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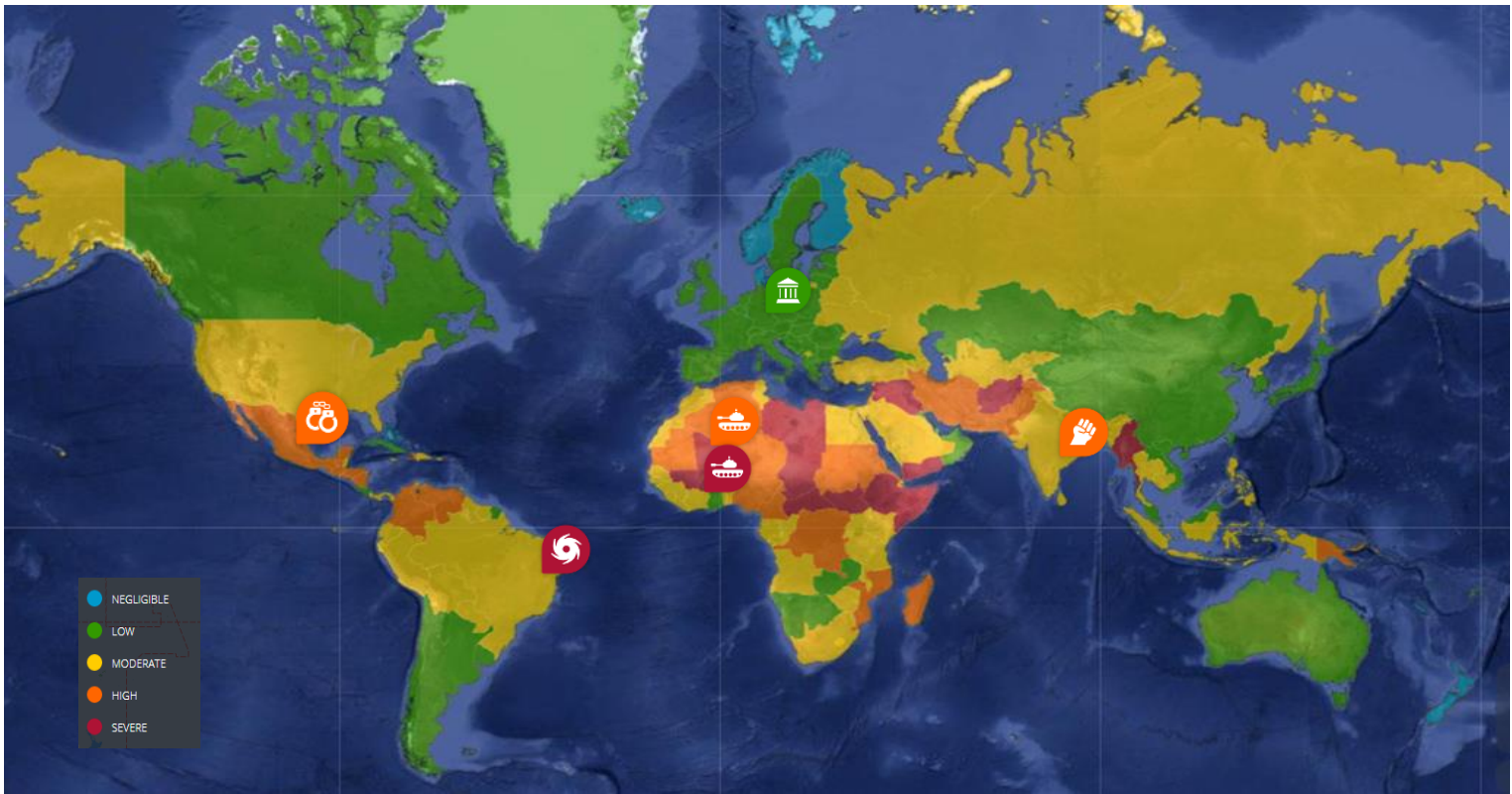
WEEKLY RISK ROUNDUP

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KEY STORIES TO LOOK OUT FOR:



