Downward trend broken in 2020 – fatalities in organised violence increase again

New data from Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), at Uppsala University, show that the total number of fatalities stemming from organised violence increased in 2020, after five consecutive years of falling numbers. Despite a substantial decrease in violence in the two biggest wars of the 2010s, Afghanistan and Syria, UCDP registered more than 80,100 deaths in organised violence in 2020, compared to 76,300 in 2019.

“Several conflicts that had been inactive for a long time escalate again during 2020,” says Therese Pettersson, Project Manager at UCDP.

Pettersson gives the separatist conflict over Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) in Azerbaijan and the war over government power in Ethiopia, pitting the Addis Ababa regime against TPLF (Tigray People’s Liberation Front), as examples. There were also completely new conflicts in 2020, such as when IS (Islamic State) in Mozambique crossed the border into Tanzania, challenging the Tanzanian government.

At the beginning of 2020, the world was hoping for a reduction in violence in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the appeal from UN Secretary-General António Guterres for a global ceasefire, in March 2020, several ceasefires were announced around the world. Most of them, however, failed to halt the fighting. When peace researchers summarise the year, it becomes clear that the number of active conflicts, both conflicts involving states and conflicts between non-state groups, increased. There was also an increasing number of actors directly targeting civilians.

“We observe a clear regional shift from the Middle East to the African continent. More than half of all the civil wars in the world are now occurring in Africa. This can partly be explained by IS shifting their focus to Africa after being severely weakened in Syria and Iraq,” says Pettersson.

IS continues to drive many of the trends in organised violence, and the group has also escalated its attacks in Syria in the past year.

“IS has managed to regroup in areas of weak government control in both Syria and Iraq, and has escalated violence in both countries,” says Shawn Davies, Research Assistant at UCDP.

Despite this, the total numbers of fatalities from organised violence in Syria has continued to decrease for several years.

“We can see that the extremely high numbers of civilian casualties that we observed in Syria during the early years of the civil war were closely connected with the use of indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes in densely populated areas. As the Syrian government has regained control of the big cities, violence has moved to less populated areas, consequently
decreasing civilian fatalities,” Davies explains.

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