



EARLY WARNING PROJECT

MASS KILLING ONSETS AND ENDINGS THROUGH 2023

UNITED STATES
MEMORIAL
**HOLOCAUST
MUSEUM**

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. We define “mass killing” as episodes when 1,000 or more civilians within a country die as a result of deliberate actions by an armed group in the same country, over a period of a year or less, because of their membership in a particular group.

Each year we update [our list](#) of countries experiencing state- and nonstate-led mass

killing. The purpose of tracking onsets and terminations is to inform our annual [Statistical Risk Assessment](#), which aims to help identify countries where preventive actions may be needed. Because our data and methods focus on mass killing within countries, other types of mass atrocities—e.g., civilian killings in international conflicts, widespread and systematic attacks other than killings—are outside the scope of our data and risk assessment. (See our [annual report](#) for more details). The following report compiles our determinations for new and ongoing mass killings as of the end of 2023.

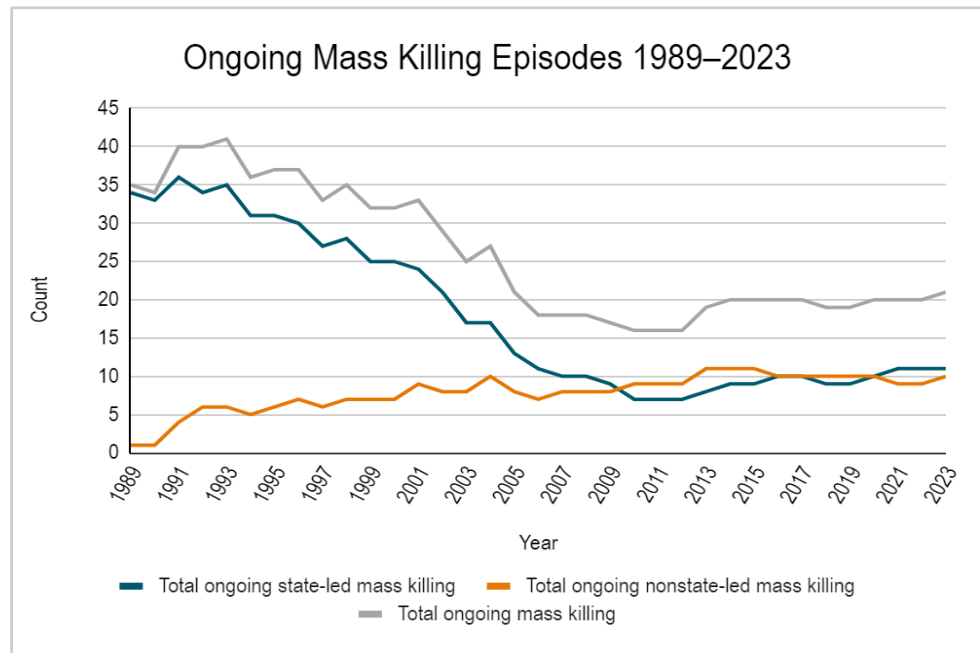
Based on our latest review, we coded two new mass killing episodes as of the end of 2023. The number of ongoing mass killings ticked up to 21, the greatest in twenty years. The 21 separate episodes as of the end of 2023 were perpetrated by eight states and 10 nonstate groups in 14 countries.

How we determine when mass killings begin and end

As noted above, we consider a mass killing to have occurred when the deliberate actions of a specific armed group within a country—including but not limited to state security forces, rebel armies, and other militias—result in the deaths of at least 1,000 noncombatant civilians targeted as part of a specific group (in the same country), 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 publicly available datasets, reports of international organizations, governments, and NGOs, 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.

New Onset of Nonstate-led Mass Killing: Darfur, Sudan

The Early Warning Project marked an onset of nonstate-led mass killing of non-Arab civilians in Darfur, Sudan by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Since our project distinguishes between multiple mass killings in one country if the perpetrator and/or victim group are different, this episode marks a second ongoing mass killing in Sudan. In addition to this latest onset, we also judge that the state-led mass killing beginning in 2003 against ethnic groups including the Fur, Zaghawa, Masalit, and other non-Arab peoples in Darfur to be ongoing.

