



# Watch List 2021

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Every year Crisis Group publishes two additional Watch List updates that complement its annual Watch List for the EU, most recently published in January 2021. These publications identify major crises and conflict situations where the European Union and its member states can generate stronger prospects for peace. The two additional updates include an overview of the policy environment and main challenges for the European Union and five crises and conflict situations, which can update those identified in the annual Watch List or present a new focus of concern. For each of the five cases included in this update, Crisis Group provides field-based analysis and specific policy advice to the European Union and its member states, with the aim to guide and improve their efforts to prevent, mitigate or end conflicts.

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*



# Introduction

European leaders hoping that a new U.S. administration and COVID vaccines would bring some respite to tempestuous global affairs might look back disappointed at the past few months. A lot has happened since Crisis Group put out our last EU Watch List in January. Despite some bright spots, little of it has been good.

First was the Myanmar coup; an entry in this update covers where things stand. The military takeover upended the country's short experiment with pluralism and provoked a degree of popular fury the generals seemed unprepared for. Though they appear eager for a return to the normalcy, their brutal crackdown has taken the country in the opposite direction. With the economy in tatters, a humanitarian calamity worsening, ethnic armed groups renewing violence and new militias emerging, the crisis risks paving the way for state collapse.

Then, new U.S. President Joe Biden announced he would pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, meaning European forces will leave, too, by mid-September this year at the latest. Biden characterised the decision as reflecting his administration's reduced prioritisation of Afghanistan amid other threats and challenges around the world. He also explained that he did not see a rationale for keeping troops in Afghanistan if it was not likely they would improve conditions there. This line of reasoning was an implicit rejection of Washington's longstanding policy of using the deployment as an insurance policy against resurgence of terrorist threats. For many Afghans, the drawdown brings dread. Much is uncertain, but another escalation in fighting – in a country that has already suffered more than four decades of war – appears the most plausible scenario, as insurgents test how far they can go against Afghan security forces. European governments, which have put their diplomatic support behind Afghan peace talks and their financial support behind the Afghan government, will have their work cut out to promote stability if that happens.

There were troubling signs in those parts of sub-Saharan Africa Europe tends to fret about most. In January, our Watch List covered Ethiopia's rocky transition – things since have gotten worse. The war in its northern Tigray region grinds on, with evidence of horrific abuses by all sides, including scorched-earth tactics by Eritrean forces fighting alongside the Ethiopian army against Tigrayan rebels. Trouble is brewing elsewhere in the country, with ethnic strife on the rise ahead of elections expected in June. Ethiopia is also at loggerheads with Sudan over border areas. Violence continues to destabilise much of the rural Sahel. To make matters worse, as this goes to press, the Malian military has detained the country's interim president and prime minister, who themselves came to power after a coup less than a year ago. In Chad, President Idriss Déby died in April near front lines fighting rebels, raising fears in European capitals about Chad's stability and what his death would mean for battles against jihadists around the Sahel and Lake Chad that Déby portrayed himself as pivotal to – though, thus far, his son, who has taken over, has kept Chadian deployments in place. Whether these events will prompt any [further reflection](#) in European capitals about the French-led military-focused strategy across the Sahel remains unclear.

Then came the latest flare-up in Israel-Palestine. After weeks of tensions in Jerusalem and heavy-handed Israeli policing at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Hamas began firing rockets into Israel, prompting an Israeli bombardment of Gaza. Over eleven days of fighting, 243 Palestinians, including scores of Hamas fighters and 66 children, and twelve people in Israel including two children, died. Much of Gaza was left in ruins. It was the fourth Gaza war since 2007 but this round was different, notably in the violence between Israeli Jews and Palestinians wracking cities in Israel itself and the displays of solidarity among Palestinians across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and Israel. Beyond the human cost, the war should serve as a wake-up call that, notwithstanding Israel's normalisation with some Arab governments and many European leaders' apparent desire to wish the conflict away, it remains a dangerous flashpoint. Unless Israel and international actors re-examine their longstanding approach to the conflict by taking into account Palestinians' shared suffering and apparent newfound common voice, and unless Palestinians have the chance to elect a new leadership, it's only a matter of time before rockets and bombs start again.

Nor is it clear that an end to COVID-19 is in sight. If much of Europe is ploughing ahead with vaccines and anticipating summer holidays, the pandemic's ravages in India, Brazil and elsewhere show the struggles in other parts of the world to get it under control. Until now, COVID-19 has [little shaped](#) peace and security or the trajectory of any major war one way or the other. Yet, in many places, the pandemic and lockdowns have aggravated precisely those problems that fed discontent beforehand: rising inequality, higher living costs, scarcer public resources, fewer opportunities for young people. Today's [upheaval across Colombia](#), for example, or the [protests in northern Lebanon](#) some months ago, have not primarily been about COVID-19. But the pandemic played into the anger that took people to the streets. Unless the virus can be tamed and economies pick up, those protests may be a harbinger of things to come. The EU played a key role in setting up and supporting COVAX, which helps distribute vaccines to low- and middle-income countries. That support is likely to be crucial for some time to come.

As for major power politics, Biden has brought more continuity than change. European leaders can feel some relief at the shift in tone and sense of normalcy that has returned to transatlantic affairs and the UN Security Council. Still, U.S.-China ties are as fraught as ever. For Brussels, the balancing act remains largely the same: standing up to Beijing where it serves Europe's interests, managing with as little friction as possible any divergence with Washington, and keeping open avenues for coordination on issues like climate change and nuclear proliferation. Russia's troop build-up near its border with Ukraine earlier this year drove home again, as our entry below covers, the dilemmas it poses Western powers. Moscow appears to be withdrawing those forces, but the show of strength aggravated already toxic relations, coming together with tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions between Western capitals and Moscow, related to Czech findings of Russian sabotage, and fresh U.S. sanctions on Moscow for, among other things, its alleged cyberattacks and election interference. As we go to press, European leaders had just agreed to impose fresh Belarus [sanctions](#) in response to President Aliaksandr Lukashenka's brazen forced diversion of a European flight over his country's airspace – characterised by some as [state terror](#) – to detain a Belarus dissident. As yet, no evidence suggests Moscow was in-

volved, but it has [publicly defended](#) Minsk. Increased friction between Brussels and Lukashenka, a Putin ally, is unlikely to do much for Russia-West relations.

So where were the bright spots? Those lie – perhaps unexpectedly – in early rumblings of efforts to mend the rivalries that have fuelled Arab wars over the past decade. Turkish and Egyptian diplomats appear to have agreed to tamp down acrimonious rhetoric. The Gulf Cooperation Council spat is formally over, and while bad blood remains between Abu Dhabi and Doha, there are signs of reconciliation within the bloc. (Libya’s peace deal owes mostly to a fighting stalemate but cooling hostility among the parties’ outside backers – Turkey and Qatar on one side, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt on the other – is part of the story.) Even Saudi Arabia and Iran are talking; their representatives met in Iraq to discuss Yemen. These apparent recalibrations may be partly motivated by Biden eyeing a return to the Iran nuclear deal and withdrawing his predecessor’s unconditional support for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. How much they’ll achieve remains unclear: Yemen’s war, as our entry below makes clear, is still going from bad to worse; competition among Gulf powers in the Horn of Africa appears undimmed. Still, given the destruction those enmities have wrought over the past decade, any stirring of change qualifies as good news.

May 2021

# Bolivia: Shifting Loyalties Complicate Route to Reconciliation

The turmoil that followed Bolivia's disputed 2019 election has subsided, but the country's deep political wounds remain unhealed. Credible and largely uneventful polls in October 2020 installed Luis Arce as president and returned Evo Morales' Movement to Socialism (MAS) to power, laying to rest fears that a fresh election dispute would trigger another round of unrest. But while citizens' faith in the electoral authorities has mostly been restored, the tensions of the past two years linger on.