Mexico
Fifth journalist killed in 2022



Germany
President Steinmeier re-elected for second five-year term



Burkina Faso
French airstrikes kill 40 militants linked to Benin attacks



India
Nationwide protests reported following hijab ban decision



Brazil
Heavy rain causes deadly flooding in Petropolis



Mali
France and allies announce military withdrawal



GLOBAL HEADLINES



MEXICO

Fifth journalist killed in 2022

On 10 February, Director of the Mexican news site Noticias Web, Heber Lopez, was shot dead outside a recording studio in the Oaxacan port city of Salina Cruz. Thursday's attack constitutes the fifth killing of a press worker since the start of 2022, making the first six weeks of the year the deadliest in over a decade for Mexican journalists.

Local authorities have since confirmed that two suspects have been taken into custody, however, investigations into the attack are ongoing. As of yet, no group or individual has claimed responsibility for the killing. Although several recent attacks have been recorded in the state of Oaxaca, the threat is national in scope. Throughout the start of the year, killings, attempted killings and other aggressions against media workers have been carried out in Tijuana, Veracruz, Yucatan and other regions.

Mexico remains one of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists, ranking as the most dangerous nation outside of active war zones. Mexico's media workers face a risk landscape comprised of two key threats, cartels and political actors connected to organized crime. Thus, journalists who investigate related themes, from drug trafficking to corruption and bribery, are the primary targets of assassination attempts and other aggressions.

Comment: The ever-worsening crisis poses a grave threat to free media in Mexico as journalists remain defenceless with little to no risk-mitigation measures in place, while killers act with growing impunity within an increasingly lawless criminal landscape. In 2012, a federal program was created to provide journalists access to security provisions via a panic button system. The scheme has proved woefully inefficient as corrupt officers have allegedly at times been in charge of leading the emergency response, while one journalist enrolled in the program was killed in Tijuana in January despite indicating to President Lopez Obrador himself that she feared for her life.

Meanwhile, Lopez Obrador continues to express hostility towards the media, labelling them as 'biased', 'sell-outs', 'thugs', 'conservatives', and 'mercenaries' on separate occasions. His recent attacks on one print columnist, Carlos Loret de Mola, have prompted the Inter-American Press Association to respond calling for the President to 'suspend his aggressions' as they encourage violence towards the press.

In the near term, further journalist killings and violent acts towards media workers should be expected amid an escalating crisis of insecurity and an inadequate government response that is facing intensifying scrutiny. On 25 January, Mexican journalists and allied activists took to the streets across Mexico to call for increased federal protection while denouncing impunity and government 'complicity'. Further incidents are likely to trigger widespread protests and potential unrest in nearby localities as well as major cities.



Germany

President Steinmeier re-elected for second five-year term

President Frank Walter Steinmeier was elected to a second term in office on 13 February. The election was conducted by a secret indirect ballot by the seventeenth sitting of Federal Convention, which consists of all members of the Bundestag, and electors nominated by the parliaments of each German state.

Steinmeier, was supported by his own party; the Social Democrats (SPD), in addition to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Greens, and the Free Democratic Party which makes up the ruling coalition led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Meanwhile, the far right Alternative for Germany (ADF) supported Max Otte, whilst the Left Party supported Gerhard Trabert.



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Comment: The Federal President of Germany acts as the country's head of state and is largely a ceremonial role. However, under article 81 of the German constitution, the president can declare a 'Legislation Emergency' which would allow the chancellor and the Bundestrat, the body that represents each of the German states at the federal level, to govern by decree without approval of the Bundestag. Additionally, the president also has the power to dissolve the Bundestag in emergencies and can make decisions related to the appointment of a chancellor that was elected by plurality only rather than the Bundestag supermajority that is common.

During his tenure as Foreign Minister under Chancellor Angela Merkel, Steinmeier pursued lenient policies regarding Russia following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. In 2016, he accused NATO of 'warmongering' towards Russia. Another controversy was his decision to support the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015.