This latest mass killing began on April 15, 2023, when [war broke out](#) between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF, a militia group with ties to the Janjaweed, which [targeted civilians in Darfur two decades ago](#). The conflict currently shows [no signs of abating](#). Both the SAF and the RSF [are accused](#) of committing atrocity crimes against civilians. Nearly [18,760](#) people have been killed since the start of the conflict. In addition to the casualties of violence, more than half of the population ([around 26 million people](#)) are facing [“crisis levels”](#) of hunger.

Until April 2023, the RSF operated with support from the Sudanese state. However, with the recent outbreak of war between these two actors, we now consider killings by the RSF as counting towards a nonstate-led mass killing. The latest violence in Darfur represents a new instance of nonstate-led mass killing, distinct from the ongoing state-led mass killing.¹

In the Darfur region, the RSF and allied militias have [deliberately attacked](#) non-Arab civilians. The UN reported that between May and November 2023, the RSF and allies carried out at least [10 attacks against civilians in El-Geneina](#), the capital of West Darfur, almost all targeting the Masalit ethnic community. In early November 2023, the RSF carried out one of the largest attacks in the conflict, [killing around 1,300 people](#) in an Ardamata camp for displaced persons. In addition to mass killing, there are reports of widespread [rape and sexual violence](#), systemic looting, burning down neighborhoods, and the use of torture by the RSF. The UN, as well as several prominent human rights organizations, have classified many of RSF’s attacks as deliberate, ethnically targeted violence.

In January 2024, the Museum published a [report](#) indicating that ethnically targeted violence was occurring and that the risk of genocide remains high in Darfur. And in May 2024, the Museum [warned](#) about the imminent risk of genocide in North Darfur. We continue to monitor the conflict closely.

¹ The RSF has always been the primary perpetrator of the ongoing state-led mass killing that began in 2003 in Darfur. However, prior to 2023, the Sudanese army supported the RSF’s activities to various degrees. The lack of transparent reporting about the Sudanese army’s involvement in the killings of civilians in Darfur in 2023 and the onset of civil war have made it challenging to assess the state’s role in civilian fatalities. For these reasons, we have chosen to keep the state-led mass killing as ongoing for the time being.

What about cross-border mass killing?

The Early Warning Project's definition of mass killing excludes situations in which an armed group (state or nonstate) residing in one country attacks civilians in another country's territory. The only exceptions to this rule are situations where we can document substantial and close coordination in killing operations between the foreign armed group and the government of the state where the targeted civilian group resides.

This means our definition of mass killing does not include Russian forces' deliberate targeting of civilians in Ukraine, civilian killings in Yemen perpetrated by the Saudi-led coalition, or civilian killings in the war between Israel and Hamas.

The decision to exclude cross-border mass killings does not involve a value judgment about the moral or practical significance of atrocities perpetrated during wars between states, international terrorism, or other international military operations, only a pragmatic judgment about what we are able to forecast more reliably.

New Onset of Nonstate-led Mass Killing: Burkina Faso

The Early Warning Project marked a new onset of nonstate-led mass killing of civilians perceived to support the government in Burkina Faso by militant Islamist groups, primarily the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM).

In recent years, Burkina Faso has experienced [growing instability and violence](#), including high levels of extremist violence perpetrated by nonstate armed groups near the border with Mali. Violence has escalated severely in the wake of [two successive coups](#) by military officers in January and September of 2022. The coups have contributed to worsening security in the country and have "[diverted precious resources, attention, and personnel from the frontlines](#)." Additionally, the announcement of state-led [recruiting initiatives](#) for the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (or Les Volontaires pour la défense de la Patrie, VDP), a self-defense militia. Since the beginning of 2022, the number of people killed by militant Islamist violence has [nearly tripled](#). In 2023, Burkina Faso experienced [67 percent of all militant Islamist-related fatalities](#) in the Sahel, more than double the number of deaths recorded in 2022.