Fierce disagreement persists about the 2019 polls, which led to Morales' resignation and were declared null after a wave of post-electoral violence. On one side of the political divide are those who continue to see that election as an attempt at massive [fraud](#) aimed at prolonging Morales' grip on power beyond constitutional limits; on the other are those who regard it as a [coup](#) orchestrated by Bolivia's white elites, the military and their international allies, including the Organization of American States (OAS). Political polarisation deepened under the right-wing interim government led by Jeanine Áñez, which held power between the two elections, and was widely seen to be persecuting MAS members and political allies. Now that the MAS has come back to power, Áñez and several of her ministers have been jailed, stirring up still more political resentment and mistrust, and reinforcing the perception that the courts are in thrall to the government and bend to its dictates.

The path to reconciliation is hardly clear. President Arce came to power offering [conciliatory rhetoric](#), and his government quickly unveiled an ambitious proposal to [overhaul](#) the politicised judicial system, which is a perennial source of partisan division. But any hope for a new tone disappeared in the rancorous run-up to regional and local elections, in which the MAS fared poorly amid growing internal tensions. Public discontent with the government, meanwhile, is mounting over [poor management](#) of the pandemic and a deepening [economic slump](#). Although the [EU](#) and [UN](#), as well as politicians such as [Vice President David Choquehuanca](#) and presidential runner-up [Carlos Mesa](#), have mooted various plans for political and social reconciliation, their prospects look remote.

*In these circumstances, the European Union (EU) and its member states should:*

- ❑ Continue working with the UN and other donors to provide technical assistance to national and local electoral authorities so as to guarantee transparent and credible polls in the future.
- ❑ To reduce the polarising impact of perceived judicial partisanship on Bolivian politics, encourage the Arce administration to carry out comprehensive judicial reform on the basis of consultations with all political parties and civil society, while simultaneously moving forward on short-term goals, such as legal reforms to help address violence against women.
- ❑ Press the Arce administration to ensure that the measures it takes with respect to Áñez are consistent with constitutional requirements.
- ❑ Together with the UN and Catholic Church, help foster local dialogues aimed at preventing flare-ups of violence and build the conditions for an eventual national reconciliation process.

### *Political Fragmentation*

Arce was [elected](#) president of Bolivia with 55 per cent of the vote after a turbulent year during which the administration of interim President Áñez was accused of [human rights violations](#) and using the pandemic to [remain](#) in power beyond its mandate. The election went smoothly. With EU and UN support, and with the widely respected Salvador Romero at the helm of the Superior Electoral Tribunal, the electoral authorities persuaded most Bolivians that the polls were free and fair. But peaceful polls and a landslide victory for the MAS over centrist Mesa (of the Civic Community party) and right-wing radical Luis Fernando Camacho (of the Creemos party) did not mean that Bolivia has united behind the MAS, as the [results](#) of March's local and regional elections proved. The party won only three of nine races for state governor, and it now controls only two of the country's biggest cities.

There are several explanations for the MAS's lacklustre showing in the March polls. Back from exile in Argentina, Morales took control of the campaign. He placed his preferred candidates on the MAS slate, shunted aside popular figures such as [Eva Copa](#), the young woman who led the Senate under the interim government, and turned off some traditional MAS voters in the process. The party also lost the support of voters who had expected the Arce administration to chart a course to domestic reconciliation, and who were disappointed when the new president declared a [broad amnesty](#) protecting his allies from being charged with serious crimes committed during the Áñez administration's tenure. Morales found himself [openly confronted](#) by disgruntled former supporters, and well-known candidates defected from the party.

The new MAS-led government also faced growing criticism over its handling of COVID-19, especially regarding a [lack of vaccines](#), and the public [perception](#) that it is not doing enough to respond to the related economic crisis. These widening divisions within the party as well as the MAS's loss of support among its traditional constituencies represent a major shift in Bolivian politics. For example, many Aymara, an indigenous group that has historically supported Morales, shifted their allegiance to a new party founded by ex-MAS members, [Jallalla](#). Significant numbers of smallhold farmers and the urban poor, who in the past were core MAS supporters, switched to other indigenous and leftist parties, such as [Movement Third System](#).

At the same time, the opposition has fragmented. The election of [Camacho](#), who in 2019 [mobilised](#) thousands of supporters to demand Morales' removal from office, as governor of Santa Cruz proved his enduring popular appeal among hardline opposition forces in some areas. Mesa's Civic Community, a more moderate movement, holds 30 per cent of the seats in parliament, but was essentially absent from the local election battle.

### *"Lawfare" and Justice Reform*

Political manipulation of the judiciary, widely known in Latin America as "lawfare", has become one of the most distinctive and divisive characteristics of Bolivian political life. In the aftermath of the 2019 election, the Áñez administration brought politically tinged [charges](#) against Morales and others for sedition and terrorism.

In turn, the Arce administration is [levelling](#) similar charges at Áñez, leading to her imprisonment since 12 March.

While evidence suggests that Áñez should face trial for grave crimes committed during her administration's [tenure](#), including the [massacres](#) of Senkata and Sacaba where at least nineteen people protesting Morales' ouster were killed by Bolivian security forces, the way the Arce administration is prosecuting her is likely to increase the public's sense that the judiciary is politicised. Among other issues, the constitution provides that former presidents are immune from normal prosecution through judicial channels for their actions while in power, and that they can only be tried by Congress. But in the present case, the government has determined that it lacks the votes in parliament to secure a guilty verdict, and admitted that it is therefore [building a case](#) against Áñez in the courts (which are widely viewed as [lacking independence](#)) based on her alleged role in what the administration characterises as a [coup](#) against Morales, despite [scant evidence](#) of her involvement.

[Human rights organisations](#) issued rapid [condemnations](#) of the Bolivian government's imprisonment of Áñez and apparent use of the justice system to perpetuate a cycle of political revenge. The [EU](#), [UN](#), [OAS](#) and [U.S.](#) were similarly critical. This outside pressure helped convince La Paz not to file charges against other members of the interim government, but Áñez remains in jail, and some MAS factions have pushed back hard against the criticism, including through social media [attacks](#) on a disapproving [European Parliament resolution](#). It is unlikely that these factions will soften their stance.

Against this backdrop, efforts to reform the judicial system and break the cycle of revenge justice have thus far made little headway. A reform proposal advanced by Justice Minister Iván Lima in December 2020 foundered in the face of lack of political backing from MAS leadership. A proposed referendum that would alter the way in which judges are elected – which now allows the party controlling Congress to decide who is on the slate – has been [postponed](#) until after the next judicial election, scheduled for 2023. Several high-profile members of an advisory council formed by the Arce government to pilot judicial reform have [resigned](#), complaining that they had met only once.

### *Recommendations for the EU and Its Member States*

To avoid a repeat of the violence that followed the 2019 elections, it will be important for Bolivian authorities to continue building public confidence in the electoral system. The EU should impress on the Arce administration the importance of maintaining an independent and impartial Superior Electoral Tribunal, and work closely with Dina Chuquimia, who replaced Romero after his resignation, to build on the progress achieved over the last year.

