



EARLY WARNING PROJECT

STATE OF THE WORLD MASS KILLING IN 2021

UNITED STATES
MEMORIAL
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SIMON-SKJODT CENTER
FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

The Early Warning Project uses patterns from past instances of mass killing to forecast when and where new mass killing episodes are most likely to happen in the future. Each year we update [our list](#) of countries experiencing state- and nonstate-led mass killing. The following report compiles our determinations for new and ongoing mass killings in 2021.

For the first time since 2016, two new mass killing episodes began in 2021, according to the latest review by the Early Warning Project. There is a historically high number of ongoing mass killings: 21 separate episodes as of the end of 2021, perpetrated by nine states and nine nonstate groups, in 14 countries.

How we determine when mass killings begin and end

We consider a mass killing to have occurred when the deliberate actions of armed groups—including but not limited to state security forces, rebel armies, and other militias—result in the deaths of at least 1,000 non-combatant civilians who are targeted as part of a specific group, over a period of one year or less. We determine a mass killing to have ended when fewer than 100 civilians of the targeted group are killed for three consecutive years.

To determine onsets and terminations, we draw on any publicly available datasets, reports of international organizations, governments, and NGOs (e.g., United Nations [UN], US government, Human Rights Watch, International Crisis Group), and media reports. We also sometimes call on experts to assist in our determinations when the data are inconclusive. When in doubt, we presume that the status quo persists—i.e., no new mass killing has begun, or, in ongoing episodes, the mass killing continues.

Mass killings include, but are not limited to, policies that intentionally kill civilians en masse (e.g., military strategies that intentionally target civilians, mass execution of a specific group) and policies that knowingly result in widespread death (e.g., mass starvation, confiscation of health care supplies, forced relocation). In general, unrelated executions

of individuals or the accidental killing of civilians in war (“collateral damage”) will not be considered a mass killing. If an armed group is engaged in multiple campaigns that systematically kill civilians (e.g., in different geographic areas, or targeted against separate civilian groups), those fatalities will be counted toward separate potential onsets.

Onset of State-Led Mass Killing: Burma/Myanmar

The Early Warning Project marked an onset of state-led mass killing of non-combatant civilians suspected of opposing the military junta in Burma/Myanmar in 2021. Since our project distinguishes between multiple mass killings in one country if the perpetrator and/or victim group are different, this episode marks the third ongoing mass killing in Burma/Myanmar. In addition to this newest onset, we also judge that the state-led mass killing against the Rohingya beginning in 2016 and the decades-long episode of state-led mass killing in the country’s east—against minority ethnic groups, including the Karen, Kachin, Ta’ang, Mon, Lisu, and Shan—continue. According to our records, Burma/Myanmar is the first country to experience three mass killings simultaneously.

This latest mass killing began shortly after the Tatmadaw—the country’s ruling military junta—[seized power](#) on February 1, 2021. Following the coup, civilians began protesting peacefully, to which the Tatmadaw responded with [excessive force](#). Since then, demonstrations have continued and the conflict landscape has become increasingly complex, with old and new conflicts overlapping. While trying to suppress civilian protesters, the Tatmadaw is also currently fighting hundreds of ethnic armed organizations—many of whom it has been fighting for decades—and resistance forces around the country.

The Tatmadaw, which has a [history](#) of violently repressing democratic uprisings, has used excessive and lethal force against protesters, including but not limited to using [rifle grenades on protestors](#), [driving an army vehicle into a crowd of protestors](#), [nighttime raids and arbitrary arrests](#), and [extrajudicial](#)

[executions](#). In many regions around the country, it has resorted to its “hallmark” tactics—massacres and scorched-earth tactics—[destroying entire villages](#) thought to support or harbor the opposition. These same tactics were used against the Rohingya ethnic minority in 2017.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that state security forces and their affiliates had killed over [1,500 individuals](#) in Burma/Myanmar in the first year since seizing power in February 2021. The report states that this total number of fatalities “is above and beyond the number of civilian deaths resulting from pre-existing armed conflicts,” thus supporting the determination that this mass killing is distinct from the other ongoing mass killing events in Burma/Myanmar. Other credible sources, such as the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#), have also reported that in 2021 alone, over 1,000 “civilians and pro-democracy activists” have been killed. [According](#) to OHCHR, the Tatmadaw “conducted widespread and systematic attacks against civilians in patterns of conduct that may amount to crimes against humanity.” Human-rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch have also [echoed](#) this statement. In addition, a report published by Fortify Rights in 2022 provides extensive [evidence](#) that the attacks against protesters during the first six months of the conflict (a period in which the military killed over 900 civilians) constitute crimes against humanity.

