



Watch List 2017

Second Update | 20 July 2017

Watch List Updates complement International Crisis Group's annual Watch List, most recently published in February 2017. These early-warning publications identify major conflict situations in which prompt action, driven or supported by the European Union and its member states, would generate stronger prospects for peace. The Watch List Updates include situations identified in the annual Watch List and/or a new focus of concern.

This update includes entries on:

1.
Nigeria: Growing Insecurity on Multiple Fronts
2.
Pressuring Qatar: What Happens in the Gulf Doesn't Stay in the Gulf
3.
Thailand: Malay-Muslim Insurgency and the Dangers of Intractability
4.
Venezuela: "Zero Hour"

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Nigeria: Growing Insecurity on Multiple Fronts

Nigeria is facing a time of uncertainty and peril. President Muhammadu Buhari's failing health – he has spent more than 110 days battling an undisclosed illness in the UK – is prompting intense manoeuvring regarding who will run for president in 2019, particularly among loyalists and others seeking to preserve Northern rule. The eight-year-old insurgency by the radical Islamist group Boko Haram persists. An older problem, Biafra separatist agitation in the South East, is provoking dangerous domino effects in the north and Niger Delta, while deadly clashes between herders and farmers are escalating across the central belt and spreading southward. Defence chief, General Abayomi Olonishakin's recent comment that the military is battling at least fourteen challenges across the country underscores the widespread insecurity. House of Representatives speaker, Yakubu Dogara, said Nigeria "is effectively permanently in a state of emergency". For the European Union (EU), which is already largely engaged in the Niger Delta and the North East, this means that it should also watch closely political, social and security developments in other regions in Nigeria, and work with other international actors to push for much needed reforms that will address these challenges.

President Buhari's Health Crisis

The president's health has deteriorated significantly, particularly since February 2017; government secrecy about his condition has only fuelled diverse speculation. Most observers doubt he can effectively complete his first term, scheduled to end in 2019. As constitutionally mandated, Vice President Yemi Osinbajo is filling in, but several important government decisions and appointments are stalled, awaiting the president's attention.

More troubling, some of Buhari's Northern and Muslim loyalists are ill-disposed toward Osinbajo, from the South West and Christian. They fear that in 2019 Osinbajo might run for and win the presidency, as former President Goodluck Jonathan did following President Umaru Yar'adua's death in 2010. That would violate an informal understanding to rotate the two-term presidency between the mostly Muslim north and largely Christian south, which has been in place since the return to multi-party democracy in 1999 as a way to address Nigeria's delicate ethnic-religious balance. The agreement itself is in dispute, however, and those who argue it is unconstitutional, non-binding and divisive will encourage Osinbajo to run. The South East, where complaints of political marginalisation increasingly are stoking Biafra separatism, also is likely to make a stronger claim to the presidency. The influential Northern Elders Forum has declared that a Northerner must complete Buhari's second term, signalling a serious north-south power struggle in 2019.

Adding to these, army chief General Tukur Buratai's warning in May that troops should steer clear of politicians approaching them for "undisclosed political reasons" raises fears of military intervention.

To renew confidence and further reduce north-south suspicions, as well as ensure stable federal governance, the EU, along with member states most closely engaged with Nigeria, should:

- ❑ Encourage transparency about the president's health as a matter of public accountability to dispel rumours of a Northern conspiracy to keep him in power even if incapacitated.
- ❑ Send strong private or public messages to both military and regional political leaders, against unconstitutional actions, particularly military intervention.
- ❑ Press all parties to abide by constitutional provisions, particularly to achieve a smooth transition if Buhari is unable to continue in office.

The Stubborn Boko Haram Insurgency

President Buhari's December 2016 declaration that the army had conquered Boko Haram's last stronghold raised hopes the conflict was ending. But, seven months on, the insurgency remains very much alive. Fighters continue to attack civilians and military targets with new ferocity. June's casualty rate – more than 80 – topped those for earlier months of the year. In April, there were indications that Boko Haram was establishing new forest camps in Borno and Taraba states, and setting up new cells in Kaduna, Kogi and Niger states. There are also indications that the military, which has units deployed in 28 of the 36 states, is overstretched and unable to provide troops with sufficient resources. Some exhausted troops are complaining of not being rotated. The rainy season could further hamper operations, enabling Boko Haram to regroup and rearm.