Additionally, the EU, in partnership with the UN, should continue to provide support to the Tribunal to strengthen its ability to run transparent and reliable elections, through technical assistance to improve vote counting; the purchase of better equipment and electoral materials; the design of a communications strategy that explains to the public the vote-tallying process and strengthens faith in its transparency; and the training of Tribunal staff, among other measures. Similarly, the Om-



budsman's Office and others have identified specific [weaknesses](#) in local electoral bodies that need to be addressed – in particular better training of local staff, guaranteeing that poll workers speak the indigenous language of the surrounding area and providing election materials that help voters understand their choices. The EU and member states that are already active in this area, such as Sweden, should [extend](#) their partnership with the UN and other donors to provide these electoral authorities with the technical and material support they require.

Given the corrosive and polarising impact of perceived judicial partisanship on Bolivian politics, the EU should also work with the Arce administration where possible to advance judicial reform efforts. Even if key parts of the planned reform are on hold, the EU and member states should continue to insist on improving the justice system, and press, among other things, for an increase in spending in this area (currently only 0.38 per cent of GDP) to allow for the creation of specialised courts, the appointment of more judges to ease case delays in the courts, and broader public access. The Arce administration should signal its commitment to ending politicised justice by developing a strategy to ensure that *Áñez* is treated in accordance with the constitution.

The EU could also support the justice ministry in pushing forward changes it has highlighted as priorities and that have broad political support; for example, modifications to Law 348 to Guarantee Women a Life Free of Violence. Bolivia has one of the [highest](#) numbers of femicides on the continent, and high levels of violence [targeting](#) women in politics. It could also partner with suitable national institutions and organisations to help modernise judicial bodies and give all Bolivians [access](#) to the judicial system.

Finally, together with the UN and Catholic Church, the EU should keep mediating political and social disputes that threaten to spill over into violence, as it has done since 2019. More substantial steps toward political reconciliation of the sort [proposed](#) by Mesa – including freeing political prisoners, prosecuting violent acts that took place between October 2019 and October 2020 (which would require reversal of the amnesty), and reinstating the two-thirds majority for certain legislative procedures to encourage greater inter-party cooperation (a threshold [abolished](#) in October 2020 by the MAS-controlled Assembly) – have been [dismissed](#) by the MAS but should still be on the table.

The EU and member states, together with well-regarded institutions such as the Catholic Church, should additionally offer political and, where needed, financial support for dialogue-based initiatives around specific issues that have established their worth. For example, [altercations](#) recently flared among coca growers (controlled growth of the plant is legal in Bolivia) after the government decided to move the location of one of two national coca markets, leading to protests and then a violent crackdown on protesters' roadblocks. International mediation on issues such as this one could help minimise the chances that local frictions provoke wider unrest and instability, and progressively build the conditions for a national reconciliation process.

# Help Contain the Damage of Myanmar's Military Coup

The 1 February coup d'état in Myanmar has undone a decade of liberalisation, triggered a deep economic crisis, led to renewed ethnic armed conflict and set the country on the path toward possible state collapse. The security forces have responded to widespread popular resistance to the military takeover with brutal violence against demonstrators and the broader civilian population – killing hundreds and detaining thousands with the apparent aim of terrorising people into submission. Instead, resistance movements appear to have become even more determined, continuing to organise general strikes and acts of civil disobedience. Conflict has also resumed or escalated in several of the country's ethnic areas as armed groups have deserted the peace process and attacked security forces. The economic meltdown prompted by the coup and the near collapse of many government functions, including the health and education systems, will have far-reaching and lasting consequences for Myanmar's 55 million people. A humanitarian emergency is already in the making, as millions, particularly in cities, are pushed into poverty and face rising food insecurity.

*The EU and its member states can help address the crisis in Myanmar by:*

- ❑ Channelling significant aid to address both the impending humanitarian emergency and longer-term needs relating to health, education and livelihoods; working to improve coordination among UN agencies, donors and implementing partners to ensure this aid's efficient delivery; and urgently funding independent media;
- ❑ Supporting regional diplomacy, particularly Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led efforts, to boost the ASEAN special envoy's legitimacy in engaging with the regime in a robust and effective manner; and backing efforts to convene an international contact group on Myanmar;
- ❑ Maintaining and expanding targeted sanctions on the regime, the military and their business interests;
- ❑ Continuing to engage closely with the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and the National Unity Government as well as other legitimate representatives of the Myanmar people;
- ❑ Ensuring that the EU arms embargo is strictly enforced and sufficiently covers dual-use items and technological tools of surveillance and repression; working with EU partners to develop a coordinated list of prohibited items; and sharing information with like-minded countries on efforts to block transfers on a voluntary basis.

## *A Multi-dimensional Crisis*

After grossly miscalculating how Myanmar's people would react to the 1 February coup, the regime appears determined to impose its will on the population through sheer brutality. Snipers have shot unarmed protesters, including children, in the head. Police and soldiers have attacked protest barricades with rifle grenades and mortars,

targeted medical first responders and fired randomly into crowds, at passing vehicles and even into homes at night. State television has broadcast photos of detainees bearing clear signs of torture, possibly as a warning to others against resisting the coup. Some female detainees have been subjected to sexual and gender-based violence during interrogations. These actions, no doubt intended to terrorise, have not achieved their goals. On the contrary, they have fuelled further resistance by inflaming the already simmering hatred of the military across the country. Although the regime almost entirely shut down the internet, general strikes and civil disobedience continue – with young female activists playing particularly prominent roles – and people keep finding new ways to express their dissent, for example by replacing demonstrations with flash mobs in order to avoid arrest. Close to four months on, the military is struggling to consolidate its power grab.

As a result of the violence, absence of governance, and strikes and civil disobedience, which also affect the private sector, Myanmar's economy is falling apart. Many have lost their jobs. Income-generating opportunities in the informal sector are drying up and the banking system is at a virtual standstill. Many people have great difficulty taking out cash due to Central Bank-mandated withdrawal limits, while the regime's internet shutdown has prevented most from access to electronic banking and payment services. The combination of the banking crisis with a collapse in business and consumer confidence, widespread insecurity, and broken logistics and supply chains has resulted in a hard stop to economic activity, and the UN Development Programme now estimates that nearly half of Myanmar's population risks falling into poverty by 2022.

At this rate, the poverty crisis will soon become a hunger crisis. Food markets are dysfunctional, with some staples unavailable, and surging prices for others. That many people are without income or access to cash leaves them unable to buy what food there is. On 22 April, the World Food Programme warned that up to 3.4 million additional people in Myanmar would struggle to afford food in the next three to six months, particularly in urban areas.

Likewise, the public health and education systems have all but collapsed, as the vast majority of medical staff and teachers – most of them women – refuse to work for the regime. Schools, already closed for months due to COVID-19, have seen their planned reopening stall due to striking teachers and parents afraid for their children's safety. Many public hospitals and clinics are shuttered, and soldiers have converted others, in key city locations, into forward operating bases after evicting the patients. COVID-19 testing and treatment have virtually stopped and the vaccination program is far behind schedule. With regular childhood vaccinations in jeopardy and key imported pharmaceuticals in short supply, public health experts are worried that a decade of progress in improving basic health care and tackling infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria will now be lost.

Meanwhile, armed conflict is increasing in several of the country's ethnic areas. While full-scale conflict between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups has not yet erupted, clashes have escalated significantly since the coup. In some regions, such as Kachin and Kayin States, the situation is edging toward a resumption of all-out conflict, with the regime even resorting to airstrikes – including upon civilian targets. Several armed groups have put an end to existing ceasefires – some under

pressure from their own constituencies to oppose the coup. While some may choose not to, it is now clear that the formal peace process for a negotiated political solution to Myanmar's numerous ethnic conflicts is dead. Any hope of resolving the Rohingya crisis in the foreseeable future has also evaporated.

