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The International Peace Institute's (IPI) Regional Insights covers select regional and thematic developments based on information from a variety of sources. It draws on the research of IPI experts and is provided exclusively to major donors and members. Each monthly issue covers challenges and opportunities related to international peace, security and development.

Africa

Guinea Bissau: The April 12 military coup in Guinea Bissau is the latest in a series of political and military crises which have plagued this country since its independence in 1974. Guinea Bissau is described as the country where no democratically-elected president has ever completed a term in office. The coup was swiftly and strongly condemned by the international community. The World Bank and African Development Bank suspended millions of dollars of development assistance. The Economic Community of Western African States authorized the deployment of a standby force to monitor the transition back to civilian rule, imposed diplomatic, economic and financial sanctions, and is leading a mediation process to restore constitutional rule.

Guinea Bissau's history of political instability is exacerbated by it being one of the poorest countries in the world and a geographical challenge to govern, a mainland with 90 islands, making it an easy prey for drug cartels. A stronger commitment by local, regional, and international stakeholders is needed to fight international organized crime and narcotics trafficking, as well as to put an end to chronic impunity and instability.

Sierra Leone/Liberia: The April 27 conviction of former Liberian President Charles Taylor for his direct role in crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by the Revolutionary United Front during Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war was historic, the first conviction of a former head-of-state by an international tribunal since the Nuremberg trials in 1946. Sentencing, expected on May 30, is the next step, followed by a probable lengthy appeals process. While the Court does not have the authority to impose the death penalty or a life sentence, Taylor will likely receive a lengthy jail term. The Court's verdict is a strong signal to other heads of state and government that leadership does not bestow impunity. The verdict was celebrated in Sierra Leone while the reaction in Liberia was mixed. Some Liberians welcomed the decision as finally bringing Taylor to account, while his longstanding supporters were angry. Taylor remains a polarizing figure in Liberia and the West Africa region.

Sudan/South Sudan: With South Sudan's independence from Sudan in July 2011, tense negotiations over unresolved secession issues including the Abyei region, borders, citizenship, oil, and external debt were underway. Seventy-five percent of Sudan's oil production capacity is now contained in South Sudan with the hitch that oil for export be transited through Sudan. South Sudan, protesting Sudan's oil transit fees, suspended oil production in early 2012. The disagreement has erupted into direct confrontation. The conflict has been most intense in Sudan's Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile states with fighting between communities along the border.

Tensions escalated in recent weeks after South Sudanese forces moved into the oil-rich area of Heglig in South Kordofan, occupying the area for ten days. Sudan's army regained control of Heglig, though Juba insists it withdrew voluntarily. In response to the crisis, the African Union (AU) adopted a roadmap calling on both countries to resume negotiations on

their post-secession relations, particularly on security issues, allocating three months to reach a settlement over border demarcation, citizenship matters, and oil revenue sharing.

South Sudan agreed to return to the negotiating table, though calling for greater involvement of the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) which mediated the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the two countries. Sudan has also agreed to recommence talks, with reservations about the three-month deadline and the fact that the AU referred the roadmap to the UN Security Council for its endorsement. The UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution on May 2 calling for an end to the hostilities and a resumption of negotiations, threatening to impose sanctions for non-compliance. China, the biggest energy investor in both countries, has an opportunity to play a pro-active role in helping to settle the ongoing dispute. A more coordinated peace effort by the African Union and the United Nations would benefit the situation as well.

Middle East

Egypt: As Egypt's post-Mubarak May 23 presidential election approaches, uncertainty and tensions are growing regarding the process and prospects for meeting Egypt's fundamental political and economic challenges. The relative power of the president, prime minister, parliament and military are in contention and there are deep concerns that the process, currently overseen by the military, is biased in their favor. When a demonstration outside the Ministry of Defense on May 2 turned violent leaving at least 11 dead, these tensions were clearly evident. The violence -- rumored to have been instigated by the Army -- is seen by some experts as a signal that the military is reluctant to relinquish power.

