Global Risk Bulletin

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World News in Brief

Guatemala

Protesters in Guatemala continue to call for an end to government corruption and the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina. Former Vice President Roxana Baldetti, who resigned in May 2015, was recently arrested on corruption charges relating to a multi-million dollar corruption scheme involving the country’s customs and import agency. The agreement was made in 2005 to fight against corruption, but was later abandoned by the government. Investigators continue to examine the allegations against Baldetti, any evidence linking President Pérez Molina to the scheme has not been passed by parliament. As protests continue, the opposition is calling for the government to resign and hold presidential elections by the end of 2015.

Ecuador

In August 2015, nationwide protests against President Rafael Correa’s administration intensified. Thousands of indigenous and opposition protesters, as well as trade unions, carried out anti-government rallies in Quito and Guayaquil. In Quito, 36 policemen and an unconfirmed number of protestors were injured in one protest. President Correa has come under increasing pressure for his failure to deliver social development programmes to poor indigenous communities across the country. Protesters have also condemned President Correa’s reliance on oil exports.

West Africa

Military representatives from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria met in N’Djamena, Chad, between 21 and 22 August to finalise the deployment of the revamped Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) aimed at combing Boko Haram. Although the MNJTF was deployed in early 2015, and did not initially involve Nigeria, on 29 July, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari confirmed that a new, enhanced task force had been established. The latest meeting finalised the rules of engagement, areas of responsibility and deployment schedule of the MNJTF. The operation, comprising 8,700 combat troops, is headquartered in N’djamena. Boko Haram has simultaneously stepped up its terrorist campaign in Nigeria, carrying out numerous high-impact bombings in major urban centres, including Maiduguri, Gombe and Yola.

Malaysia

On 24 August, the Co-ordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a Tuareg rebel group, announced that it had pulled out of the international monitoring group set up to facilitate the Algiers Accord. The accord, reached between the CMA, the Malian government, and members of the government-aligned Tuareg group known as the Platform, was intended to end fighting in northern Mali, which has been ongoing since the Tuareg uprising of 2012. The CMA has stated that its participation in the monitoring group is contingent on the withdrawal of Platform forces from the town of Anefis in the Kidal region. The Platform had seized Anefis on 17 August following three days of fighting between the Tuareg rebels. These latest developments have jeopardised the Algiers Accord, which was reached on 23 June 2015. While the agreement has not yet been declared void, tensions remain elevated and a resumption of the conflict cannot be ruled out.

Europe

Concerns over the increasing numbers of immigrants attempting to enter Europe continue to prompt protests and place pressure on governments. On 21 August, 600 members of far-right organisations staged violent protests outside a refugee shelter in the German town of Heidenau. Police used tear gas to break up a street blockade targeting buses transporting the asylum seekers to the shelter. In Macedonia, security forces fired tear gas to disperse thousands of migrants attempting to cross Macedonia’s southern frontier on 21 August. At least five people were injured in the confrontations. The Hungarian government has started building a 175km fence along the border with Serbia to prevent migrants from entering the country. Germany and France have also responded to the issue and are expected to push for more comprehensive European Union immigration policies over the coming months.

Belgium, France and The Netherlands

On 21 August, a heavily armed gunman opened fire on a high-speed train travelling from Amsterdam to Paris. Two people were injured in the attack, before the perpetrator was overpowered by bystanders and arrested. The attacker, a Moroccan national who had allegedly travelled to fight in Syria in 2014, remains in police custody. As the assailant reportedly boarded the train in Brussels, Belgian authorities have announced that they are implementing heightened security measures in the country. Security has also been increased across all major European rail services.

Ukraine

Some of the heaviest fighting was reported in eastern Ukraine in August 2015 since the February Minsk ceasefire agreement. Most of the fighting has taken place near Donetsk Oblast and the strategic port city of Mariupol. On 17 August, seven civilians were reportedly killed, the highest number of civilian casualties since February. In another incident near Mariupol, shelling destroyed several houses and damaged an oil depot. Since April 2014, the conflict has claimed the lives of an estimated 6,400 people. On 24 August, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who spent significant political capital sealing the Minsk agreement, criticized Russia over ceasefire violations and called for its full implementation.

Egypt

On 19 August, six people were wounded in a car bomb attack on a state security building in northern Cairo. The attack reportedly took place at 02h00 local time, and the driver of the car fled on a motorcycle. The Islamic State (IS) has since claimed responsibility for the attack, under the name ‘Islamic State in Egypt’. Other recent incidents related to IS, including a car bombing outside the Italian consulate in Cairo on 11 July, and the execution of a Croatian national who was kidnapped in Cairo by Sinaloa-based militants on 22 July, have prompted fears that IS is expanding its presence outside of the Sinai region.