Another significant development is the formation of civil defence forces or militias by local communities, including in Sagaing and Magway Regions and Chin State. Armed with locally made hunting rifles as well as a small number of assault weapons and grenades, these groups are not capable of confronting experienced and well-armed army units, but they are able to use local knowledge of the terrain to harass and ambush soldiers, including in urban environments. Underground resistance groups are also carrying out improvised explosive device and arson attacks on regime targets and government administrative offices in Yangon, Mandalay and elsewhere, while hundreds of protesters have travelled from cities to non-government-controlled areas to receive military training from ethnic armed groups.

Growing conflict and insecurity in many parts of the country, coupled with a deepening economic and humanitarian crisis, may lead to significant population flows both internally and across the country's borders.

### *Responding to the Crisis*

With no sign of either an end to violence or a return to civilian rule, the EU and member states should take a number of steps to respond to the coup and its aftermath.

The first is to make urgent preparations to provide significant levels of support to ordinary people in order to address not only the looming humanitarian emergency but also longer-term needs related to the collapse of the health and education systems and the loss of livelihoods. The EU has already provided an extra €9 million for urgent humanitarian relief, but suspended its development assistance in March as a result of the coup. In order to deliver aid at scale while bypassing traditional mechanisms now under the junta's control, the EU and member states should explore working through NGO and civil society channels (while protecting them from being overwhelmed or put at risk), multi-donor funds and UN agencies if possible, and local government systems as appropriate. To ensure efficient delivery of such aid, the EU should advocate for the nomination of a senior UN envoy for relief and recovery planning, who could be appointed by the Secretary-General to bring coherence and coordination to UN agencies', donors' and implementing partners' responses to the crisis. With Myanmar's media under immense pressure, Brussels should also urgently fund independent media outlets, who play a vital role in getting reliable information to the population and the outside world.

Secondly, the EU should support global and regional diplomatic efforts to address the crisis. While the ongoing ASEAN-led process has significant limitations, it is the only diplomatic initiative under way and arguably the only platform for engaging both the regime and representatives of the elected civilian government. The EU should support it with the objective of making it more robust and effective, including by pushing for the speedy nomination of an ASEAN special envoy to help address the crisis and by pressing the junta to permit the envoy to travel to Myanmar as soon as possible. The EU should also back the convening of a contact group on Myanmar

comprising key regional and Western countries, an idea that has been quietly discussed and that could usefully complement the ASEAN process. Finally, the Union and its member states should continue to engage closely with the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (a group of parliamentarians elected in November 2020) and the National Unity Government that it has appointed, as well as other representatives of Myanmar's people, such as ethnic leaders (including Rohingya).

Thirdly, the EU should continue to develop its framework of restrictive measures. It should continue to expand targeted sanctions on the military and its business interests, members of the regime, its cabinet, senior police and military officers, and military-owned or -linked companies. It should, however, refrain from revoking Myanmar's access to the Everything But Arms trade scheme that gives developing country products tariff-free access to the single market, as the impact would fall on workers – mainly young women from poor families employed in the garment industry – and there are no indications that such a move would create leverage over the regime.

Finally, the EU should strictly enforce its arms embargo and make sure that it sufficiently covers dual-use items and technological tools of surveillance and repression. The EU and its member states should work to develop with other partner countries a coordinated list of prohibited items and share information on their efforts to block transfers of such items. This step would create a framework for like-minded countries to coordinate constraints on the military.

# Halting the Deepening Turmoil in Nigeria's North West

Nigeria's North West is sliding deeper into crisis. Criminal gangs, some of which started out as ethnic militias or vigilante groups, have proliferated in the region. These gangs are gaining in strength – adding recruits, arming themselves more heavily and carrying out far more audacious attacks on both civilian and military targets than they were a few years ago. The humanitarian and economic costs are enormous. As security deteriorates, jihadist groups linked to the Boko Haram insurgency that erupted in 2011 in north-eastern Nigeria are also expanding their reach into the North West. The crisis risks spilling over into neighbouring Niger.

Although Nigeria's government has repeatedly vowed to curb bloodshed, its military response has been inadequate. It has made little progress toward resolving the herder-farmer conflict that is at the root of the violence and little effort to alleviate deepening human misery in the region. It urgently needs to develop strategies that can contain armed groups and ease the humanitarian crisis in the North West, while expediting plans to promote peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers. Given the government's resource and capacity deficits, international partners can do much to help.

*The EU and its member states should assist the Nigerian government to:*

- ❑ Bolster its security presence in the North West by providing security forces with logistics and communications equipment, as well as reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering tools needed to locate gangs hiding in forests and prevent their attacks, while making such assistance subject to appropriate human rights vetting. The EU can also help the government tighten Nigeria's borders by offering training and equipment that would improve its security agencies' capacity to stem the influx of illicit firearms and foreign jihadists. It can further help the establishment and effective operations of the newly created National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons.
- ❑ Increase financial allocations to roll out immediate humanitarian aid to hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in the region and others affected by the mayhem, particularly women who have been widowed, sexually abused or who have lost their livelihoods.
- ❑ Support those initiatives and organisations working to foster local dialogues among herding and farming communities, as well as different ethnic and religious groups, and accelerate implementation of the National Livestock Transformation Plan, which aims to improve relations between herders and farmers by building ranches and rehabilitating grazing reserves in states that have endorsed the plan.

## *Rising Violence*

The causes of the North West's turmoil are [complex and inter-related](#). Environmental degradation caused by the twin pressures of climate change and rapid population growth has aggravated resource competition between herders and farmers. Disputes over land and water prompted both herders and farmers to form armed self-defence groups, fuelling a cycle of retaliatory violence that has taken on a communal dimension. The herders are predominantly ethnic Fulani, while the farmers are mainly Hausa or from other ethnic groups. In some areas, particularly in the southern part of Kaduna state, these tensions are compounded by long-running animosity among the predominantly Muslim Fulani and Hausa, and smaller, largely Christian groups.

The emergence of criminal gangs, whom the Nigerian government and mass media call "bandits", has aggravated an already precarious security situation. Some of these gangs started as herder-allied groups but now operate autonomously. Many are exclusively or predominantly Fulani, while others are ethnically diverse. Some have recruits from neighbouring Benin and Niger as well as countries as far away as Sudan. Most members are illiterate. Aided by the flow of illicit firearms and hard drugs across Nigeria's poorly secured borders, these gangs, often storming villages on hundreds of motorcycles, engage in a range of criminal activities, from cattle rustling and kidnapping for ransom to extortion, sexual assault and armed robbery of gold miners and traders. Most gangs have taken refuge in the region's vast woodlands – sometimes hidden in caves or mountainous terrain – including Kamuku forest in Kaduna state, Falgore forest in Kano state, Dansadau forest in Zamfara state and Davin Rugu forest, which straddles the states of Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara.

The gangs lack centralised leadership structures and are sometimes locked in bitter rivalries with one another. Some gang leaders claim they resorted to crime because successive federal or state governments neglected the welfare of the pastoralist Fulani or because security forces and vigilante groups formed by various communities abused them. Such claims may have merit in some cases, but in most they appear to be self-serving excuses for illicit profit seeking.

The gangs are continually evolving. Having originated in Zamfara state, they have since spread to all neighbouring states – Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Kebbi and Sokoto – and are growing in number and size. They are staging ever more mass abductions of students and other citizens in order to extract ransom payments from parents, families, communities or state governments, kidnapping over 700 school-children and killing six between December 2020 and April 2021. But gang violence is no longer limited to hit-and-run attacks. In April, Muhammad Awaisu Wana, chairman of Niger Concerned Citizens, a civil society group, reported that armed groups had taken control of ten of fifteen wards in the Shiroro local government area of Niger state. Similar reports from Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina indicate that the gangs have established a permanent presence in parts of these states.

