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BRIEFS

COLOMBIA: Catholic Church Offers to Mediate Conflict

Summary: Amid hostilities and failures in negotiations the Catholic Church has agreed to mediate the conflict between the ELN and Colombia.

Development: On 5 February, the Catholic Church in Colombia and Ecuador offered to mediate talks between the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the Colombian government, following an increase in border skirmishes between the two. Talks of the ELN integrating into the Colombian political system such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been suspended by the Colombian government after violence from the ELN flared up. The Colombian armed forces will continue operations into ELN territory as part of Operation “Hercules” in the absence of continued peace talks. In January 2018 alone, there have been more terrorist attacks by the ELN along the Colombia-Venezuela border than occurred in the last six months of 2017 combined.

Analysis: Although Colombia has not commented on this option considering the breakdown in communication, the Catholic Church may be a viable mediator to continue negotiations. Since the peace deal and transition of FARC from a guerrilla organization to a legitimate political party in 2016, the ELN and the Government of Colombia have attempted to negotiate the same deal. These attacks caused the breakdown in talks between the ELN and the Colombian government, as the attacks were likely viewed by Colombia as an indicator that the ELN is not serious about reintegrating into the Colombian political system. If attacks continue, they will surely hinder the ELN’s integration into Colombian politics. After the success story of the 2016 peace deal between FARC and Colombia as well as FARC’s reintegration into the political system, the Colombian Government likely feels pressure from the people to have the same success with the ELN.

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EQUATORIAL GUINEA: President Briefly Dissolves Government in Power Move

Summary: President Obiang's dissolution of the government and crackdown on opposition parties may incite the CI party to oust him.

Development: On 3 February, state-sponsored television announced President Teodoro Obiang's suspension of the government, which dissolved the powers of the Prime Minister and three deputies. On 6 February, President Obiang reinstated the same Prime Minister and deputies, all members of his party and the Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea, (PDGE) but did not announce the appointment of other positions. Since seizing power in 1979, Obiang has faced many coup attempts, many of which some analysts claim were staged by the government to crack down on opposition parties, like the Citizens for Innovation (CI) party. The Equatorial Guinean government thwarted the most recent coup attempt on 27 December and detained over 130 opposition members in response. The government cites the coup as retaliation against the November 2017 election, when the PDGE won 99 out of 100 seats in parliament, while the CI won the remaining seat. Opposition leader Santiago Ebee Ela died in government custody on 15 January, further deteriorating relations between the CI and the PDGE, as the CI claims the police tortured him to death.

Analysis: In response to President Obiang's dissolution of the government and his most recent crackdown on opposition, the CI may attempt a revolt in the coming weeks. As Obiang has been President for decades and following the questionable November 2017 election, the CI likely already viewed the PDGE as a corrupt party seeking absolute power. By dissolving the government, Obiang indirectly expressed his aim to further consolidate power, which will likely provoke further outrage among opposition parties, including the CI. With the growing outrage and the PDGE's power consolidation, the CI may attempt a coup to remove Obiang so the CI can challenge the existing power structure. If this possible coup succeeds, Obiang would likely face harsh punishment or death from the new government as retribution for his government's disregard for the rights of Ebee Ela. If an overthrow was to fail, Obiang will likely take even harsher action against the CI, potentially detaining any individual tied to the party. Obiang could even designate the CI as a violent group, banning it from Equatorial Guinea, as some African governments have done with other groups. While the potential consequences of a coup are high for the CI, Obiang's recent consolidation of power and silencing of opposition groups may have triggered enough outrage and injustice to spark a CI effort to remove him.

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JAPAN: Tensions Build as Russia Militarizes Contested Kuril Islands

Summary: Russia's aggressive military action in Japan's contested Kuril island continues to create friction between the two powers.

Development: On 7 February, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono denounced ongoing Russian military operations in Japan's Northern Territories. These operations include the Russian military deploying warplanes to a civilian airport on the island of Etorofu in the disputed Kuril Island chain and Russian claims that it will eventually build a military base on the islands. Additionally, Russia is conducting a 2,000-man military drill throughout the Kuril Islands. Due to these actions, Kono stressed the necessity of settling the territorial dispute between the two nations. The disputed ownership of the island, one of four seized by Soviet forces toward the end of WWII, was never settled.