Lebanon

On 23 August, one person was killed and over 70 injured in violent community forces and anti-government protesters in Beirut. Protests over inadequate management of waste disposal in the city have escalated in recent days, as critics for the current administration to resign. The protest movement, operating under the name ‘You Stink’, has led to widespread rioting over what is perceived to be a corrupt and inefficient public sector. In addition, the protesters are opposed to alleged sectarian biases within the Lebanese political system. The movement has generated significant momentum, and further protests are likely in the coming weeks.

Australia

Unions and trade associations have staged several rallies across the country in opposition to a proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Australia and China. The rallies have drawn between several hundred and several thousand participants and have been largely peaceful. Anti-China FTA supporters and unionists are in the agreement, which allows Chinese companies to import a foreign labour force to work on projects worth more than USD 150 million. Various unions claim that this could place local jobs at risk and also lead to the exploitation of foreign workers.

North and South Korea

On 4 August, a landmine blast injured two South Korean soldiers patrolling the country’s heavily militarised border with North Korea. South Korea blamed North Korea for the incident and demanded an apology. After North Korea refused, South Korea broadcast loudspeakers. Such exchanges of cross-border propaganda are a regular feature of relations between North and South Korea, therefore the latest incident is not necessarily indicative of an escalation in hostilities between the two countries.
Bangkok Bombing: Refocusing on Thailand’s Terrorism Threats

While security officials continue to search for the perpetrators of the recent bombing of a shrine in Bangkok, the attack has brought Thailand’s terrorism threats to the fore, writes Mandira Bagwadeen.

On 17 August, a bomb exploded at the Erawan Shrine near the Ratchaprasong junction, a major tourist thoroughfare, during Bangkok’s rush hour. The three-kilogram pipe-bomb caused unprecedented damage, claiming the lives of over 20 people and injuring more than 100 others. Following the attack, another pipe bomb was thrown from a nearby bridge, killing three police officers. A third bomb was planted in a traffic light, causing no injuries. Though Thailand has a history of terrorism, the Erawan Shrine bombing is a significant deviation from the more common, politically motivated and small-scale attacks that have previously occurred in Bangkok. Notably, the perpetrators intended to produce mass casualties as well as damage to Thailand’s tourism industry and wider economy.

Investigations into the attack are ongoing. Thai security officials, at the time of writing, have arrested two suspects. The first suspect was arrested on 29 August on the outskirts of Bangkok in Min Buri district; he was in possession of a fake Turkish passport and bomb-making materials. A second foreigner, currently considered to be the primary suspect, was arrested in Kao province, east of Bangkok, on 1 September. Similar to the first suspect, bomb-making materials and forged passports were found at his residence. He was also in possession of a Chinese passport, believed to be genuine, that indicated he was born in Xinjiang, home to China’s minority Muslim Uighur population. Though investigators remain in pursuit of several other foreign suspects, the available evidence so far indicates that police could be dealing with a militant network of Uighur sympathisers.

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Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who was ousted by the ruling junta in May 2014. Since then, the Red Shirts have been accused of carrying out several low-impact bombings and other terrorist attacks. In particular, a radical and militant branch of the Red Shirts, known as the Black Shirts, has a history of carrying out explosive and armed attacks against security forces and pro-military and monarchy groups. Such attacks are mainly staged in Bangkok, targeting government and military interests as well as popular public places.

Another terrorism threat relates to Malay Muslim insurgents, who have waged a decades-long low-level insurgency against the government as part of their campaign to re-establish an independent sultanate in southern Thailand. Malay Muslim insurgents regularly stage shootings and bombings against security forces and Buddhist interests. Attacks have historically been concentrated in the southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Songkhla, collectively known as the Deep South. As their grievances are of a local nature, Malay Muslim insurgents mainly target government and military interest. Attacks generally involve the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), guns and knives. The most active Malay Muslim militant group is the Barisan Revolusi Nasional.

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Irrespective of who carried out the Erawan Shrine attack, the Bangkok bombing could set back Thailand’s economic growth prospects for the short term. While security officials continue to search for the perpetrators of the recent bombing of a shrine in Bangkok, the attack has brought Thailand’s terrorism threats to the fore, writes Mandira Bagwadeen.

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‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’: Police Reform in the US

Police shootings of unarmed African Americans have increased demands for sweeping reforms in police departments across the US. However, several obstacles have resulted in piecemeal reforms that are unlikely to ease tensions between minority communities and police, writes Lara Sierra-Rubia.