Nevertheless, the presidential campaign is underway with the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi; the last Mubarak-era Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq; former Secretary-General of the Arab League Amr Moussa; and Islamist Abdel Moneim Abul Futuh drawing the most attention. Liberals are concerned that the Muslim Brotherhood will dominate the political scene if successful in the presidential race, since the Brotherhood already controls parliament; others worry that the candidacy of Ahmed Shafiq is an effort by Mubarak allies to make a comeback. While foreign and local non-governmental organizations will monitor the elections, eight prominent US non-governmental organizations have been excluded, a leading example being the exclusion of the Carter Center which monitored last fall's parliamentary elections. The rewriting of the constitution remains another battleground, with the Muslim Brotherhood and the military competing to issue their own draft versions.

New political freedoms are also causing strains in relations with traditional allies. Saudi Arabia briefly closed its Embassy in Cairo following protests by Egyptians outside the facility. The demonstrators were incensed by the arrest of an Egyptian lawyer in Saudi Arabia, who advocated for the rights of Egyptian workers in Saudi Arabia. Egypt depends economically on the remittances from its nationals working in Saudi Arabia and the government quickly sent a delegation, led by the speaker of parliament, to Riyadh to resolve the matter. The Saudi Ambassador returned to Cairo on May 5.

Iran: Tensions between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries increased after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad made a surprise visit to Abu Musa, an island claimed by both Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Iranian Parliament is debating whether to make Abu Musa the capital of a new province. For its part, the GCC is planning maneuvers in the area to test its military readiness. This dispute is a backdrop to the second round of nuclear talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany (P5 + 1) scheduled to take place on May 23. There is speculation that Iran could agree to suspend its production of uranium enrichment up to 20 percent in exchange for relaxed Western sanctions, leading analysts to consider military action less likely.

Libya: Sharp differences between the head of the Transitional National Council (TNC) Mustafa Abdeljalil and interim Prime Minister Iyad al-Gharyani went public following a recent vote of no confidence in the government that was subsequently overturned. The TNC blames the interim government for a series of failures during the transition, including not integrating rebels into government forces.

In the eastern region of Barqa -- where there is a tradition of separatism -- some are calling for a boycott of the upcoming Constituent Assembly elections, arguing that they will not be adequately represented. Similar strains are showing with the international community, as Libya continues to maintain that Saif al-Qaddafi be tried in Libya and is resisting the

possibility of a trial by the International Criminal Court outside the country. More dramatically, Abdel Hakim Belhaj, head of the Tripoli Military Council, filed charges against former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, claiming that British authorities handed him over to the Qaddafi regime when Straw served as British Foreign Secretary. Belhaj was, at the time, leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and Belhaj claims mistreatment and torture in Libya after his rendition.

Syria: The spotlight turned to the role of extremists in the Syrian opposition after three suicide attacks occurred between April 27-30. The tactics, slogans, and websites resemble those used by al-Qaeda in Iraq and some experts have suggested that al-Qaeda militants may be joining the clashes. The Free Syrian Army quickly claimed that the Assad government was behind the attacks, using the attacks as an excuse to continue the government crackdown.

A new development in early May was the targeting of universities by the Syrian army, as student dormitories were raided in search of protestors in the northwestern city of Aleppo resulting in four deaths. While the death toll from the violence is down, the UN observer mission is still struggling to track Syrian actions. It is limited by small numbers, not yet having met its 300-member authorized strength, and negotiations are ongoing with the government on the mission's mobility. The Security Council resolution calls for further action if Syria does not comply with the peace plan, but makes no reference to specific sanctions. In the meantime, the European Union has imposed a fifth round of sanctions, this time targeting luxury goods.