Analysis: Japan's concern over Russian military exercises in the Kuril Islands may stem from the fear of a militaristic takeover of the islands, resulting in Tokyo's wish to settle the territorial dispute. A settlement, however, seems unlikely, as Tokyo and Moscow both wish to control the islands due to their strategic importance in the Pacific. Tensions are likely to worsen as both nations attempt to secure their grasp on the islands. Russia, having military control of the islands, may begin the construction of a Naval facility within the Kuril Islands in an effort to cement their claim in the region. This development leaves few options for Tokyo in regard to its wish of settling the dispute and to eventually regain control over the Kuril Islands.

[Andrew Ruffini]

LEBANON: Military Disputes Israeli Border Wall Likely for Leverage

Summary: A tripartite meeting between Lebanese and Israeli officials mediated by the UN concerning Israel's construction of a border wall yielded no resolution.

Development: On 6 February, officials from the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) held a tripartite meeting mediated by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFL). The LAF claims that Israel's border wall, currently being built, violates Lebanese sovereignty. However, the IDF maintains that the border wall stays within Israel's territory according to the UN's Blue Line, a border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel established in 2000. Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist political party and militia based in Lebanon has recently threatened Israeli army units along the border. Lebanon and Israel are also currently disputing 330 square miles of maritime territory, which Lebanon intends to use for offshore drilling. The discussions mediated by the UN ended with no resolution.

Analysis: Israel will almost certainly continue to build the border wall as it perceives the wall to be within its borders. As the Blue Line is an internationally recognized border, Israel's Western allies and the UN will likely support Israel's position. Lebanon's fierce opposition to the wall will certainly increase the friction between the nations and could lead to Hezbollah acting on its threats against the Israeli army along the border. If Hezbollah interferes with the construction process of the wall or endangers Israelis, Israel will likely retaliate forcefully. Lebanon only recently voiced discontent over the border wall, likely because of the current dispute over maritime territory. Lebanon probably will use the border wall as leverage against Israel to

continue the offshore drilling. The next couple of weeks are crucial in determining whether the affected parties of the border wall will remain diplomatic or turn to forceful means. Another tripartite meeting can soon be expected between the nations due to the unresolved tension and disagreements over territory.

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NATO: Baltic Concern Rises as Russia Installs Missiles in Kaliningrad

Summary: Russia deployed advanced, nuclear-capable Iskander missiles to its exclave Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, threatening to further destabilize the Baltic Region.

Development: As of 5 February, Russia deployed its nuclear-capable Iskander missile system to its exclave Kaliningrad, according to media reports and claims from Lithuania's president and defense minister. The Iskander is a mobile ballistic missile system with a range of about 311 miles. According to Russia, previous deployments of Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad acted as temporary response to the building up of US forces in the Baltics. It is unknown whether the current installation is a temporary measure or a permanent one, with NATO officials calling on Russia for answers. Vladimir Shamanov, chairman of the Duma's defense committee, touted the deployment simply as a response to neighboring nations' military assets, and did not comment on the duration or number of Iskander missiles deployed.

Analysis: The deployment of the Iskander missile systems to Kaliningrad significantly raises Baltic unease and suspicion. This event brings further instability and uncertainty to the region, following the Russian annexation of Crimea and summer 2017 military exercises, which some believe was a rehearsed attack against NATO. The deployment brings much of the EU and NATO nations within range of a ballistic missile attack, which likely means NATO and other forces will begin to recalibrate to counter the threat. About 4,500 NATO troops are stationed in Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, however, Russia may be able to cut off the three Baltic states via the Sulwaki Gap, the 40-mile border between Poland and Lithuania positioned adjacent to Kaliningrad. Although Russia may be able to explore such an action in the future, the stationing of the missiles in Kaliningrad likely serves as a frequently-used Russian intimidation tactic. NATO will surely still move to counter this threat and will likely take steps within the month to minimize the threat to the Sulwaki Gap and build up rapid-response forces and coordinated air defenses.

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NETHERLANDS: Foreign Ministry Withdraws Ambassador to Turkey

Summary: The Netherlands officially withdrew its ambassador from Turkey, creating a stalemate in a yearlong dispute.