The conflict's humanitarian fallout is worsening: about 4.5 million people lack sufficient food. On 8 June, the government launched a new food intervention plan for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Maiduguri, but it remains impossible to reach many of the needy. Despite the February Oslo donor pledging conference, UN officials reported the US\$1.05 billion Nigeria humanitarian response plan was only 37.8 per cent funded as of 7 July 2017. Insecurity is also constraining aid efforts, as Boko Haram carried out 97 suicide and vehicle borne attacks between March and June 2017 according to Nigerian military authorities. The Borno state government's shelving of its earlier plan to close all IDP camps by 29 May underscored that large areas of the state are still unsafe. If aid efforts are not stepped up, expanded and sustained, Borno state in particular could slide deeper into humanitarian crisis.

The EU most recently announced a €143 million support package for early recovery and reconstruction, bringing its total support in Borno state alone to €224.5 million for 2017. Delivering this package requires safe access, but many humanitarian aid agencies complain that convoys are not effectively secured, exposing them to ambushes and abductions. To help improve confidence and guarantee safer space, the EU should:

- ❑ Prod the government to intensify military and other security efforts to ensure safer humanitarian access.
- ❑ Prioritise humanitarian assistance with operational presence, fast-track food assistance and cash-based transfers wherever feasible.

Biafra Agitation Sparking Dangerous Domino Effects

Deepening separatist agitation in the Igbo-dominated South East, spurred by perceived political and economic marginalisation, is producing dangerous ripple effects. A successful sit-at-home action called by agitators on 30 May – the 50th anniversary of the declaration of an independent Biafra – provoked sixteen northern youth groups to demand a week later that Igbos leave the north by 1 October. This in turn prompted a call by a coalition of eight Niger Delta militant youth groups for all Northerners leave the delta by the same date. Although northern state governors disavowed the declarations while Acting President Osinbajo consulted with both northern and south-eastern leaders to defuse tensions, the youth groups have not withdrawn their demands. Should they seek to enforce them, or should mobs take matters into their own hands, there could be violence and large-scale population displacements.

Militants in the Niger Delta have not launched any major attacks on oil installations since the federal government engaged the region's ethnic and political leaders last November, pledging to revive infrastructure projects, clean up the polluted Ogoni environment and allow local communities to set up modular refineries. Yet the region's situation remains fragile. Attacks against Igbos or other southerners in the north might lead some delta militants to target oil companies, either to pressure the federal and northern state governments to stop anti-Igbo violence, or to cover criminal activities.

The EU, especially its delegation in Abuja, and its member states should encourage the government to continue consultations with regional leaders and other stakeholders. In particular, it should:

- ❑ Encourage the government to strengthen measures to protect citizens, working with the military, police but also community leaders and associations.
- ❑ Engage with leaders of relevant south-eastern, northern and Niger Delta youth groups, and organise forums with the goal of halting inflammatory rhetoric, withdrawing quit orders and publicly denouncing violence.
- ❑ Urge the National Assembly (federal parliament), presently divided over the 2014 National Conference Report and its recommendations, to commence deliberations on suggested federal reforms that could help prevent conflicts and curb separatist agitation.

The Herder-Farmer Tinderbox

Violent conflict between largely Muslim Fulani herders and ethnically diverse farmers in predominantly Christian areas has taken on tribal, religious and regional dimensions. Clashes across the central belt and spreading southward, are killing some 2,500 people a year. The conflict is now so deadly that many Nigerians fear it could become as dangerous as the Boko Haram insurgency. Escalating internally, the conflict could also spread regionally: herders might seek to draw fighters from their kin in other West and Central African countries, as some Fulani leaders have warned. This in turn could undermine a fragile region already struggling to defeat the Boko Haram insurgents.

In the absence of a strong federal response, states have been devising their own policies, including bans on open grazing that are vehemently opposed by herders and cattle dealers. Because state governments do not control the police and other security agencies, community vigilantes might be mobilised to enforce these bans, which could spark violence, particularly in Benue and Taraba states. In the short term, the EU should:

- ❑ Urge state governments to exercise caution in considering – or enforcing – these new laws, and urge cattle herders’ and dealers’ associations wishing to protest to use lawful channels.
- ❑ Press the federal government and its security agencies to strengthen measures to detect and pre-empt potential unrest among both community vigilantes as well as herders and cattle dealers, particularly in Benue and Taraba states.