In addition to monitoring the activities of the Tatmadaw, we will continue to closely monitor the activities of nonstate actors (e.g., People’s Defense Forces, various ethnic armed groups) and killings they may commit.

Onset of State-Led Mass Killing: Ethiopia

The Early Warning Project marked a new onset of state-led mass killing of Tigrayan civilians in Ethiopia. This is in addition to an [ongoing state-led mass killing](#) in Ethiopia that began in 2015 against perceived state opposition in the Oromia region. Since fighting erupted in Tigray in November 2020, as many as [465,000](#) people are estimated to have been killed in the conflict or died as a result of the man-made famine in Tigray, and more than two

million have been displaced. The government and its allies have targeted Tigrayan civilians across the country.

The origins of the current conflict trace back to September 2020, when the TPLF held regional elections in defiance of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s postponement of national elections. The federal government, asserting that these local elections were illegal, suspended funding to the Tigray region. In response, Tigrayan forces attacked a federal military base. The government perceived this as a declaration of war, and on November 4, 2020, sent its army into Tigray. Since then, the Ethiopian government has tightly [limited access to the region](#), especially to journalists and humanitarian organizations. Government-enforced communication blackouts and blockades have made reporting on the conflict extremely difficult.

Despite restrictions on information and access, substantial evidence exists regarding large-scale killings and other civilian atrocities. According to the UN, the conflict has been characterized by “[extreme brutality](#)” with mounting reports of [sexual and gender-based violence](#), [extrajudicial killings](#), [looting of public and private property](#), [indiscriminate shelling](#), and [large-scale forced displacement](#). In a March 2021 public statement, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [referred](#) to the human rights abuses in Tigray as including “acts of ethnic cleansing” and cited the need for an independent investigation and the removal of Eritrean forces.

The state-led mass killing, in this case, includes atrocities committed by Eritrean government forces, as well as Ethiopian government forces. While we normally exclude killings by foreign armed groups, sufficient evidence exists that Eritrean forces acted at the invitation of and in close coordination with the Ethiopian government. After denying Eritrea’s involvement for months, in March 2021, Prime Minister Abiy [publicly acknowledged](#) the presence of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia. Accumulating evidence suggests that Prime Minister Abiy invited Eritrean forces and that the two states worked together in a [coordinated effort](#) to target mutual enemies in Tigray. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have [documented](#) severe human rights abuses by Eritrean forces, including

What about Ukraine?

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a military assault against Ukraine that has included large-scale [attacks against civilians](#). Why is Russia's killing of Ukrainian civilians not on the list of new mass killings?

First, this report only assesses mass killings that took place through the end of 2021. The current conflict in Ukraine began in February 2022. Second, as we explained in a [2015 blog post](#), our project's definition of mass killing excludes situations in which one country's armed forces attack civilians in another country's territory (i.e., interstate conflicts, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine). The only exceptions to this rule are situations where we can document substantial and close operational coordination between the foreign military and the state government in killing operations. This decision does not involve a value judgment about the moral or practical significance of atrocities perpetrated during wars between states, foreign occupations, and other international military operations, only a pragmatic judgment about what we are able to forecast reliably.

the [massacre in the city of Axum](#), in which hundreds of civilians were killed in a large-scale offensive by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Between November 2020 and November 2021, Ethiopian forces and Eritrean forces together were responsible for [killing a combined 2,696 civilians](#) in Tigray (this figure only includes cases of "fully documented civilian casualties"—total fatalities by these groups are expected to be much higher). As mentioned, we consider a mass killing to have occurred when the deliberate actions of armed groups result in the deaths of at least 1,000 non-combatant civilians who are targeted as part of a specific group, over a period of one year or less. In addition, we backdate mass killing onsets to the first year when more than 100 civilians were killed in the campaign; thus we mark the start of the episode in Tigray in 2020 based on [UN reporting](#) suggesting that the total was at least in the hundreds that year.