He has called on Russia to 'lift the noose from the neck of Ukraine' and to seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Chancellor Scholz has indicated that Berlin would institute immediate sanctions in the event of invasion. This could include targeting Russian banks and suspending the opening of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline intended to deliver Russian gas to Europe via the Baltic Sea.

Given the heightened tensions in Europe related to Ukraine, the possibility of President Steinmeier enacting a 'Legislative Emergency' to ensure the continuity of government cannot be ruled out should war break out in Europe. Indeed, Germany is likely to be amongst the most affected countries in the event that Russia decides to cut supplies of oil and gas to Western Europe, which in an extreme case scenario could result in significant disruption to travel and services across the country. Such shortages would most likely last until alternate supplies of liquified natural gas (LNG) could be obtained from the United States and Middle East. Whilst tensions with Russia remain as they are, organisations with operations in Germany and throughout Western Europe should have contingency plans in place should this occur.



Burkina Faso

French airstrikes kill 40 militants linked to Benin attacks

On 12 February, the French Armed Forces General Staff announced that aircraft operating under Operation Barkhane had conducted airstrikes in Burkina Faso that killed 40 militants responsible for earlier attacks in neighbouring Benin. The strikes also destroyed several vehicles used by the militants.

A French police trainer was amongst those killed in two roadside bomb attacks in the W National Park on the Benin-Burkina Faso border on 8 February.

On 10 February, a French surveillance aircraft capable of detecting radio transmissions observed a convoy of jihadist fighters entering Burkina Faso on motorcycles. By 12 February, Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft conducted three separate airstrikes targeting the convoy.

Comment: In June 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that Operation Barkhane, aimed at combatting Islamist extremist groups across the Sahel, would come to an end. Despite this, the French led operation continues to conduct large scale operations in the region.

The airstrikes come weeks after the military seized power in Burkina Faso. The coup itself was motivated by struggles the country's military had in funding and equipment to fight Islamic militants. During 2021, Burkinabe troops suffered heavy casualties and often went several weeks without rations or ammunition.

As such, the Burkinabe military, similarly to those of other countries in the Sahel is likely to continue to rely on the French military in order to conduct effective operations against militant groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the so called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS). After the end of Operation Barkhane, France or others such as the United States will most likely need to aid local forces in terms of special forces missions and close air support in the long term.

The security situation in Burkina Faso will remain highly dangerous and volatile for the foreseeable future. It is therefore advised to avoid all travel to the region unless it is for a business-critical purpose. Any essential travel should only be conducted with enhanced risk mitigation measures including an armed escort and suitably armoured vehicles able to traverse desert terrain. These should be arranged with an accredited provider prior to arrival.



India

Nationwide protests reported following hijab ban decision

Across India, a number of protests have been reported after at least six female students were banned from a college for attending classes whilst wearing a hijab. The initial incident, which occurred in Karnataka state, stated that the hijab violated the college's dress code. Whilst hundreds of Muslim students protested their right to practice Islam through wearing the hijab, counter-protesters wore saffron shawls, which are a symbolic colour of Hindu nationalist groups. A number of schools and colleges were closed due to the scale of the protests, but they reopened on 14 February.

The state government argued that if the uniform was not picked by authorities, clothes would disrupt the integrity and public law and order. For India's Muslim community, the ban on the hijab violates their right to religious freedom, which is guaranteed under India's constitution. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which holds the majority in Karnataka state government, has backed the ban. The BJP have been campaigning for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) for decades.

Comment: Whilst the predominant religion in India is Hinduism, Islam is the second biggest religion with approximately 195 million people as followers of the religion. This makes up around 13 per cent of the 1.35 billion population.

Since the partition of India in 1947, there have been long running societal tensions between the Hindu population and Muslims who remained in the newly created state. Banning the hijab and other items of religious clothing could further deepen religious fault lines across India. In recent years, the BJP party, has long called for the implementation of the UCC which minorities believe would be the effective imposition of Hindu laws across the entire country.

Travellers to India should be aware of long-standing ethnic tensions. Whilst in country, and particularly in large population centres, it is advised to maintain situational awareness and avoid all protests as they may escalate quickly and without warning. Moreover, Indian police and paramilitary auxiliaries are known to be heavy handed in dispersing protests. As such, if in the vicinity of spontaneous unrest or ethnic tension, travellers should leave quickly and return to their accommodation or another secure location.



