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Five Conflicts to Keep an Eye On in 2024

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By Tobias Ide*

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PERTH, Australia | 16 January 2024 (IDN) — From a peace and conflict perspective, 2023 was not a good year. In July, the Uppsala Peace and Conflict Data Program revealed that the past few years saw more armed conflicts than any other period since 1945. Fighting related to cartel conflicts in Mexico, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the military coup in Myanmar, and state fragility in West Africa continues with high intensity. Recently, the Middle East experienced a massive eruption of violence in Israel and Palestine.

In this article, I briefly highlight five conflicts the world should keep an eye on in 2024. Obviously, there are many more conflicts that endanger human lives and undermine livelihoods, and that are hence worth watching. These include ongoing insurgencies in Colombia, civil war in several African states (e.g., Ethiopia, Mali, Sudan), and rising tensions around Taiwan. Here, I focus on conflicts with potentially far-reaching consequences and where international attention could be crucial in making a difference for those affected. Yet, such a list will inevitably also contain some subjective judgments.

Ukraine

Almost two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the situation is stuck. Russia has been unable to advance significantly beyond the territories it gained during the first weeks of the war. Likewise, the Ukrainian counter-offensive in 2023 yielded only small territorial gains. The invasion is a significant attack on the sovereignty of the Ukraine (and its elected government), the human security of the people in the Ukraine (particularly given the track record of **war crimes** by Russian forces), and the rules-based international order. While China could play a moderating role, the impact of international sanctions so far demonstrates that Russia is unlikely to react to international pressure. This makes the continued military, economic, and moral support of Ukraine by other states and the international community (including the United Nations) even more important.

USA

74% of all countries are facing elections this year. The prospect of extremist parties or candidates taking power and of an erosion of democratic principles is very real in some of them. The USA has experienced considerable political polarisation in recent years, including widespread (yet entirely wrong) beliefs that Joe Biden stole the last presidential election. This has resulted in an increase in political violence, culminating in the Capitol Riots in early 2021. If Donald Trump loses the 2024 election or is legally banned from competing in it, similar or worse political unrest is a real possibility. Beyond such high-profile events, long-lasting budget disputes between the Democrats and an increasingly radical Republican Party have resulted in federal spending cuts and delays, affecting (among others) support for the Ukraine and social safety nets. It is up to the American people to make a democratic choice in the 2024 elections, and the international community should stand firmly behind whoever emerges as the legitimate winner.

Israel and Palestine

After the horrifying attacks of Hamas on October 7, Israel reacted with one of the **most destructive** military campaigns in history. Hamas continues to launch rockets on Israel, while radical Israeli settlers terrorise Palestinian civilians in the West Bank. Both conflict parties receive considerable external support, and their respective supporters should urge them to undertake the following three steps unconditionally: (1) Hamas must stop its attacks on Israel, release all remaining hostages, and acknowledge the right of Israel to exist. (2) Israel must take substantive steps to reduce the civilian casualties and infrastructure destruction associated with its operation, as well as to allow more aid into Gaza. (3) Israel must stop the expansion of settlements in the occupied West Bank, reign in radical settlers there, and commit to the West Bank as a key territory for a future Palestinian state. The public, states, and international organisations like the United Nations should exert pressure on both conflict parties to commit to these steps.

Disasters

2024 will see the full effects of El Niño, causing record temperatures and (depending on the world region) intense droughts or devastating floods in many parts of the earth. We know that such disasters can catalyse **protests** and anti-government sentiments. In some cases, they have even contributed to the onset and escalation of **armed conflicts**, for instance when they weakened states or allowed armed groups to recruit desperate disaster survivors. However, **researchers** have also shown that international attention and support matters. The inflow of relief goods, rescue teams, and financial support (for instance from the World Bank and UNICEF) can mitigate both humanitarian suffering and political instability after major disasters. Likewise, when they are the focus of global attention, armed groups often shy away from continuing their attacks in the face of a humanitarian emergency to avoid reputational damage.

Myanmar

David Brenner and Enze Han recently made us aware that even large-scale armed conflicts often receive very limited attention internationally. Ignoring such **forgotten conflicts** limits our understanding of these wars and of possible actions to deal with them (before they escalate even further). Furthermore, there is limited external pressure on the conflict parties to moderate violence and engage in negotiations. Myanmar is such a forgotten conflict. In early 2021, the country's armed forces dismissed the results of the November 2020 elections, deposed the government, and established a military junta. The new regime cracked down on peaceful protests against the coup as well as on existing insurgencies, committing serious human rights violations in the process. As of late 2023, the coalition of opposition forces controls over 50% of the country, but heavy fighting is continuing, resulting in massive displacement and a humanitarian emergency. Despite this, the conflict has been quite low on the international agenda, resulting in low pressure by states and international organisations on the conflict parties to moderate their actions and enter negotiations.

Given current global trends, 2024 is unlikely to be a particularly peaceful year, and at times it will be painful to watch. But looking the other way is not an option either because global attention and solidarity can prevent at least some atrocities on the ground. [IDN-InDepthNews]

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