

Weather and conflict in Africa: It's almost winter and 'strike season' in South Africa; war more likely in hot years

11 MAY 2015 07:50 [CHRISTINE MUNGA](#)

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A wise African government would do well to include a Weather Study Unit in its ministries of defence or internal security.



[Thousands of members of the South African Municipal Workers Union march through Cape Town, on May 6, 2015, during a strike calling for better wages. Wage talks are currently deadlocked. \(Photo/AFP\)](#)

EACH winter in South Africa, weeks of angry demonstrations erupt in cities across the country as employees down tools and flock into the streets during pay negotiations.

“Strike season”, they call it, and this year, a recent wave of deadly xenophobic attacks has heightened fears that protests could fuel further aggression towards migrant workers.

Employment is scarce in South Africa, and much of the frustration is targeted at migrant workers from elsewhere on the continent whom locals accuse of stealing their jobs.

Winter in South Africa (late May to August) is a time of clear skies, bone-chilling temperatures, and even the occasional dusting of snow.

Cold angry Africans

Why would this coincide with strike season? There are several theories, but it’s probably because the cold season brings with it a certain gloom and despondency, which magnifies workers’ financial woes.

In Kenya too, there’s anecdotal evidence that school strikes are likely to rise in the second term of the school calendar, May-July, which is also the cold season in the country.

So school administrators typically take one of two routes to mitigate the expected unrest, particularly in the boarding secondary schools - either clamping down hard on every minor infraction, or following a “policy of appeasement” to keep the students happy, such as by making some marginal improvement in the school diet, or allowing more out-of-school trips.

In other places, the weather might be something that is only the subject of chit-chat or small talk. But in Africa, it can be the difference between war and a peace deal.

In several African conflicts, you can observe an ebb and flow in violent confrontations that coincides with the rainy season. (READ: [Want to strike a peace deal in Africa? Wait for the rainy season](#)).

In South Sudan, the rainy season starts in April and peters out towards the end of October.

Roads are turned into rivers of slurry mud, hindering the movement of both fighters and war machinery, and it is easier to track soldier battalions in the mud. In addition to the cold, diseases like malaria and pneumonia also torment combatants more.

During the war in South Sudan against Khartoum, reports show that SPLA fighters who had homes on the Ugandan side would hang their AK47s, cross to farm and work their gardens during the rainy season, and go back into Sudan to fight after the rains.

And even in the latest fighting that broke out in December 2013, the warring sides held position during the rainy season, and leaders racked up hotel bills in Addis Ababa attending talks that made little progress.

The same pattern plays out in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Somalia's rainy season brings with it treacherous mud, rendering tanks of the African Union Mission in Somalia (Amisom) useless - one of the most formidable weapons that the mission has against the al-Shabaab militia.

The militants too, find that they can't move their pick-up mounted machine guns, known as 'technicals'. Such lulls in fighting could make warring sides more amenable to peace talks.

Beware of the heat

But it isn't just cold and rain that has an impact on fighting in Africa - the outbreak of civil war is likely to happen in warmer-than-average years, according to a groundbreaking [2013 paper](#) by economists Solomon Hsiang, Marshall Burke, and Edward Miguel.

The researchers found there are strong historical linkages between civil war and temperature in Africa, with warmer years leading to significant increases in the likelihood of war.

For each one standard deviation change in climate toward warmer temperatures or more extreme rainfall, the frequency of interpersonal violence rose 4% and the frequency of intergroup conflict rose 14%.

With climate change expected to make Africa hotter, governments should brace themselves for the possibility of more restive citizens and more violent confrontations.

A rise of as little as 1C could make civil conflict in sub-Saharan Africa more than 50% more likely, according to the study.

When climate model projections of future temperature trends are applied to the historical conflict response to temperature, it suggests that there could be roughly a 54% increase in armed conflict by 2030, or an additional 393,000 battle deaths if future wars in Africa are as deadly as recent ones.

Because the majority of Africans rely on rain-fed agriculture for their livelihood, higher temperatures are more likely to lead to crop failure, and the disadvantaged become more likely to take up arms. With empty fields, they have less to lose.

The other reason is that psychologically, higher temperatures make people more aggressive.

"Although people say they feel sluggish when they are hot, their heart rate and other physical responses are aroused and elevated. They think they are not agitated, when in fact they are, and that's a recipe for disaster," Ohio State University psychology professor Brad Bushman is [quoted](#) to have said, who wasn't part of the study but whose work on crime and heat was analyzed by Hsiang.

Of course, future responses to warm weather could turn out very different from the historical trends in Africa. With rising incomes, more urbanisation (and so less reliance of weather

for survival) regular elections, and a more expanded democratic space, it isn't inevitable that Africans will take up arms with the breaking of beads of sweat on their foreheads.

Still, a wise African government would do well to include a Weather Study Unit in its ministries of defence or internal security.

-Additional reporting by AFP

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