Nine August 2015 marked the one-year anniversary of the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a case that brought the issues of racial profiling and the use of excessive force by the US law enforcement agencies to the fore. The Brown shooting was not an isolated case, however, as police have killed at least 55 unarmed African Americans since July 2014. These incidents have driven the #Blacklivesmatter protest movement, characterised by the ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ slogan, which has resulted in violent protests across the country. The steady stream of highly publicised police shootings has fractured community-police relations, particularly among ethnic minorities.

A recent 2015 Ipsos poll showed that only 28 percent of African American respondents trust police to be fair and just, compared to 61 percent of white respondents. Although police violence against minorities has been a long-standing issue in the US, Brown’s death and the resulting ‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ slogan, which has resulted in violent protests across the country. The steady stream of highly publicised police shootings has fractured community-police relations, particularly among ethnic minorities.

As a result of growing public pressure, President Barack Obama has set aside USD 263 million to fuel the #Blacklivesmatter protest movement and public animosity towards US law enforcement.

Despite these successes, significant obstacles to transformation remain. A clear lack of political will, coupled with bureaucratic delays, has precluded police reform bills from being passed. While at least 19 states have proposed 50 bills regarding racial bias training for officers; aside from Colorado, none of these bills have been passed. Because federal reforms are limited by the fact that police forces are largely governed by state and local laws, most reforms have been piecemeal with federal intervention in local police departments occurring on a case-by-case basis only. This uneven approach has yielded uneven results.

Limited resources have posed another constraint. While pilot studies in the US have shown body cameras to be effective, uncertainties remain about procedure, public records access and the expense of storing, reviewing and releasing footage. In addition, the Department of Justice does not have the budget to conduct investigations into all law enforcement agencies in the US and there is currently no standard or policy for collecting and comparing data on police use of force. Even though states are in the process of developing policies to develop more robust reporting measures, collecting comparable data on a national level is a long-term project.

Finally, institutional and cultural factors have hindered reform. The symbolic and historical working relationship between police and prosecutors presents a significant challenge. Prosecutors have little incentive to doubt the police version of events, as they rely on the support of the police during elections and in prosecution. Opaque checklists on the legitimate use of force by police further compound uncertainty over accountability where fearing for one’s life in reaching for his/her waistband are frequently cited as justifiable reasons for the use of force.

As holders of the purse strings, Congress can provide local agencies with a strong foundation for transformation. However, with over 18,000 police departments across the country, a solution for one department may not be effective for another. As a result, while funding from Congress can help facilitate change, there is little incentive to doubt the police version of events, as they rely on the support of the police during elections and in prosecution. Opaque checklists on the legitimate use of force by police further compound uncertainty over accountability where fearing for one’s life in reaching for his/her waistband are frequently cited as justifiable reasons for the use of force.

“Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” is a slogan that has been adopted by many groups as a way to protest police violence against African Americans. The slogan has become a national symbol of resistance against police brutality.

In late July, the Turkish government initiated a dramatic shift in its security policy as it abruptly discarded a two-year ceasefire with the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), sparking a resurgence of violence in the country. The government's action has been met with mixed reactions, with some experts warning of negative implications for the region.

In the months prior to this development, tensions had been steadily growing between the PKK and the government, and in mid-July the government announced the start of a new offensive against the PKK. The government’s decision to initiate military action against the PKK came following an IS suicide bombing on 20 July against a Kurdish cultural centre in Suruc, a town 10km from the Syrian border, in which 33 people were killed. The PKK's response was to publicly link the threat posed by IS with that of the PKK, framing military operations against both groups under the mantle of a broader counter-terrorism campaign.

While the Suruc attack can be viewed as a catalyst for further PKK actions, the government’s decision to initiate military action against the PKK came following an IS suicide bombing on 20 July against a Kurdish cultural centre in Suruc, a town 10km from the Syrian border, in which 33 people were killed. The PKK's response was to publicly link the threat posed by IS with that of the PKK, framing military operations against both groups under the mantle of a broader counter-terrorism campaign.

The PKK has been a long-standing target of the Turkish government, which has been engaged in an ongoing bombing campaign against the PKK in both Iraq and Syria. The PKK is a militant group that seeks to establish an autonomous Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria.

However, it is unclear whether Erdoğan's intentions are genuine or driven by political expediency. While the PKK has been a significant threat to Turkey, recent negotiations have led to a partial ceasefire. The government's decision to escalate the conflict could be seen as a diversion tactic to distract from domestic issues.

In conclusion, Turkey remains a complex and dynamic country, with ongoing tensions between the government, the PKK, and other groups. The government's decision to initiate military action against the PKK has significant implications for the region, and the long-term outcome of this conflict remains uncertain.
About

Led by its Business Intelligence & Investigations division, Salamanca Group leverages its holistic risk management expertise to provide XL Catlin with a range of information resources and advice to inform their business operations.

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