Development: On 5 February, the Dutch foreign ministry officially withdrew the Dutch ambassador to Turkey after failing to normalize Dutch relations with Turkey. The withdrawal effectively occurred in March 2017 when Turkey restricted the Dutch ambassador from returning to Turkey, however the foreign ministry's announcement officially ends diplomatic ties with Turkey. The breakdown in relations occurred when the Netherlands decided not to allow Turkish officials to campaign in the Netherlands for the controversial referendum to consolidate executive power in Turkey. The foreign ministry also paused official negotiations with Turkey, without expressing a clear path forward to restore the relationship between the two countries.

Analysis: The Netherlands will likely not actively seek a solution to this dispute with Turkey in the near future. The Netherlands has little to gain from Turkey, however, Turkey will be incentivized to resolve the dispute given its aspirations of joining the EU. Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdogan said on 4 February that he expects to be admitted to the EU, and clearly indicated that Turkey still intends to join. If Turkey is serious about joining the EU, it will likely be pressured into resolving its dispute with the Netherlands. The EU holds the leverage, and if Turkey softens its rhetoric toward Europe, it may be a sign Turkey is willing to compromise to gain the good faith of Europe.

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PHILIPPINES: Duterte Continues Crackdown on Criminal Leaders

Summary: Security forces arrested a leader of the major communist movement in the Philippines, despite possible human rights violations.

Development: On 31 January, Philippine police arrested Rafael Baylosis, a leader of the Maoist Guerilla movement in the Philippines officially known as the New People's Army. Baylosis is the highest-ranking leader of the movement to be arrested since peace talks ended last year. Human rights advocates have ridiculed the action as a wrongful arrest as police are denying the immunities Baylosis is guaranteed as a peace-talks consultant. These activists have also called for a resumption of peace negotiations following President Duterte's halt of such negotiations and calls for security forces to target guerrilla group leaders. Duterte has a history of disregarding human rights and calls for change, as is evident in his support for extrajudicial killings of alleged criminals.

Analysis: Despite the rights activists' calls for diplomatic negotiations, President Duterte will likely maintain a harsh stance against the communist group. Duterte likely views his crackdown on guerilla group leaders as a security necessity and likely only after eliminating such violent groups will Duterte possibly consider restoring peace negotiations. The arrest of Baylosis with no regard for his immunity highlights Duterte's focus on security before peace. Duterte's history

of disregarding protests from human rights activists further demonstrates the likelihood that he will ignore the most recent calls to release Baylosis.
[Kaylie Prieur and the Eagle Eye Editing Board]

TECH: Cybercriminals Mining Cryptocurrency from Popular Sites and Ads

Summary: Unknown actors used JavaScript-enabled advertisements to mine the cryptocurrency ‘Monero’ on users’ PCs during browsing sessions.

Development: Since the beginning of the Cryptocurrency boom in late 2017, actors within the cyber community have sought to profit from software-based ‘mining’, or distributed accounting, used to maintain these currencies. Beginning in late December 2017, security firms such as Avast and Kaspersky labs have observed an increase in ads containing malicious code to mine various cryptocurrencies, primarily the cryptocurrency ‘Monero’. These ads can hijack large amounts of a computer’s resources and in extreme cases it can damage the computer. The ads have primarily shown up on video-hosting sites such as YouTube and Showtime due to the extended periods of time users spend there.

Analysis: These mining-based ads are an expected offshoot of the cryptocurrency boom and some companies such as Pirate Bay are testing these scripts as an alternative to advertisements. Due to the cloud-based nature of this kind of attack, it is notoriously difficult for security and web companies to find and stop these ads from executing their code. These ads also come attached with a social engineering attack saying that a user’s machine is infected with viruses/malware and encouraging the user to install an antivirus program advertised to remove the infection. The antivirus advertised is typically malware and will likely spy on the users’ actions or add the users’ machine to a botnet, which is a network of private computers infected with malicious software and controlled as a group without the owners' knowledge. One of the most effective ways for a user to block these mining attacks is to disable JavaScript execution in the browser settings. As always, users should strive to keep their antivirus and firewalls up to date, as many security companies are testing ways to block the scripts used.

[Mark Burrell]

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