Brazil

Heavy rain causes deadly flooding in Petropolis

At least 94 people have died and more are missing following heavy rainfall and flooding in Petropolis, north of Rio de Janeiro. On 15 February, more rain fell in six hours than was expected for the entire month. The force of the current in the floods dragged multiple cars, debris and pedestrians down the streets of the city. A state of emergency has since been declared in Petropolis due to the additional threat of flooding and landslides.

The formation of the storm over the region was related to an earlier cold front which caused the unexpected amount of rain. Whilst the bad weather has affected the entire state of Rio de Janeiro, Petropolis saw the most rain. Around 120 firefighters have been deployed to the area to aid in search and rescue operations.

Comment: Typically, the rainy season in Brazil runs from December to March. However, in recent years, the rainy season has been longer and more intense. Climate change is producing more extreme rainfall and more frequent climate disasters. However, it is not the only factor at play. An increase in rural to urban migration to the larger cities in Brazil is also an important impact. Activists have called for immediate improvements to be made urban infrastructure to try and help mitigate against natural disasters and their impact in the urban environment.

Brazil's President, Jair Bolsonaro, is known for continually centring policies against climate change. Under the Bolsonaro administration, at least 10,000 squares miles of the Amazon rainforest has been destroyed. The Amazon rainforests is one of the most important ecosystems in the world and, on average, absorbs approximately ten per cent of CO2 emissions. With every square mile of rainforest destroyed, the target of keeping global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius becomes more unachievable.





Travellers are advised to avoid all areas of Petropolis affected by heavy rain and flooding as a safety precaution. Adhere to any emergency directives issued by authorities and anticipate disruptions to overland travel and essential services in the coming hours and days. The clean-up from the flooding and landslides will cause extended delays that will affect travel. Extreme weather events of this nature are likely to increase in the near future.



Mali

France and allies announce military withdrawal

In a joint statement released on 17 February, France, Canada, and several European partners announced their intention to begin the withdrawal of military assets from Mali. The actions of the Malian transitional authority since the 2021 coup d'état were cited as the primary motivation for the decision taken by the signatories. In particular, the signatories stressed the Malian transitional authority's failure to facilitate a return to civilian rule via fresh democratic elections that were originally scheduled to be held in late February 2022.

The decision reached by France and its military partners came amidst a meeting between the European Union and African Union in Brussels on 17 February. The joint statement stressed the support of the signatories for the ongoing measures taken by both the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to compel Mali to return to civilian rule. A coordinated withdrawal plan is scheduled to be developed by the signatories by no later than June 2022, at which point the signatories intend to withdraw in full from Malian sovereign territory.

This decision follows accusations from the signatories regarding the Malian transitional authority's continued obstruction of their activities within Mali. France and its allied states also stressed their intention to continue military operations in the Sahel via their deployments in other nations in the region. A statement of intention for continued military operations in the wider Gulf of Guinea was issued too, confirming a shift in focus from Mali to other security theatres for the French military.

Comment: Insecurity in the Sahel derived from Islamist extremism has helped fuel a series of coup d'états in Western Africa. French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to coordinate with France's immediate partners in the Sahel to redeploy military assets away from Mali represents a shift in France's assessment of the region's political stability and immediate needs. In particular, the deployment of additional assets to the Gulf of Guinea reflects intelligence assessments of a growing Islamic State presence in theatres beyond the Sahel in Africa.

The Malian government has increasingly shifted towards a reliance on Russian-backed mercenaries, such as the Wagner Group, to fulfil its security needs in the Sahel. Russian involvement in the country has prompted significant controversy amongst Western nations with interests in the Sahel, including France. It remains to be seen whether the Wagner Group will be able to effectively replace the full scope of the counter-insurgency operations currently provided by France and its allies. Travellers with interests in Mali or upcoming travel to the country are advised to prepare enhanced security and risk mitigation measures prior to their arrival.



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