Yemen: Former President Saleh and his relatives are facing international pressure to abide by the decrees of new President, Mansour al-Hadi, regarding military staff changes. The Commander of the Air Force, Saleh's half brother, was compelled to hand over power to a new commander, and his nephew surrendered control of the Third Battalion of the Republican Guards. Preparations are underway for the national dialogue which will serve as the basis for drafting a new constitution and electoral law.

Central and South Asia

Afghanistan: The international push for an Afghan-led security framework post-2014 continues. Presidents Karzai and Obama signed the Afghan-US strategic partnership agreement in Kabul on May 1. The agreement gives both parties stability in the parameters of their bilateral relationship through 2024 and serves as a security anchor for the Afghan administration in peace talks with the Taliban. Similarly, the NATO and Afghan public relations push to highlight the increased capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces as well as to line up long-term funding for these forces aim to convince skeptical domestic and international audiences that Afghanistan will not be abandoned, as occurred in the 1990s.

In April, new impetus was given to starting talks with the Taliban. Karzai appointed Salahuddin Rabbani as head of the High Peace Council on April 14, replacing his assassinated father after a seven-month gap in the Council's leadership. The younger Rabbani, an Afghan diplomat, brings political connections to the Northern Alliance, yet is considered a risky choice given his relative youth and inexperience. On April 27, Afghan Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Jawed Ludin, following a trilateral meeting with Pakistan and the United States, announced two new initiatives: 1) a process whereby Pakistan would provide safe passage for Taliban representatives to travel to participate in talks in Qatar and 2) to set-up a trilateral sub-group in New York to coordinate the process of de-listing the names of Taliban leaders from the UN sanctions list.

The press speculates that this tripartite discussion was followed by US talks with Taliban representatives in Qatar. This progress is real yet tenuous when placed in the context of the bickering among supposed allies, regional tensions, especially with Iran, and the relentless violence, including the worrisome "blue on green" attacks, where Afghan forces attack NATO coalition members.

India: India tested a long-range, nuclear-capable intermediate ballistic missile on April 19. Seen as playing catch-up to China, India's successful launch was cheered domestically, cautiously accepted by the United States, and received with disdain in China. Press commentary compared the successful Indian launch to the failed North Korean test less than a week earlier, underscoring the noticeably different reactions of the international community – wary for India; harsh for

North Korea. Not surprisingly, the Indian launch led to a subsequent missile launch by Pakistan. The timing of the launch appears embedded in India's current domestic political dynamics.

Newspaper reports recently speculated about the country's civil-military tensions, especially between its Army Chief of Staff and Minister of Defense. The ruling Congress Party did not fare well in recent regional elections, winning only one out of five states. With this missile launch, the government appears to be showing that it is militarily strong and focused on its country's regional power position, particularly towards its larger neighbor to the north.

Pakistan: On April 26, the Supreme Court found Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani guilty on contempt charges for not pursuing a corruption case against President Asif Ali Zardari. The Prime Minister was imprisoned only for a symbolic few minutes, until the court adjourned. Considered weakened by some political commentators, Gilani, appearing unfazed by the results, plans to appeal the conviction as he could be ousted under a constitutional provision that bans felons from serving in Parliament.

Given the domestic political divisions, Pakistani parliamentarians showed a surprising willingness to compromise when, on April 13 in a joint session, the Parliament unanimously approved new guidelines for foreign relations with the United States. The parliament agreed to reopen NATO supply routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan, but continued to demand an immediate end to drone strikes inside the country. The resolution, agreed to by a cross section of Pakistani politicians, assuages fierce nationalism in Pakistan, protects domestic commercial interests, maintains a level of counter-terrorism cooperation with the US, and aims to keep US aid flowing into Pakistan's coffers.

Yet so far US-Pakistan talks on these issues, for example on April 27, have been only talks on talks. As one Pakistani insider commented anonymously to the press, despite this show of sovereignty and resolve by Pakistan, drones strikes will continue as seen on April 29. While Pakistan and the US insist that they want to restore cooperation -- with a cloaking of domestic political respectability -- the situation will not be resolved quickly.

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