In the longer term, EU member states should support, through funding, capacity building and technical aid, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture’s proposed National Ranching Development Plan, which seeks to promote cattle breeding only in ranches, as a permanent solution to herder-farmer friction.

Pressuring Qatar: What Happens in the Gulf Doesn't Stay in the Gulf

In early June, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and the Maldives broke diplomatic relations with Qatar and moved to isolate it. More than a month later, the rift shows no sign of abating. Tension among a number of these states – especially the main protagonists, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – is not new, but with the Middle East polarised, conflicts persisting around the region and the Gulf states themselves projecting their power, their dispute risks making an already bad situation worse. The threat of direct violence in the Gulf itself may be low, but with the U.S. unable to mediate an end to the dispute, the EU and its member states, particularly France, should also lend their efforts to defusing the situation lest it metastasise into subsidiary venues and proxy fights.

Exactly what precipitated the move is unclear. Doha was given no warning. In conversation with Crisis Group, Saudi and Emirati officials cited no specific catalyst but rather spoke about an accumulation of frustration and unkept pledges. Two issues apparently vexed them in particular. First, some officials alleged that Qatar had cosied up to Iran, though Qatar's policies largely fall within the stated Arab consensus of confronting Tehran's proxies, maintaining economic ties, and planning to negotiate at some future point when the Arab hand has been strengthened. Second, and more importantly, officials accused Doha of backing "extremists", by which they mean a range of both jihadist and political Islamist groups and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, which their governments tend to see on a continuum with groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). Despite Doha's commitments since 2014 to change its policies, an Emirati official said, "they say one thing and do something else", leading Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to take a stronger stance.

As for timing, it hardly appeared a coincidence that the Saudi move occurred on the heels of a successful visit to Riyadh by U.S. President Donald Trump. This almost certainly emboldened the royal family, particularly then Deputy Crown Prince (now Crown Prince) Mohamad Bin Salman, who is determined to break with what he views as a tradition of Saudi passivity and assert the kingdom's regional leadership.

If the ferocity of the Saudi-led campaign against Qatar is unprecedented, its complaints are longstanding. Tension across their mutual border grew in the late 1990s, when Doha began to use its financial wherewithal to extend its regional political clout. It pursued an iconoclastic and at times seemingly contradictory foreign policy, at the centre of which was mediation of conflicts; strong ties with the U.S., whose important military base it hosted; sponsorship of a powerful, often combative pan-regional media instrument (Al Jazeera); as well as patronage of groups with an Islamist bent, notably the Muslim Brotherhood but also, later, some in the salafi-jihadist orbit. For Doha, this policy was a mix of what it considered sound political principles, ally cultivation and an assertion of independence. For Riyadh and some other Gulf capitals, this amounted to a leadership challenge and, in some cases, a potential threat to their established domestic order.

With the 2011 Arab uprisings, intra-Gulf competition intensified as Doha on the one hand and Riyadh as well as Abu Dhabi on the other lined up on opposite sides of the regional divide pitting the Muslim Brotherhood against established regimes. The

various capitals tried to shape the emerging order to their advantage. Qatar doubled down on its support for Hamas and the Brotherhood even as it continued to cultivate a partnership with the U.S.; Saudi Arabia and the UAE pushed in the direction of restoring the former order, nowhere more so than in Egypt.

If the immediate causes of the rift are not clear, the potential consequences are. The human and economic impact on Qatar and its citizens aside, perpetuation of the crisis risks diverting Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries from other pressing needs – whether domestic or regional. Moreover, with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE having extended their reach into other conflict theatres – including in particular Libya and the Horn of Africa, regions of particular interest to the EU – what happens today in the Gulf is not likely to stay there:

- ❑ The U.S.-led **anti-ISIS campaign** is run from Qatar’s Al Udeid airbase, which has been exempt from severe restrictions imposed by Saudi Arabia and its allies on the rest of the country. A long-running crisis could have unintended consequences, however, and divert attention from the fight against ISIS.
- ❑ In **Syria**, while Qatar and Saudi Arabia both have cultivated influence among the opposition, Doha has tended to fund harder-line groups (though they were not alone in doing so, nor was it ever easy to tell exactly who was funding whom). Competition among opposition backers was contained, though never eradicated, once the U.S. started coordinating weapons flows and established operations rooms. But should Riyadh and Doha discontinue cooperation and prioritise the fight against each other, the campaign could be weakened and internecine fights among rebels aggravated.
- ❑ **Libya** remains fractured. Qatar, along with Turkey, supports Brotherhood-aligned groups and Islamist militias that control Tripoli and the west, whereas the UAE and Egypt devote even greater resources to backing and arming forces in Libya’s east loyal to General Haftar. For the moment, Qatar seems to have diminished its support, but should it find itself pressed as the standoff drags on, the proxy war between Doha and Abu Dhabi could intensify.
- ❑ Doha, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have made substantial investments in the **Horn of Africa** – military, economic and political. The neutral stance on the conflict adopted by Ethiopia and Somalia (though not its federal state governments, notably Somaliland) has been received coldly in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi; the UAE withdrawing its support from Somalia as a result would be a blow to its weak, cash-strapped government. Conversely Eritrea and Djibouti by contrast have lined up with Saudi Arabia and UAE, which prompted Qatar to withdraw its 400-plus ceasefire monitoring contingent from Doumeira, the disputed Red Sea island. The Gulf interest in the Horn has the potential to promote stability there, but, especially if their Gulf backers push their partners in the Horn to take positions that prove unpopular with local groups, it could have the opposite effect.

At this writing, the main protagonists appear unwilling to budge. Saudi Arabia and its allies have presented a list of demands almost impossible for Qatar to accept – which Doha dutifully rejected. The EU and its member states potentially could play a role in de-escalating the situation. Under normal circumstances, the U.S. would step in strongly, all the more so at a time when it wishes to consolidate its partnership

with the GCC against Iran. But these are not normal circumstances, and there is discord as well as confusion in the U.S. administration. President Trump has tweeted his support for Riyadh even as the secretaries of state and of defence counselled restraint and de-escalation. Secretary Tillerson's round of diplomacy notwithstanding, Washington's muddled and internally contradictory responses have left everyone unclear about its capacity or willingness to resolve this dispute.

The EU and its member states by contrast have issued relatively consistent and constructive statements. Should U.S. mediation fail, they, and especially France under President Macron's leadership, given the country's traditionally strong relations with both Riyadh and Doha, could seek to play a more active part. They should be modest about their capacity to do so, particularly as long as the U.S. position is unclear, since that lack of clarity will encourage the antagonists to maintain their current positions. But once the parties begin to tire of their standoff and look for a way out, Europe could mount its own mediation effort.

Thailand: Malay-Muslim Insurgency and the Dangers of Intractability

The occurrence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-linked or inspired violence in Jakarta, Mindanao, and Puchong, near Kuala Lumpur, has raised fears of a new era of transnational jihadist terrorism in South East Asia. To date, ISIS has used Thailand as a transit point rather than a target; indeed, there is no known case of a Thai citizen joining the group. But the persistence of a Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency in the kingdom's southernmost provinces, where roughly 7,000 people have been killed since 2004, is a source of concern among some Western governments, Thai officials, local people and even some within the militant movement. Repeated, if poorly substantiated reports of ISIS activity in Thailand, from foreign fighters transiting through Bangkok to allegations of Malaysian ISIS members buying small arms in southern Thailand, have prompted questions about the insurgency's susceptibility to radicalisation along transnational jihadist lines. Yet even absent intervention by foreign jihadists, the insurgency's own dynamics could lead to greater violence.

Thus far, the separatist insurgency has had little in common with jihadism. Rooted in the country's nearly two million Malay Muslims, who constitute a majority in the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, its aspirations are nationalist in nature: liberation of Patani, the homeland they consider to have been colonised by Thailand, and defence of Patani-Malay identity against so-called Siamification. Moreover, the insurgency draws support from traditionalist Islamic leaders, upholders of a syncretic, Sufi-inflected Islam who oppose the rigid views propagated by jihadists. Even the relatively small Salafi minority rejects ISIS's brutal tactics and apocalyptic vision; some among them claim that ISIS is a product of Western machinations. For Barisan Revolusi Nasional Patani Melayu (BRN, Patani-Malay National Revolutionary Front), the main Malay-Muslim militant group, in other words, association with transnational jihadists would risk cutting them off from their base while triggering greater isolation. It could also internationalise efforts to defeat them.