It should be noted that considerable violence against civilians has been committed at the hands of nonstate actors, most notably, Amhara militia and Tigrayan forces. The Amhara militias (e.g., Fano, Amhara Special Forces) face serious accusations of [atrocious crimes](#) against civilians in Tigray. On the opposing side of the conflict, Tigrayan forces have also been accused of committing numerous war crimes, such as "[gang rape, looting and physical assaults](#)", [extrajudicial executions](#), and [other atrocities](#).

In addition to the conflict in Tigray, recent violence in Ethiopia's Oromia region warrants attention. In June 2022, [armed men brutally killed hundreds](#) of—

primarily ethnic Amhara—people. The Early Warning Project will continue to review information and reports from conflicts across Ethiopia.

Ended Nonstate-Led Mass Killing: Afghanistan

This year, we determined the ongoing episode of nonstate-led mass killing in Afghanistan had ended. This mass killing episode began in 2001 and was perpetrated by the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other associated nonstate armed groups. In August 2021, the Taliban [regained control](#) of Afghanistan following almost 20 years of conflict with the government of Afghanistan and the US-led military coalition. The Taliban is no longer a nonstate actor vying for power, but instead is the governing party of Afghanistan. While we normally consider a mass killing to have ended when fewer than 100 civilians of the targeted group are killed for three consecutive years, when the perpetrator of a non-state-led mass killing takes over the government, we consider the non-state-led episode to have ended. If the same group commits mass killing while in control of the government, we would consider it a new state-led mass killing.

We are actively tracking whether the Taliban might be responsible for a new state-led mass killing or whether a non-state group, such as the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), might be responsible for a new non-state-led mass killing. Despite pledging their rule would be more peaceful and progressive, since assuming control, the Taliban

has [releged on allowing girls and women to attend school](#), [forcibly evicted ethnic minorities](#) from certain areas, and continued [executions of those who oppose them](#). In addition, nonstate actors—al-Qaeda and ISIS-K—pose a [significant threat](#) to civilians. [Recent attacks](#) by ISIS-K in 2022 increase atrocity risks, particularly for ethnic and religious minorities (specifically Hazaras), who have faced recent and historic targeting by [the Taliban](#) and [ISIS-K](#). We will continue to closely monitor the activities of the Taliban as a state actor as well as nonstate actors in Afghanistan.

Ongoing State-Led Mass Killings

The following countries were experiencing ongoing episodes of state-led mass killing as of the end of 2021. More details on all ongoing mass killings can be found on [our website](#). As noted in the definition, mass killings are ongoing as long as there are at least 100 civilians killed per year as part of the episode. The names of the targeted communities and year of onset are in parentheses:

- Burma/Myanmar (protesters and civilians opposing Tatmadaw rule, 2021; Rohingya, 2016; ethnic minority groups: Kachin, Lisu, Shan, 1948)
- Ethiopia (Tigrayans, 2020; Oromo, 2015)
- Iraq (Sunnis, 2014)
- Nigeria (suspected supporters of Boko Haram, 2009)
- North Korea (suspected political opponents, 1948)
- Philippines (civilians accused of using or selling drugs, 2016)
- South Sudan (suspected rebel supporters/co-ethnics, 2013)
- Sudan (ethnic groups in Darfur, 2003)
- Syria (suspected Assad opposition supporters, 2011)

Ongoing Nonstate-Led Mass Killings

The Early Warning Project identified nine ongoing episodes of nonstate-led mass killing as of the end of 2021. The affected countries, with the perpetrator group and date of onset in parentheses, are the following:

- Central African Republic (various armed groups, including anti-Balaka, 2013)
- Democratic Republic of the Congo (various militias in the northeast, 1998)
- India (Maoist rebels, 2004)
- Iraq (Islamic State, 2003)
- Nigeria (Boko Haram, 2010)
- Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan and associated militias, 2001)
- Somalia (Al Shabaab and associated militias, 2007)
- South Sudan (Machar supporters, SPLM in Opposition, Nuer ethnic militias, and others, 2013)
- Syria (Islamic State and associated militias, 2012)

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The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.



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