



Conflict Trends in Africa, 1989–2018

In 2018, Africa experienced an increase in civil wars from 18 in 2017 to 21: this is the highest number of civil conflicts since 1946 – with 21 also recorded in 2015 and 2016. Further, there has been an increase in countries with conflict on their territory. On the other hand, the number of battle-related deaths in civil wars is lower than it has been since 2012, with approximately 6,700 people killed. While non-state conflict in Africa has been on the rise over the past five years, this trend stabilized in 2018; for the first time in ten years, the number of non-state conflicts did not increase. What should we make of these seemingly contradictory trends?

Brief Points

- In the past five years, there has been an increase in the number of conflicts in Africa. This holds for state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence.
- While the number of civil wars and conflict-affected countries have increased in 2018, the number of battle deaths have decreased considerably.
- In 2018, the conflict over the Ambazonia in Cameroon escalated dramatically.
- Although conflict numbers are high, it is important to note that most of these conflicts are geographically restrained. First, the number of countries experiencing conflict is lower than the number of conflicts. Second, within conflict-affected countries, conflict takes place in limited geographical areas and rarely throughout the whole country.

Siri Aas Rustad

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Ingrid Vik Bakken

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

Introduction

During the past six decades, the African continent has seen some very severe civil wars. Some of the deadliest conflicts, such as the Biafran War in Nigeria in the 60s and 70s, the Congo Wars and the Rwandan genocide in the 90s, and the Ethiopian and Eritrean war from 1999–2000, have come to an end. Yet, in recent years, the number of conflicts has grown substantially. Below, we describe the scope of conflicts in Africa and provide some explanations for the trends we see.¹ We conclude with some general remarks and recommendations for policy makers and practitioners.

Types and Severity of Conflict

In Figure 1, all the violent conflicts in Africa are displayed and broken down into different conflict types. We distinguish between three conflict types: state-based conflict, non-state conflict, and one-sided violence. Figure 1 also displays the numbers of battle-related fatalities, which is another way of evaluating the extent and intensity of conflict. To be included in the data, a conflict has to reach 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. Battle-related deaths are defined as those caused by the

warring parties that can be directly related to combat.

State-Based Conflict

The total number of state-based conflicts, i.e. conflict where at least one of the actors is state government, is marked with light blue. State-based conflict tends to get the most attention, as it is globally the most common and most deadly type of conflict. This category includes both conflicts between states and internal conflicts.

As is apparent from the graph, there has been a marked increase in the number of state-based conflicts in Africa over the past five years. In 2018, Africa experienced 21 state-based conflicts. This is a return to the all-time high in 2015 and 2016. Globally, we saw a decrease from 2017 to 2018. In 2018, the conflict in Angola fell below the threshold, while Central African Republic, Rwanda, Burkina Faso and Mozambique were new conflict countries. All of these are low intensity conflicts. While the two first saw a continuation of recent conflicts, the latter two are experiencing new conflicts with Islamist groups not previously operating in the country. The Islamic State (IS) is still a large ac-

tor in Africa, involved in conflicts in five countries (Chad, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Niger). Nonetheless, the most notable change is the conflict in Cameroon. The Ambazonia region of Cameroon is currently the object of a secession conflict. The political conflict turned violent in 2017 and escalated in 2018. If the escalation continues, this conflict may be classified as a war starting in 2019.

In 2018, the number of conflict-affected countries rose from 14 in 2017 to 17 in 2018. This is the second highest number since 1946, only surpassed by 2016 with 18 countries. This suggests that while the conflict areas are still geographically limited (see Figure 4), there is an increasing number of conflict-affected countries.

However, despite the past year's increase in both the number of conflicts and conflict countries, we see that there is a substantial decrease in battle-related deaths. In 2017, state-based conflicts caused around 9,300 battle-related deaths; in 2018, this has decreased to 6,700. This is the lowest number since 2012. Moreover, as displayed in Figure 3 the majority of battle deaths in 2018 occurred in three countries: Nigeria, Somalia and Cameroon. The former two are the only conflicts with more than