Dangers of an Intractable Conflict

Yet perpetuation of the conflict risks altering its trajectory which, in turn, threatens to change the nature of the insurgency. In principle, this could potentially open opportunities for foreign jihadists, who have proven adept at exploiting other protracted conflicts. That remains for now a theoretical threat: little evidence thus far suggests jihadist penetration in Southern Thailand. As noted, neither the insurgency nor the broader Malay Muslim community has shown any inclination toward jihadism.

Without progress in peace talks or an inclusive dialogue, insurgents might resort to more dramatic acts of violence however. They already have shown they can stage attacks outside the deep south, as they did in August 2016 when they conducted a series of coordinated, small-scale bombings in seven resort areas, wounding European tourists among others. Militant groups also might splinter, with rival factions competing to demonstrate their capabilities to potential supporters and the government. In turn, increased violence or attacks against civilians – particularly outside

the conflict zone – could fuel an anti-Islamic backlash and stimulate Buddhist nationalism, creating tensions between Muslim and Buddhist communities throughout the country. A prolonged conflict means more young Malay Muslims will have grown up in a polarised society and experienced traumatic events. This could split a more pragmatic elder generation from a more militant younger one.

Stalled dialogue

The surest way to reduce these risks would be to bring the insurgency to an end – a task at present both daunting and long-term. The ruling, military-led National Council for Peace and Order, which seized power in a May 2014 coup, is engaged in a dialogue with MARA Patani (Majlis Syura Patani, Patani Consultative Council), an umbrella group of five militant organisations whose leaders are in exile. But many perceive the dialogue, facilitated by Malaysia, essentially as a public-relations exercise through which Bangkok intends to signal its willingness to peacefully resolve the conflict without making any concessions. Likewise, there are doubts that MARA can control most fighters: although the BRN has the top three slots in MARA Patani's leadership, BRN's information department insists these members have been suspended and do not speak for the organisation.

After a year-and-a-half, the MARA process remains stuck. In April 2016, the Thai government balked at signing a Terms of Reference agreement to govern talks, which remain unofficial. At the time, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha argued that MARA lacked the necessary status to act as the government's counterpart. After a hiatus, the two sides resumed their meetings in August and, in February 2017, they agreed in principle to establish "safety zones", district-level compacts in which neither side would target civilians. They also agreed to form inclusive committees to investigate violent incidents, although details still need to be worked out and they have yet to announce a district for pilot implementation.

For its part, BRN insists on impartial international mediation and third-party observers as conditions for formal talks with Bangkok. In a 10 April 2017 statement, BRN's information department reiterated these prerequisites and noted that negotiating parties themselves should design the process, a jab at Malaysia's role as facilitator. Demonstrating that they exercised control over fighters, the BRN implemented an unannounced lull in attacks from 8 to 17 April, a period preceded and followed by waves of coordinated attacks across several districts.

In late June 2017, a senior Thai official said that the government might re-examine the issue of the identity of its counterpart, a rare public sign of high-level deliberation and possible flexibility. Although this could suggest willingness to consider BRN's conditions – including the sensitive question of Malaysia's role and that of any internationalisation – which it previously had rejected outright, it could also constitute another delaying tactic.

The National Council for Peace and Order apparently still clings to the conviction that the conflict can be resolved through attrition, enemy surrenders and economic development, without any fundamental change in state/society relations in the deep south. The military, whose entire ethos is based on the image of national unity and whose senior officers tend to view enhanced local power as a first step toward partition, is loath to contemplate autonomy or political decentralisation. Since taking

power, it has suppressed once-lively public debate about decentralisation models, such as proposals for elected governors or sub-regional assemblies.

Options for the European Union

In this context, one of the international community's longer-term goals should be to encourage Bangkok to accept some degree of political decentralisation as fully compatible with preservation of national unity. For the European Union (EU) and those EU member states that are engaged in the country such as Germany, in particular, an important objective would be to encourage the government to establish a more inclusive dialogue and to support it, when possible, through capacity building for both parties. Admittedly, their influence with the National Council for Peace and Order is limited. After the 2014 coup, the EU suspended official visits to and from Thailand, as well as negotiations for the Free Trade Agreement and the Partnership Cooperation Agreement, pending a return to elected government. Restrictions on popular representation, codified in the new constitution and laws, mean that even a general election, now scheduled for 2018, might not satisfy the EU's requirement of functioning democratic institutions. Moreover, Bangkok is not yet prepared to countenance an EU role.