Gangs are also scaling up their weaponry, acquiring general-purpose machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Sheikh Ahmed Gumi, a prominent Muslim cleric who met several gang leaders in January, said they planned to buy anti-aircraft missiles to repel the Nigerian military's aerial attacks. Gumi [said](#): "What is currently happening ... is insurgency and not banditry". In April, gunmen stormed

two military barracks in Niger state, killing at least seven soldiers; other assailants killed at least nine police officers in Kebbi state.

Rampant insecurity appears to be an opportunity for jihadists to extend their influence in the region by forging alliances with other armed groups. A spike in jihadist activity in the North West raises the prospect that the region could soon become a land bridge connecting Islamist rebels in the central Sahel with the decade-old insurgency in the Lake Chad region of north-eastern Nigeria. Security sources point to a resurgence of the long-dormant Boko Haram splinter group, Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Group of Partisans for Muslims in Black Africa), better known as Ansaru, which was active in north-western Nigeria between 2011 and 2014. Elements of other Boko Haram offshoots, notably the Islamic State in West Africa Province, are arriving in the area.

At the same time, a poorly secured international boundary enables the influx of arms and facilitates the movement of jihadists to and from the Sahel, where local Islamic State affiliates have been expanding their influence. Moreover, [as Crisis Group reported recently](#), organised banditry is spreading to neighbouring Niger's south-western border strip between the towns of Maradi and Dogondoutchi.

### *The Growing Humanitarian Crisis*

The violence is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the North West, which already has some of Nigeria's highest levels of displacement, poverty, malnutrition and disease. The civil society organisation Global Rights [reports](#) that 1,527 people were killed by criminal and other armed violence in the North West in 2020, higher than the number (1,508) reportedly killed by the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East. In Kaduna state, the government reports that in the first three months of 2021, armed groups killed 323 people (compared to 628 in all of 2020) and kidnapped 949 others. The UN estimates that 279,000 people were displaced in Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina by the end of 2020, and that almost 2.6 million people across the three states are facing food insecurity in 2021.

Poverty is rising across the region. Gangs deny farmers access to their fields unless they pay levies, often making it impossible for them to plant or harvest crops. In Katsina state, Governor Aminu Masari said farmers have abandoned over 50,000 hectares of land in 2020. Amid the surge of kidnappings, ransom demands have forced many families – and sometimes entire communities – to sell property and take on debt. Some rural communities have agreed to pay taxes to armed groups to avoid attacks, an arrangement that further impoverishes residents.

Women have been disproportionately affected. Hundreds have been killed in attacks on their villages in recent years. Thousands have been widowed, leading to an increase in the number of single-income households. The violence has forced thousands more to flee their homes, abandoning farms, livestock and trades, thus losing sources of income. As gangs destroy markets and loot shops and warehouses, they cut off access to credit for many small-scale female traders. Wealthier business owners have also slashed their trade volumes in order to avoid travelling to suppliers on the region's increasingly dangerous roads. Sexual violence is widespread. Having



lost their livelihoods, some women have resorted to street begging or sex work so as to survive.

Furthermore, the violence poses a serious threat to education in the North West and Nigeria more broadly. Since December 2020, authorities shut down hundreds of schools across seven states – Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara – until better security arrangements are in place or the risk of mass abductions lowers. The use of some schools' premises as displaced persons' camps is also disrupting learning. Lower enrolment and attendance, resulting from insecurity, could add to Nigeria's population of out-of-school children, already estimated at over 10 million and among the highest in the world.

Even more worryingly, the crisis is eroding the government's capacity to perform certain core functions. On 5 May, citing the insecurity in the North West, the federal House of Representatives asked the National Population Commission to postpone the 2021 census until the situation improves. General elections scheduled for February 2023 may also prove impossible to organise in parts of the North West.

### *The Faltering Response*

The Nigerian government lacks the personnel and resources to tackle the insecurity in the North West. Despite President Muhammadu Buhari's repeated pledges to crush the armed groups, as well as police and military operations that have killed hundreds of gang members since 2015, attacks continue. The faltering federal response is fuelling conspiracy theories that some government officials may be complicit in, or even profiting from, the violence.

Security forces are stretched woefully thin across the region. In Niger state, the governor [complained](#) that there are only 4,000 police to protect 24 million citizens (a dismal ratio of one police officer per 6,000 citizens). In March, the *emir* (Muslim traditional ruler) of Anka, in Zamfara state, [reported](#) that "we have less than 5,000 security men fighting over 30,000 bandits". The federal government, however, has undertaken no major recruitment campaigns for security personnel in several years.

A dearth of equipment further constrains security operations. In January, the Katsina state government secretary, Mustapha Inuwa, [recalled](#) an occasion where "about 292 army officers were brought for a particular operation with only four vehicles". Residents report that troops have sometimes fled combat against the gangs after running out of ammunition. The equipment deficit is only partly due to resource constraints. Inertia in Abuja is also at play. In January, the Niger state governor complained that, three months after his government had procured drones to track armed groups, they had still not been delivered due to delays in documentation, including the procurement of end user certificates, from federal authorities.

Peace deals between state governments and gang leaders have yielded few results. In mid-2019, the governors of Katsina, Sokoto, Niger and Zamfara states offered unconditional amnesties, rehabilitation and other incentives as a means of wooing the gangs to release hostages and disarm. These agreements led attacks to decline through the second half of the year. Disarmament stalled, however, for several reasons including possible bad faith by some actors, competition among groups and the failure of authorities to foster Hausa-Fulani reconciliation. Some armed groups that

were not involved in the talks turned against those that agreed to negotiate. Many criminal gangs, oblivious of the peace agreements or perceiving them as a sign of government weakness, simply carried on their violent activities. The Zamfara state governor [claims](#) that his peace efforts are working [despite continuing violence](#), but the others have since conceded defeat and [terminated negotiations](#).

The humanitarian response has been insufficient. The federal government has made little effort to provide internally displaced persons (IDP) with food, water, emergency shelters or sanitary facilities, and its Humanitarian Response Plan for 2021 makes no mention of the crisis in the North West. Meanwhile, there are few international agencies on the ground, although the International Organization for Migration is documenting some of the displacement and the need for aid.

### *A Role for the EU and Its Member States*

The Nigerian government needs considerable assistance in reversing the slide in the North West. On 23 March, the governors of three North West states – Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara – visited the EU delegation in Abuja, soliciting help. Together with its member states, the EU could render support in at least three areas.

A first priority is security support to the Nigerian government. The EU and its member states could assist Nigeria's security agencies with logistics and communication facilities to help protect rural dwellers and respond more effectively to early warnings and distress calls. As most armed groups are hiding in forests, the EU could provide the military with reconnaissance and intelligence-gathering equipment to help apprehend them, making all such assistance subject to appropriate human rights vetting. Furthermore, the EU and its member states can help the Nigerian government secure the country's borders by offering better training and equipment to strengthen customs and immigration agencies' capacity to stem the flow of illicit firearms and foreign jihadists, and also by helping the Department of State Services improve intelligence gathering around border communities and target networks bringing firearms into the region. They can also support the full establishment and operations of the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, created by the government on 3 May, as part of efforts to curb illicit firearms in the country and improve regional cooperation in arresting the transnational flow of firearms.