According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) [data](#), over 1,200 civilians were killed in 2023 by militant Islamist groups. Militant Islamist groups have [systematically attacked civilians](#), particularly in villages where VDPs have been recruited. The apparent motive of these attacks is to exert pressure on the local communities seen as hostile to the militant Islamist groups, to dissuade them from collaborating with the armed forces, and to expand these militant's' sphere of influence. JNIM (the most active group in the country) has [openly claimed](#) the strategy of abducting and killing those connected to the VDPs (e.g., relations, involvement in recruitment). Militant Islamist groups have also barricaded towns, cutting off civilian access to daily necessities and placing populations [at risk of famine](#), as well as abducting women and girls in besieged areas.

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;² thus we mark the start of the episode in Burkina Faso in 2019 based on [reports](#) suggesting that the total was at least in the hundreds that year.

² We backdate the start of a mass killing to when 100 or more civilians were first killed in the campaign, so as to help train our statistical model to detect when the risks are present, but fatalities are not yet high.

It should be noted that the state armed forces also appear to have [killed hundreds of civilians](#) in 2023. For example, members of the army allegedly targeted civilians in [Karma village](#), killing at least 147 people in April 2023. The government also expanded the recruitment of volunteer forces, which the International Crisis Group [warns](#) is putting civilians at greater risk. Violence by both state forces and militant Islamist groups has only increased in 2024.

Ended Nonstate-led Mass Killing: India

This year, we determined the ongoing episode of nonstate-led mass killing in India had ended. This episode of mass killing, beginning in 2004, was perpetrated by Naxalite-Maoist rebels against civilians accused of collaborating with the government. According to our definition, mass killings end when fewer than 100 civilians of the targeted group are killed for at least three consecutive years. We trace the end of this mass killing episode to 2019.

Maoist rebels have been at war with the Government of India since 2004 in an effort to overthrow the government and establish communist rule. Naxal-Maoist rebels [committed violence against civilians](#), including killing alleged police informers, violent attacks on members of opposing political parties, and abductions.

Over the past decade, instances of Maoist rebel violence in India have consistently decreased, with reports by Indian government officials indicating that Maoist-related fatalities declined [by 82%](#) between 2010 and 2020. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), fatalities have been [falling sharply](#) on a year-to-year basis since 2018. Efforts by security forces to combat insurgents, the nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19, and government development projects (e.g., road infrastructure, mobile connectivity, service delivery) that have increased the state's presence in the region, are speculated to have contributed to the [decline of Maoist influence](#). According to data from [SATP](#) and ACLED, 2019 was the first year to see fewer than 100 civilians killed by Maoist rebels.

While levels of violence have fallen significantly, [clashes between security forces and Maoist rebels continue](#), as do civilian deaths caused by these conflicts (albeit at a lower level). We will continue to monitor the situation.

Ongoing State-Led Mass Killings

The following countries were experiencing ongoing episodes of state-led mass killing as of the end of 2023. More details on all ongoing mass killings can be found on [our website](#). As noted in the definition, mass killings are considered ongoing until we record three consecutive years in which fewer than 100 civilians were killed as part of the episode. The names of the targeted communities and year of onset are in parentheses:

- Burma/Myanmar (civilians suspected of opposing Tatmadaw rule, 2021; Rohingya, 2016; ethnic minority groups—including the Karen, Kachin, Ta'ang, Mon, Lisu, and Shan—in the country's east, 1948)
- Ethiopia (Tigrayans, 2020; Oromo, 2015)
- 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—including the Fur, Zaghawa, Masalit, and other non-Arab peoples—in Darfur, 2003).
- Syria (civilians suspected of opposing al-Assad's rule, 2011)

Ongoing Nonstate-Led Mass Killings

The Early Warning Project identified 10 ongoing episodes of nonstate-led mass killing as of the end of 2023. The affected countries, with the perpetrator group and date of onset in parentheses, are the following:

- Burkina Faso (Militant Islamist groups, 2019)
- Central African Republic (various armed groups, including anti-Balaka, 2013)
- Democratic Republic of the Congo (various militias in the northeast, 1998)
- Iraq (Islamic State and associated militias, 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, including SPLM in Opposition, Nuer ethnic militias, and others, 2013)
- Sudan (the Rapid Support Forces and allied militias, 2023)
- 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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