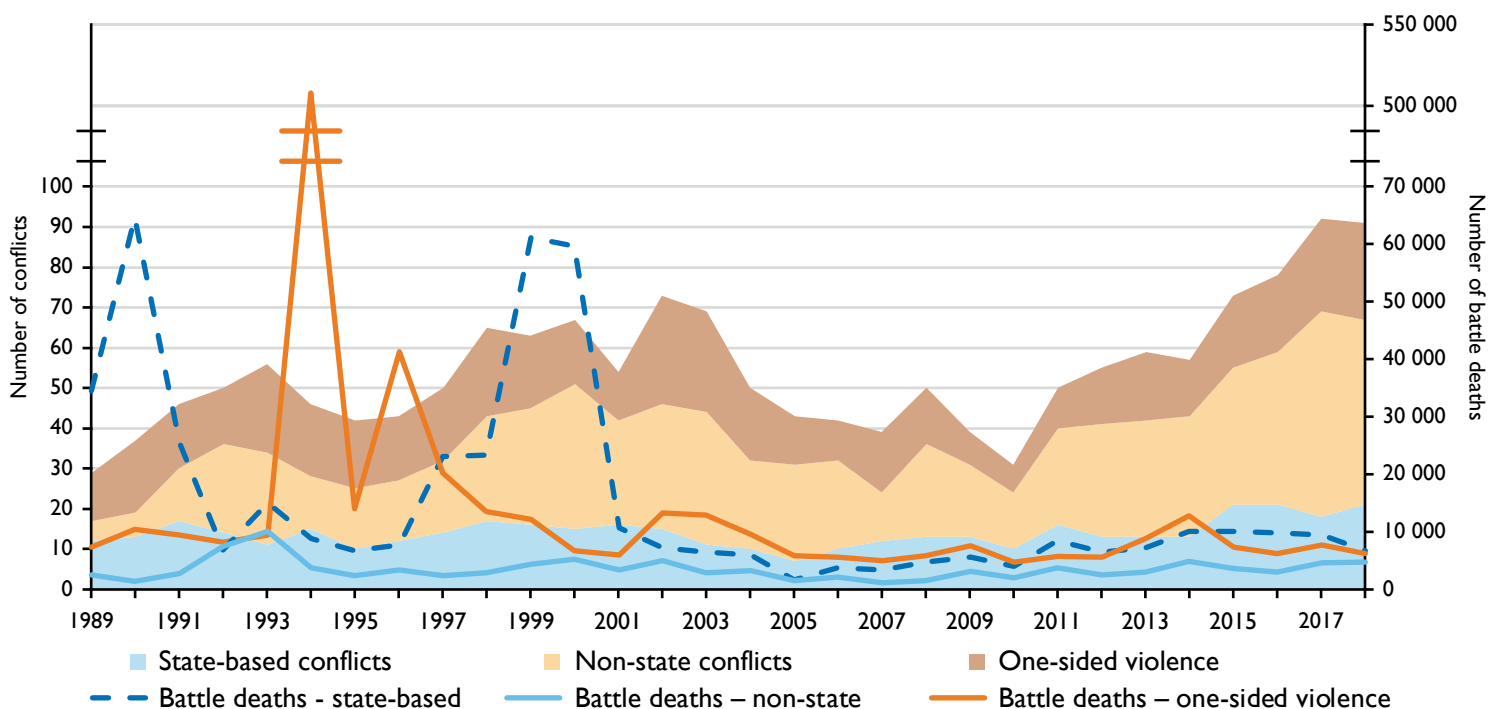


Figure 1: Conflict types and battle deaths (trends over time). Source: UCDP/PRIOD database

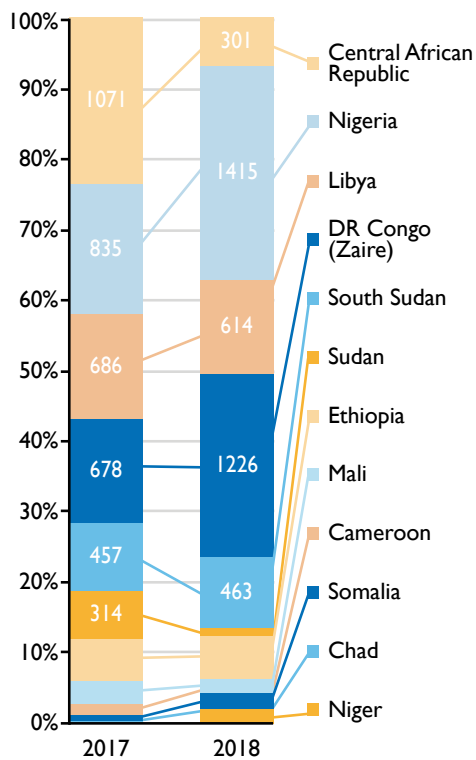


Figure 2: Comparing share of battle deaths for non-state conflict in 2017 and 2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

1,000 battle deaths. The relatively low number of battle deaths suggests that the increase in conflicts has not led to a substantive increase in the intensity of conflict.

Non-State Conflict

State-based violence is not the only type of conflict that is prevalent in Africa. Non-state conflict is defined as a conflict fought between two organized groups, neither of which is related to the state. In Figure 1, these conflicts are marked with pale yellow.

