry into force on 1 September of the new ceasefire agreement reached in late August between Ukraine and the rebel forces supported by Russia. Throughout the month, the parties to the conflict recognised that the truce was mostly being respected. NATO provided a similar assessment, but noted that the situation was still very fragile. The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France held a telephone conversation on 9 September centred partially on the issue of holding elections in rebel areas. The four countries' foreign ministers met in Berlin on 12 September and a meeting was planned for all four top leaders (known as the Normandy format) in Paris in early October, which would make it the first such meeting since mid-February. After a meeting in Berlin in 24 August between the leaders of Ukraine, France and Germany, they

called for an immediate and verifiable ceasefire (which entered into force on 1 September), proposed the creation of a new 15-kilometre buffer zone and the withdrawal of light artillery and urged an end to the restrictions and obstacles to the OSCE monitoring mission and the search for a solution to the status of the rebel areas before the year is out. Some experts said that this position reflected Russia's agreement to find a solution before the end of the year. However, the proposed constitutional amendment for a special law on a special decentralised status for the insurgent areas, which was approved on first reading in August, was criticised by both Moscow and the rebel authorities. The differences over this issue could not be overcome in September. The same was true for the elections, which according to the Minsk II agreement in February should be held under the umbrella of Ukrainian law. In mid-September, the rebel authorities in Donetsk confirmed that they intended to hold elections on 18 October and those in Luhansk said they would do the same on 1 November. However, the parties did reach an agreement in late September on the withdrawal of tanks, artillery and mortars of less than 100 mm calibre at a distance of 15 kilometres, which will be supervised by the OSCE. In humanitarian terms, the situation in areas under rebel control remained very fragile. The rebel authorities ordered all UN agencies to cease activity in areas under their control, including UNICEF, UNHCR and the WHO, as well as 10 international NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières. (BBC, Jamestown Foundation, Reuters, RFE/RL, Itar Tass, 01-29/09/15)

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