Secondly, the EU and its member states should help ease the humanitarian crisis. Beyond providing direct aid to the thousands of IDPs living in poorly run camps, they could help the Nigerian government survey the numerous displaced who have found refuge in cities and villages. Many victims of abduction, women and children especially, though released, remain at risk of exploitation, trafficking and gender-based violence. The EU and its member states could focus on the establishment and expansion of special community-based counselling and rehabilitation programs, providing women and children victims with physical and psycho-social support that could help reduce their vulnerability to such risks. The European Commission's announcement, on 11 May, that it would allocate €37 million for humanitarian relief to vulnerable populations in Nigeria in 2021 is a step in the right direction. In making distributions from this fund, the EU should consider the critical needs in the North West.

Thirdly, the EU and its member states should lend greater support to measures aimed at curbing herder-farmer tensions. In the short term, they should provide assistance to various initiatives by state governments, communities and civil society organisations promoting dialogue and peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers, and also among different ethnic and religious groups. Looking ahead, they should offer technical and financial support to state governments seeking to implement [the National Livestock Transformation Plan](#), which represents Nigeria's most comprehensive strategy yet to encourage pastoralists to switch to ranching and other sedentary livestock production systems. Modernising the livestock sector is key to resolving the herder-farmer conflict, which triggered the crisis in the North West in the first place – and now threatens Nigeria's political stability and food security.

# Enhancing Prospects for Peace in Ukraine

Relations between Russia and the European Union (EU) are frostier than ever. Reasons include disagreements old and new, with Europeans concerned about issues from Moscow's treatment of opposition activist Alexei Navalny and other dissidents, to its alleged meddling in their elections, to newly surfaced reports of Russian involvement in a 2014 explosion at a Czech munitions depot. Those reports formed the backdrop for a rash of diplomatic expulsions by Prague and other European capitals, on one hand, and Moscow on the other. But it is the continuing war between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian state forces in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region that remains the sorest point of friction.

Russia raised worries of a substantial escalation in Kyiv and among Ukraine's Western partners when it massed forces near Ukraine's borders in March and April. While these anxieties were largely assuaged when Russia started to pull back its forces in late April, the situation as a whole remains fraught. A ceasefire Kyiv and Moscow agreed to in July 2020 has broken down. Negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow are deadlocked. Neither side is taking steps prescribed by the 2014-2015 Minsk agreements that ended the worst of the fighting and were intended to bring peace. The Normandy Format peace process that includes France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine is largely dormant, with no new summit on the horizon. Absent changes, the coming year could bring new problems and new dangers of further outbreaks of violence. The EU, for all its difficulties with Moscow, can and should work with member states and allies to mitigate the risks and seek ways to break the impasse.

*To deter future threats to Ukraine and reduce tensions with Moscow, the EU and its member states should:*

- ❑ Forge consensus with the U.S. and UK about how they would respond to evidence of Russian threats to attack or actual attacks on Ukraine, focusing on what additional sanctions they would apply and under what circumstances. Options for increasing military pressure should be viewed cautiously, given that they could bring further risks of escalation.
- ❑ For purposes of deterrence, quietly communicate agreed-upon red lines and repercussions to the Kremlin, being careful not to rely on bluffs that Moscow would be likely to call.
- ❑ Encourage Kyiv, on one side, and Moscow and its proxies, on the other, to return to observing the July 2020 ceasefire as a prelude to renewed talks among the Normandy Format countries and the U.S.
- ❑ Work with the Biden administration to create incentives for breaking the long-running impasse in talks, including by delineating, and communicating, a clear plan for gradual, reversible sanctions relief for Russia in response to measurable progress.
- ❑ Develop and propose economic incentives to aid and support Kyiv's planning for Donbas's eventual reintegration, to include proposals for restoring social, economic and transport links between government-controlled and separatist-held Donbas.

### *Political Stalemates*

In December 2019, as French, German, Ukrainian and Russian leaders met in Paris to hold their first Normandy Format meeting to advance the Ukrainian peace process in three years, there seemed to be cause for hope. With a new Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who had averred his commitment to peace both on the campaign trail and upon taking office, the summit might have been a first step on a new path after years of stalemate and disappointment.

A year and a half later, those hopes are foundering. The conflict parties have taken only two of the seven joint steps promised in Paris: Kyiv and the Russian-backed leadership of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Donbas exchanged detainees in December 2019 and April 2020, and Kyiv and Moscow agreed to a ceasefire starting 27 July 2020. But other important steps – including, crucially, disengagement of forces from front lines, demining, particularly around key infrastructure facilities located on the line of separation between Ukrainian and separatist forces, and full access for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring mission – remain outstanding.

Moreover, even the slim progress made in 2019 and 2020 has begun to unravel. By March 2021, the ceasefire, the most successful of the many reached since the war began, had collapsed. As shelling and sniper fire resumed across the line of separation, a new crisis emerged. Russian troop build-ups near Ukraine in late March and early April sparked fears of a return to large-scale combat. The Kremlin said the soldiers were conducting routine training, but the deployment of paratroopers to Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, and establishment of a base camp at Voronezh (a few hours' drive from the Ukrainian border) were nonetheless unusual and, understandably, alarming for Kyiv and its Western allies. When Ukraine asked for help, European countries, the EU, U.S. and UK spoke supportively but took no overt action in response.

At the end of April, ten days after Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden discussed a possible summit in a call, Moscow announced that the troops had completed their training and would be coming home. The announcement helped assuage concerns (although leaving unclear what precisely Moscow's motives had been), but by then relations between Russia and the West were taking new twists and turns. In mid-April, the Czech Republic made public its findings of Russian involvement in a 2014 explosion at a Czech munitions depot and announced the expulsion of eighteen Russians affiliated with Moscow's mission in Prague. Further expulsions by both sides ensued, with other European countries also expelling dozens of Russian diplomats. At around the same time, Washington announced its own expulsions of Russian diplomats along with new sanctions in retaliation for Russia's alleged hack of U.S. government infrastructure through software provided by the SolarWinds company. In response, on 14 May, Russia said it deemed the Czech Republic and the U.S. "unfriendly" countries, curtailing the staff of their diplomatic missions. Then on 19 May, Washington imposed sanctions on a total of thirteen Russian vessels involved in laying the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will bypass traditional routes for which Russia pays lucrative gas transit fees to Ukraine and pump Russian gas directly to Germany.

Yet amid the rancour there are positive signs. Even as the new U.S. sanctions were announced, when Putin and Biden's top diplomats met in Iceland in prepara-

tion for their possible summit in June, they noted their differences but struck an optimistic tone. Moreover, the Kremlin and Kyiv were exchanging invitations for summits of their own: Zelenskyy invited his Russian counterpart to meet in Donbas and Putin countered with an invitation to Moscow – although only to discuss issues unrelated to the war. Ukraine and Russia confirmed in late May that preparations for a meeting between Putin and Zelenskyy were under way.

But for there to be any chance of progress toward resolving the Donbas conflict, itself necessary for improving relations between Moscow and the West, the parties will need to address certain core areas of disagreement relating to implementation of the Minsk agreements. Among the most contentious is a Minsk requirement that Kyiv grant local autonomy (“special status”) to the separatist-held areas and hold local elections there in exchange for Ukraine regaining control of its eastern border. Ukraine says it cannot run credible polls in these regions until it has reassumed territorial control, and indeed its parliament has prohibited elections without first regaining such control. Russia says Minsk is clear: elections and special status come first, control only afterward. Moving past this fundamental impasse will be hard, but in theory, a deal is possible. The parties might agree, for example, that the OSCE and UN will monitor the border and region as a whole while elections are held, in order to assuage Kyiv’s concerns about their integrity.