That aside, relations with Bangkok are not hostile; Thailand and the EU held a Senior Officials Meeting 9 June 2017 in Brussels, the first since 2012. When conditions permit, the EU should be well placed to support a peace process, given perceptions in Thailand of its impartiality. In the meantime, the EU and member states should continue encouraging the parties to deal with each other constructively. This could include sharing experiences in sub-national conflict resolution and political power devolution or offering training on matters such as negotiations, communication and conflict management.

In the near term, the EU and member states should urge the Thai government to restore civil liberties and freedom of expression to allow more open discussion and debate. Among other benefits, such steps would facilitate a public conversation within Malay Muslim communities that, in turn, might diminish risks of radicalisation. Already, the EU backs civil-society organisations' endeavours to promote community and youth engagement in peace building. This ought to continue.

Venezuela: “Zero Hour”

Venezuela approaches a key moment in its protracted political crisis: the government is preparing to replace the country’s ailing democracy with a full-fledged dictatorship by means of an all-powerful constituent assembly, due to be elected on 30 July under rules that effectively exclude the opposition. Nearly 100 people have died in over three months of street demonstrations across the country, many of them shot dead by police, national guard or civilian gunmen. Beginning a week before polling day, the army will be deployed on the streets to guard against any disruption. There is a grave danger of violence on a scale so far unseen, and a fresh wave of emigration is probably imminent. The accelerating breakdown of health services and other vital infrastructure, growing hunger and shortages of basic goods, along with surging rates of violent crime, pose an evident threat not only to Venezuelans but to neighbouring countries and the international community generally.

Democracy Dismantled

In December 2015, the opposition Democratic Unity (MUD) alliance won a two-thirds majority in the single-chamber National Assembly, but the government has used its control of the Supreme Court to block every move by parliament since then. When the opposition responded by attempting to trigger a recall referendum against President Maduro, this too was blocked, using the courts and the government-controlled electoral authority (CNE). Elections for state governors, due in December 2016, were suspended. Some opposition leaders have been banned from holding office and/or banned from leaving the country. Others have had their passports annulled and some have been imprisoned. In late March, the Supreme Court attempted to transfer to itself all the assembly’s powers, causing the once loyal attorney general, Luisa Ortega, to declare that constitutional rule had been interrupted and the Organization of American States (OAS) to invoke the Inter-American Democratic Charter, devised to deal with the breakdown of democracy in a member state.

The opposition alliance launched a campaign of mass demonstrations to demand the restoration of democracy, but the response from the government has been violent. In addition to the deaths, thousands have been injured and thousands more arrested; security forces and civilian gunmen have invaded private residences, destroying and stealing property and carrying out warrantless detentions. Hundreds have been subjected to trial by military courts, and the legal aid organisation Foro Penal puts the number of political prisoners at around 400. On 1 May, Maduro announced he was convening an assembly to rewrite the constitution. The assembly, to be elected on 30 July, will be supra-constitutional and there is no time limit on its authority. Government leaders have said it will be empowered to close down parliament, stripping members of their parliamentary immunity, and “turn upside down” the attorney general’s office, which has declined to prosecute peaceful demonstrators and charged senior military figures with human rights abuses.

Around two fifths of constituent assembly members will be elected by “sectors” (including trade union members and “communes”) largely controlled by the government. The remainder will be elected by municipality, under a system that vastly over-represents the rural areas where the government is strongest. The MUD is boy-

cotting the election, which it says the president has no right to convene without a prior referendum. Polls suggest only around 20 per cent of the electorate intend to vote. Fringe elements in the opposition (collectively referred to as *La Resistencia*), frustrated with the MUD's non-violent approach, talk in private of armed resistance. With millions of illegal weapons in private hands, arming urban guerrillas might not be difficult. Nor is the MUD itself united: while some parties support a negotiated transition, others are opposed. Despite abundant evidence of discontent in military ranks (including dozens of arrested officers), there has so far been no split in the armed forces. The officer corps would nonetheless be faced with a dilemma if the army were called on to restore public order. Such a move would inevitably bring much higher casualty figures and some would be reluctant to obey.