In Africa, the number of non-state conflicts has increased dramatically over the last five to six years, peaking in 2017 with 50 non-state conflicts, compared to 24 in 2011. In 2018, the number has decreased to 46. This makes Africa the continent with the highest number of non-state conflicts. The levels of battle deaths in non-state conflicts is stable from 4,609 in 2017 to 4,649 in 2018. However, we see in Figure 2 a new set of countries with high levels of non-state battle-related deaths. These have increased

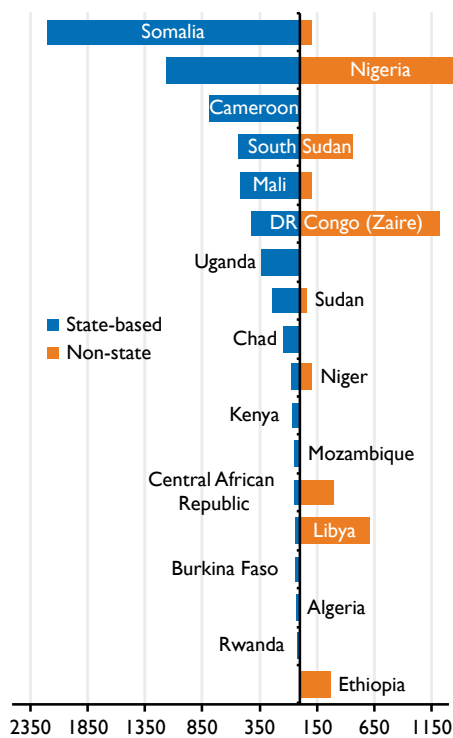


Figure 3: Share of battle deaths for state-based and non-state conflict in 2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

in Nigeria and DR Congo in particular, while decreasing substantially in Sudan and Central African Republic.

Figure 3 compares the levels of battle deaths between state-based and non-state conflicts. Most countries with state-based conflicts see very little non-state violence. On the other hand, in Nigeria and DR Congo, we see high levels of both. However, three countries stand out: Libya, Central African Republic, and Ethiopia. These all have a low (or non-existent) level of state-based violence, but a comparatively high level of non-state violence. The former two are typical countries with weak levels of state control. In Ethiopia, the battle deaths from non-state conflict are mainly linked to ethnic communal violence.

One-Sided Violence

Another important part of the conflict picture is one-sided violence. One-sided violence is defined as violence against civilians by a formally organized group, which can be either the state or a non-state actor.

The number of organized groups perpetrating one-sided violence is marked with brown in Figure 1. There has been a substantial increase in

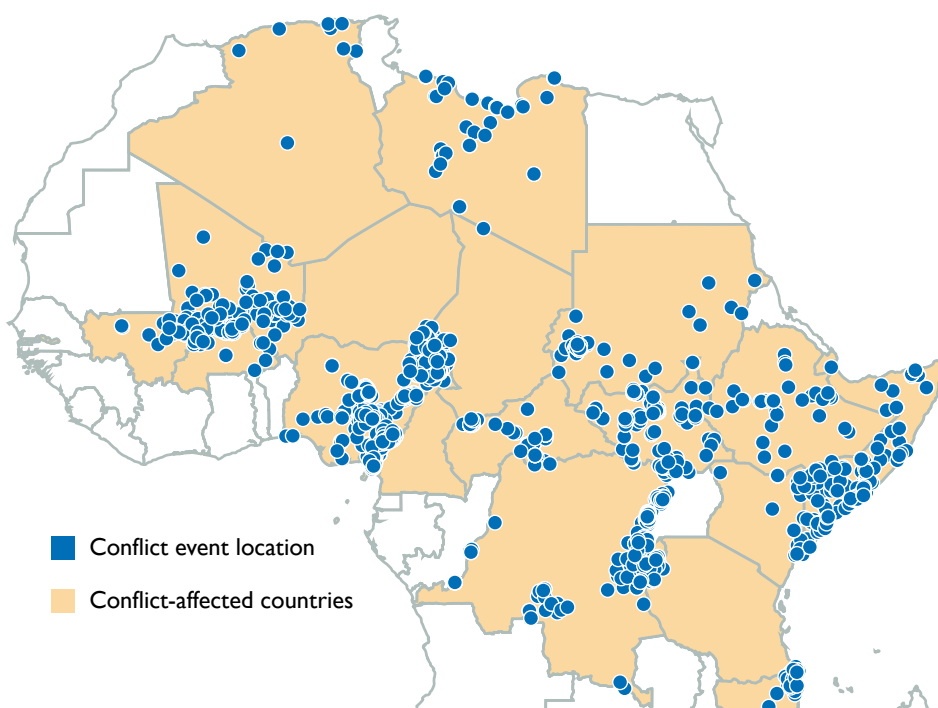


Figure 4: Geographic location of conflict in 2018. Source: UCDP/PRIO database

the number of actors carrying out one-sided violence since 2012. The worst perpetrator by far during this period was Boko Haram in North-eastern Nigeria. We see a quite substantial decrease in one-sided violence from 2017 to 2018 (3,850 to 2,350).