In practice, however, the longer the war continues, the more positions harden, and the more difficult concessions seem. Complicating things further, Moscow sees Donbas-related sanctions as part and parcel of a broader Western pressure campaign, with Ukraine only one component. Russia is particularly rankled by what it perceives as the EU’s interference in its domestic politics. Russian parliamentary elections scheduled for September are likely to be a source of friction alongside the dispute over Navalny, particularly if, as appears likely, the Kremlin escalates its crackdowns on independent media and opposition. European positions may also harden due to forthcoming polls in European countries – notably Germany in September – in which European leaders will likely fear Russian meddling given Moscow’s previous alleged interference. Broader tensions make it all the harder to find mutually acceptable ways forward on Donbas.

### *Recommendations for the EU and Its Member States*

Still, with Russia reversing its troop build-up and Washington interested in a June summit with Moscow, the EU and its member states may have an opportunity to work with the U.S. and UK to develop a joint deterrence strategy and revive the peace process.

Brussels, Washington and London should coordinate a common approach to deterrence in the face of future threats or aggression in Donbas. The first step would be to reach agreement on both red lines and consequences if Russia crosses them. For these purposes, sanctions, for all their limits, remain the primary non-military tool at the West’s disposal. Existing sanctions could be augmented through steps that would curtail lending to certain Russian enterprises, cut off Russian access to the SWIFT banking network or block Russian purchases of sovereign debt on the secondary market. Moscow is likely to be particularly concerned about the possibility

of U.S. secondary sanctions, through which the U.S. could block access to the U.S. financial system for third parties that engage in prohibited transactions. The secondary sanctions could have a negative impact on EU member states, however, and risk adding to transatlantic tensions over the cost to European companies of U.S. sanctions on Nord Stream 2. (On the latter front, in a nod to ties with Berlin, the Biden administration waived sanctions on the company behind the pipeline and its chief executive.) Brussels and Washington should reach as good an understanding as possible about when Europe would back U.S. sanctions of this nature.

As for whether military pressure could be useful for purposes of deterrence, the West's somewhat muffled response to the Russian troop build-up only reinforced awareness on all sides that neither the U.S. nor European countries want to get drawn into conflict in Ukraine. The Western powers should not make bluffs that Russia could well call. They should be extremely cautious about taking or threatening measures that would increase the likelihood of confrontation – such as putting Western advisers on the front line in Ukraine. While ramping up the provision of weapons to Kyiv might be less risky, doing so is not likely to yield the kind of battlefield advantage that would change Moscow's calculations.

Whatever combination of economic and other measures the EU, U.S. and UK agree upon, they should communicate clearly to Moscow what their red lines are and what the consequences will be for crossing them. Sending the message through quiet rather than public channels may give Moscow more political room to absorb it without reacting counterproductively. To maximise the usefulness of sanctions as leverage, the Western powers should not threaten measures that they would be unwilling or unable to rescind in the event that Russia reverses course.

As the EU and its partners are developing their approach to deterrence, they should also be focusing on easing tensions on the ground and encouraging dialogue. This means getting the parties back to the table, ideally for a near-term summit among the Normandy Four and possibly the U.S. Either before or at the summit, France and Germany could press for a suite of de-escalatory measures: for example, returning to the July 2020 ceasefire; broader and freer access for OSCE ceasefire monitors; a roadmap to restoring civilian freedom of movement across the line of separation; and broader military deconfliction and resumption of prisoner exchanges.

Ideally, over the course of the summit and ensuing negotiations, the EU, U.S. and UK would also present Moscow with incentives for charting a path out of the current standoff. They could, for example – as Crisis Group has argued before – offer the Kremlin a concrete plan to exchange the lifting of specific Minsk-related sanctions (eg, against banks and companies) for specific Russian military and political concessions in Donbas (eg, compromises on the Ukrainian border, disarmament of combatants or flexibility on special status). The proposal would make clear that should Russia or its proxies renege, the sanctions will be reimposed. There is some risk in this course of action: should Russia pocket the concessions and then backslide, Brussels may find it difficult to cobble back together the consensus required for the reimposition of sanctions. But if the U.S. and its European partners are not ready to use sanctions relief to motivate incremental progress by Moscow, the combination of high demands and inflexible tools offers little hope of breaking the deadlock.

Brussels should also work with Kyiv to encourage flexible thinking along the lines suggested above about how to work through the impasse over “special status” and begin planning for the near-term reintegration of Donetsk and Luhansk. The latter point is controversial: on one hand, Zelenskyy’s team has rallied to produce a roadmap for reintegration, but on the other, they appear to increasingly favour relegating the task to a distant and speculative future. If Brussels wants to help reverse this tide, it should keep up its promises of an EU economic support package to help rehabilitate the war-torn region, as well as offer plentiful guidance on overhauling Donbas’s fossil fuel-dependent economy. As further preparation for reintegration, Brussels should also maintain pressure on Kyiv to build an independent judiciary and adopt transitional justice legislation that encourages combatants to disarm and provides a framework for the fair trial of accused war criminals on both sides.



# Arresting Yemen's Freefall

In the spring 2020 EU Watch List, Crisis Group warned that the military, political and humanitarian situation in Yemen could go “from bad to worse”. That has happened: Yemen is in freefall. UN-led, U.S.-supported efforts to reach a nationwide ceasefire have borne no fruit. Nor have attempts to prevent a battle for Marib, the internationally recognised government's last bastion in the north. Huthi rebels appear poised to launch another offensive on the city in the coming weeks and months. If Marib falls, and even if it does not, fighting is also likely to intensify on other fronts. A Saudi-brokered deal between the government and southern secessionists hangs by a thread, even after the sides formed a power-sharing government in December 2020. A Huthi takeover of Marib would also likely precipitate a fresh wave of conflict in Yemen's south and west.

The humanitarian crisis continues to worsen amid huge aid shortfalls and a Yemeni government-imposed fuel embargo on Huthi-held territory. The UN has warned repeatedly that famine is imminent. Only the infusion of billions of dollars in aid has staved off mass starvation to date. But donors have pledged just half of the money the UN says it needs for 2021 amid a coronavirus-induced funding crunch. Fighting over Marib city could make aid agencies' work harder by triggering mass displacement and further limiting the supply of basic commodities. On top of everything, a year after COVID-19's spread in Yemen first drew global attention, the country is suffering its deadliest outbreak yet.

*The EU and its member states should:*

- ❑ Send more aid, escalating Yemen's status as a priority recipient of the EU's global response to COVID-19 through joint initiatives between Brussels and member states; increasing humanitarian funding under the new budget programming; and accelerating discussions about investment in medium-term projects – away from front lines – that foster local stability.
- ❑ Advocate for forming a UN-led international contact group to help coordinate the world's response to Yemen's disaster, including through more concerted diplomacy in support of a ceasefire and the peace process. Such a group should include the EU, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and representatives from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).
- ❑ Push the UN to shift its mediation efforts away from a two-party focus on the Huthis and the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi toward a more inclusive peace process that encompasses other political and armed factions as well as women's and youth groups and other civil society actors.
- ❑ Working within EU COVID-19 protocols, increase diplomatic outreach to the Huthis in Sanaa, the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council in Aden.

### *Marib Offensive and UN Mediation*

Since early 2020, Huthi fighters have focused on taking Marib governorate, in particular the eponymous city, along with nearby oil, gas and electricity production facilities. The Huthi campaign has been intermittent, and the rebels have at times struggled to advance. Saudi Arabia, which is allied with the internationally recognised government led by Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, has mounted a fierce aerial defence. Thousands of Huthi and anti-Huthi fighters have been killed and injured over the course of the year. Yet the Huthis have shrugged off their losses. A clear trend has emerged on the ground: gradual if uneven Huthi progress, coupled with growing unease and falling morale among forces aligned with the Hadi government. Absent a major shift in the balance of power, the Huthis appear set to take more territory and gain greater leverage in talks with local leaders as they seek to negotiate the governorate's surrender.