A ray of light came on 16 July with a massive turnout for a "consultation" of voters ordered by the National Assembly. Over seven million voted to reject the constituent assembly, call on the armed forces to obey the constitution, not the government, and mandate parliament to appoint a new Supreme Court and electoral authority and form a government of national unity. While the government sought to downplay the event, it strengthened demands both internal and external for a last-minute u-turn.

Growing Hunger

Economists project that by the end of 2017 the Venezuelan economy will have shrunk by around 30 per cent in three years. Manufacturing industries are producing at 20-30 per cent of capacity and the main farmers' federation says only about a quarter of the normal acreage will be planted, due to lack of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, as well as agricultural equipment. Outbreaks of mass looting in many cities have badly hit wholesale and retail food outlets, while imports of food have slumped. The government's failure to provide enough emergency rations through its CLAP (Local Provision and Production Committee) system of food parcels has led to protests in many poorer areas. Studies show half the population living in extreme poverty. Rare official figures show an alarming increase in infant and maternal mortality. Child malnutrition rose by over 11 per cent from 2015-2016 and nutritionists are beginning to predict famine if trends continue. Shortages of essential medicines continue at critical levels and hospital infrastructure is collapsing. A shortage of vaccines has contributed to outbreaks of formerly eradicated diseases such as diphtheria, while farmers warn that livestock too is vulnerable to epidemics due to the lack of veterinary vaccines.

In the medium term there is a possibility that the Venezuelan government might collapse under the burden of an unpayable foreign debt and domestic ungovernability, although without necessarily triggering a restoration of democracy. While most analysts believe Caracas can make this year's debt service payments, it faces a severe challenge in October/November, when around US\$3.5 billion come due.

Responding to the Emergency

The OAS has so far failed to reach consensus on how to approach the crisis. A handful of mostly Caribbean states, beholden to Caracas for cheap energy supplies and other benefits, have blocked what they call an excessively “interventionist” approach. Without a split in the government (and in particular the military), the constituent assembly plan appears unstoppable, and further violence is likely; the 8 July release into house arrest of opposition leader Leopoldo López notwithstanding, the government’s attitude does not appear to have changed.

Still, concerned governments nonetheless should prepare a negotiating structure for when conditions change. In this context, the European Union (EU) should back a proposal by a large group of OAS members, including the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Peru and Colombia, to form a “contact group” comprising four or five governments agreed on by both sides to the conflict; its goal would be to promote negotiations aimed at averting more violence and restoring democracy. This group probably would have to be created outside the formal framework of the OAS. The EU and EU member states with close ties to the region (in particular to the Caribbean) should use their influence to widen support for this proposal, especially among OAS countries close to the Maduro government.

In addition, the EU, with regional governments in the lead, should develop a concerted response and attempt to bring Russia and China on board insofar as they have greater leverage over Caracas and hold large quantities of Venezuelan debt. Involvement by either or both of these countries in a plan to avert violence and promote genuine negotiations would have a major positive impact. On 16 July, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos reportedly sought Cuban government support for a regional plan to resolve the crisis. As Venezuela’s closest ally, Cuba is in a unique position to influence the outcome, and Santos’ initiative should be supported by the EU and member states.

As an immediate response, the EU and the wider international community should assist front-line states in dealing with the humanitarian and security consequences of the crisis. Colombia, with its delicate post-conflict situation, is highly vulnerable to refugee flows, possible border clashes if the Caracas government seeks an external distraction, and increased activity of non-state armed groups. Although the Venezuelan government has consistently rejected humanitarian aid, some NGOs have been permitted to provide small-scale humanitarian assistance on condition it is not publicised. The EU should seek ways to facilitate this process even as it continues to press publicly for aid to be allowed in.

The EU should make plain that free and fair elections and the restoration of constitutional rule are essential pre-requisites for normal relations as well as for emergency financial support. The EU and member states also should be prepared to offer advice and technical assistance to a transitional government, should one be set up. There is no quick fix for the multi-layered crisis Venezuela is facing. But inaction is no longer an option.