The Geographical Extent of Conflict

We often talk about conflict on the national level, i.e. which countries are experiencing conflict. However, most conflicts are geographically limited, with only a small part of a country being directly affected. Figure 4 depicts the conflict-affected areas within each country. Pale yellow indicates countries that experienced conflict in 2018, while the blue areas indicate conflict events. The conflict events include both state-based and non-state conflicts, as well as one-sided violence. The map shows that such conflicts rarely affect the entire country but are often geographically limited to a relatively small area. Only in a few countries, like Somalia, do conflicts cover the main share of the country; other countries like Nigeria have some clear hotspots. Thus, instead of focusing on conflict countries, it is useful to look at clusters of conflict, like the area around Lake Chad, the Great Lakes region, and the border region between Mali and Burkina Faso.

Ceasefires

A common feature of most civil conflicts is ceasefires. Nonetheless, despite their frequency and importance, we know very little about what causes ceasefires and how they change the conflict dynamics. In an attempt to look into this, PRIO and CSS ETH Zürich have collected a global dataset on ceasefires between 1989 and 2018. In this period, Africa as a whole saw 613 ceasefires, 17 of which were declared in 2018. Figure 5 is the first attempt at illustrating the de-

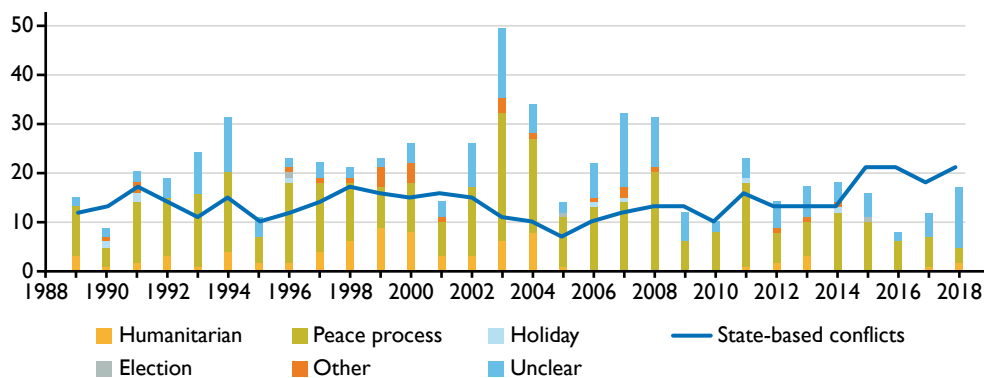


Figure 5: Type and number of ceasefires in Africa, 1989–2018. Source ETH/PRIO Civil War Ceasefire Dataset

velopment of ceasefires over time in Africa. First, the figure shows that ceasefires related to peace processes (marked in green) is – unsurprisingly – the largest category. However, we see that there is a fairly large proportion of ceasefires that are related to other issues, such as humanitarian efforts and elections. Particularly, we see that humanitarian ceasefires were more common in the late 1990s and early 2000s, while in the past 15 years, they are surprisingly absent. The second important trend is that we see a decrease in ceasefires while the number of conflicts increases. There could be many reasons for this. It could be related to the timing of ceasefires, or to their comprehensiveness, or to the type of conflict actors. These issues need to be further investigated. The time trends of ceasefires for the specific countries should also be studied.

Conclusion

This policy brief has given an overview of the major conflict trends in Africa from 1946 to 2018. We have shown that there has been an increase in recent years in the number of conflicts, when considering state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence. While the

number of conflict countries has previously been comparably low, in 2018 the number reached an all-time high. However, the high number of conflicts has not been followed by a substantial increase in number of battle-related deaths; rather, 2018 has seen a substantial decrease, suggesting that the level of intensity remains relatively low.

In sum, many countries on the African continent struggle with several parallel conflicts. However, the picture indicated by these conflict trends is by no means straightforward. When discussing recent conflict trends, policy makers, scholars, civil society and media should be aware of the nuances and avoid simplifying. Indeed, the decrease in battle deaths and the stabilizing of the number of non-state conflicts suggests that the level of conflict in most countries is low. Furthermore, the ceasefires data suggests that there is a high level of dialogue and attempts to solve conflicts. ■

Note

1. The conflict data is taken from the UCDP/PRIO database. Available at: ucdp.uu.se/downloads/

THE AUTHORS

Siri Aas Rustad is Senior Researcher at PRIO and leads the Conflict Trends project.

E-mail: sirir@prio.org

Ingrid Vik Bakken is a PhD student at NTNU.

THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of and trends in conflict. This policy brief is based on a larger background paper on inequality and conflict that PRIO has prepared for the World Bank and the United Nations flagship study on development and prevention of armed conflict. This research was funded by the World Bank.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.