Fearing a growing humanitarian and displacement crisis amid a major coronavirus outbreak, and aware that a Huthi takeover of Marib would have a knock-on effect on dynamics elsewhere in Yemen, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths has sought since early 2020 to broker a nationwide ceasefire. In 2020, the Huthis told Griffiths they would agree to a truce if the Saudi-led coalition and Hadi government lifted all restrictions on Hodeida port on Yemen's Red Sea coast and allowed the Sanaa airport to reopen to international flights after four years of Saudi-imposed closure. For much of the year, the government and the Saudis argued that the Huthi proposal gave the rebels too much and quibbled over the fine print in draft agreements.

The parties failed to reach an accord, and now the landscape has shifted. In early 2021, after making a series of rapid military gains, the rebels shifted the goalposts, insisting that the government and Saudis unblock the port and airport unilaterally before they would consider a truce. They also backed away from the prospect of a nationwide ceasefire, saying they would first consider a cross-border ceasefire under which they would stop drone and missile strikes on Saudi Arabia in return for a moratorium on Saudi airstrikes in Yemen, including Marib. Riyadh and the Hadi government deemed the Huthi position a non-starter. In turn, the Huthis rejected a public Saudi offer made in March to ease restrictions on Sanaa airport and resume negotiations over Hodeida in return for a nationwide ceasefire and a mutual halt to cross-border attacks.

### *Fresh U.S. Energy*

The recent change in leadership in Washington has injected fresh energy into international efforts to stop the fighting, with President Joe Biden making ending the Yemen war a top Middle East policy priority along with returning to the Iran nuclear deal. In February, Biden announced that he was halting all offensive support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen. He also said the administration would cease some arms sales, remove the Huthis' designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) and appoint a new U.S. special envoy for Yemen – a role now filled by veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderking. Lenderking has been highly active since his appointment, travelling regularly to the Gulf (but not yet Yemen), and pushing the Huthis and Saudis to agree to a truce.

Washington wishes to engineer a conflict outcome acceptable to both itself and Riyadh. Yet its ability to do so is limited, as the Huthis hold the upper hand. By publicly prioritising ending the Yemen war, the administration may also have given the Huthis, and their main external supporter Iran, the sense that the conflict represents a more valuable bargaining chip than in the past. Washington's frustration with the Huthis is palpable, and U.S. officials appear to be increasingly convinced that they cannot persuade the rebels to abandon their quest for victory in Marib.

### *Humanitarian Meltdown*

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has placed greater limits on aid agencies' ability to work in Yemen, and on donors' generosity toward a country the UN says is already the site of the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Yemen continues to sit at the brink of famine. Donors pledged \$1.7 billion to fund the UN's humanitarian appeal in March, less than half the figure the UN had asked for, leaving a \$2 billion gap in the UN's budget for the year. The UN humanitarian chief, Mark Lowcock, warned that as a result the UN "doesn't have enough money to stop famine".

A battle for Marib would make the humanitarian crisis still graver and more complex. Local government officials claim that two million people have moved to Marib since the war began six years ago, many of them with sufficient resources to settle and live without aid assistance, while UN estimates of poorer, formally displaced people living in temporary settlements hover around 700,000. In the event that fighting reaches Marib city, the UN believes that around 350,000 people will be displaced, seeking to travel either eastward to Seiyoun, a six-hour drive under normal circumstances, or southward to Shebwa. Both routes are likely to be dangerous, and fighting could cut off the Shebwa road entirely. The UN says it has contingency plans for a battle, but the response will put further strain on its already limited aid budget.

### *A Way Forward*

With chances of a diplomatic breakthrough slim, Yemen's trajectory in the coming months will largely be determined by developments in Marib. If the Huthis take Marib city, or negotiate its surrender, the government will lose its last major stronghold in the north; it may then face an attempted takeover by the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in southern governorates as well. A Huthi victory in Marib could also precipitate intra-Yemeni deal-making, most likely between the Huthis and one or more rival factions, potentially including the STC, at the expense of the Hadi government. Moreover, the STC and other groups are likely to press for a direct role in UN-led talks, rather than the indirect one they are afforded as part of the Saudi-brokered 2019 Riyadh Agreement. Even if the Huthis and government can reach a ceasefire in Marib, many local conflict parties remain sceptical it will last, or that it is in their interest to comply with its terms if they are not given a say in subsequent UN-led political talks.

For these reasons, whatever happens next in Marib, it is increasingly clear that the international approach to Yemen needs to be rethought. The UN's current two-party mediation framework that focuses narrowly on the Huthis and the Hadi gov-

ernment (with Saudi Arabia active behind the scenes and wielding a de facto veto over any settlement) excludes many of the armed and political factions likely to influence the durability of a ceasefire or political settlement. It also boxes out political parties, civil society actors, women's groups and youth organisations that have been crucial throughout the war to preserving local stability and social cohesion and whose buy-in and support will thus be important in sustaining any pact.

With EU support, Washington should advocate for an approach to peacemaking that takes into account the conflict's deepening complexity and creates space for this range of actors. The EU and Special Envoy Lenderking should press for the creation of a UN-chaired international contact group, which can revisit the UN mediation framework and encourage adoption of a new multi-party approach that better reflects the emerging reality on the ground. Such a body could establish a division of labour among its members to support the peace process, with sub-groups focusing on key topics such as sub-national conflicts (like the one between the government and STC), economic warfare and outreach to the Huthis in Sanaa, which has been constrained by COVID-19, with no senior diplomat visiting since early 2020.

### *A Role for the EU and Its Member States*

The EU and its member states should bolster UN-led efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. They should also help coordinate the international diplomatic response to the war.

The EU's inclusion in an international contact group would allow EU representatives to act as a force multiplier, positioning them to solicit funds and diplomatic capacity from member states for issues the group determines to be priorities. The EU and member states can also, along with P5 members and others, push for contact group members to start making regular diplomatic trips to Sanaa, Aden and perhaps Marib to ensure better contact with the Huthis, the Hadi government and other relevant groups in Yemen, providing them with a clearer picture of international thinking about the conflict. The EU and its member states can also play an important role in advocating within the contact group for a more inclusive political process, and share their practical experience in brokering local truces, reopening roads and freeing prisoners.

Whether or not as part of any contact group, to help make the peace process properly inclusive, the EU and its member states should throw their weight behind efforts to press the UN Security Council to adopt a broader interpretation of Resolution 2216 (prevalent interpretations of which have unhelpfully limited UN mediation to two-party negotiations to end the fighting) so that the UN can introduce a quota for women and other civil society figures in direct talks. The EU should also work with the UN to establish a parallel mediation track with women's and civil society organisations, that at a minimum enjoys a direct channel of communication with UN deliberations, and ideally leads to a substantive role in the negotiation of a political settlement for those involved. The EU already funds work for women's inclusion; it should increase its support for and engagement with groups on the ground.

The EU and member states should also begin active discussions about how to increase humanitarian funding for Yemen in light of COVID-19's continued spread,

the troubling socio-economic indicators and the huge deficit facing UN aid agencies in 2021. The EU should make it an even greater priority to allocate extraordinary humanitarian funds in response to the virus and increase its development assistance through joint programming with member states under the new EU multi-annual budget. Finally, whether or not the war continues, the EU and member states should start making medium-term plans to help improve conditions – potentially entailing local infrastructure development, capacity-building support for local government and civil society organisations, small business loans and similar efforts in areas away from the front lines that are starved of basic services and governance. Such projects could help foster at least a modicum of stability away from the fighting and may prevent the further deterioration of local institutions.