WORKING PAPER

Borders and Political Violence in Africa

ACLED event data analysed in QGIS, 1 March 2015 to 1 March 2025

36.3% of all violence-against-civilians incidents fell within 50 km	**2.83** mean fatalities per incident in border districts (vs 2.36 elsewhere)	**144.7%** Increase in political violence incidents within 50 km between 2016 and 2024 (raw counts)

Executive summary

This paper examines how political violence was distributed in relation to internal land borders in mainland Africa, drawing on 171,953 ACLED political violence incidents and 428,465 reported fatalities between 1 March 2015 and 1 March 2025. The analysis covers Battles, Violence against civilians, and Explosions/Remote violence.

Across mainland Africa, 30.9% of political violence incidents occurred within 50 km of an internal land border and 49.3% within 100 km. Violence against civilians was the most border-oriented event type: 36.3% fell within 50 km and 56.8% within 100 km. Political violence within 50 km rose from 2,722 incidents in 2016 to 6,662 in 2024, after peaking at 8,113 in 2022. The 144.7% increase is a raw-count change within the border band.

Near-border violence showed higher reported lethality, occurred more often in lower-population localities, and shifted away from state forces toward rebel groups and political militias. In 30 km named borderland systems, a rise on one side made a rise on the other more likely in the same month or the next month, lifting the probability from the 15.7% background rate to 28.5% and 25.8% respectively, but not making it automatic.

Scope and analytical design

Mainland Africa only: island states, island territories, and maritime borders were excluded.

Internal land-border buffers were constructed at 10 km intervals from 10 to 250 km and linked to ACLED events in QGIS calculations.

An Albers equal-area projection was used, since the analysis compares land shares and buffer coverage at continental scale.

Geo_precision 3+ was excluded because coarse coordinates are not reliable within narrow border bands.

Included event types were limited to Battles, Violence against civilians, and Explosions/Remote violence.

Executive findings

- Violence against civilians was the most border-concentrated event type: 36.3% of political violence incidents fell within 50 km and 56.8% within 100 km, versus 30.9% and 49.3% for all political violence incidents.
- Political violence incidents within 50 km of a border rose by 144.7 per cent, or 3,940 incidents between 2016 and 2024, from 2,722 to 6,662, after peaking at 8,113 in 2022. This is a raw-count increase within the band.
- The heaviest concentrations were especially around the DRC, the Cameroon - Nigeria borderland, and the central Sahel.
- Border districts contained 27.8% of incidents but 31.5% of reported fatalities; on this mean measure, lethality was 2.83 fatalities per incident versus 2.36 elsewhere, a gap of about 20%.
- Using ACLED's population_5km field as a local population proxy, the lower-population third of localities showed higher near-border shares than the upper-population third: 37.6% versus 21.2% within 50 km.
- Actor composition near borders shifted away from state forces and toward rebel groups and political militias: within 50 km, rebel groups accounted for 33.3% of incidents and political militias 28.4%, versus 24.3% for state forces.
- When political violence incidents rose on one side of a 30 km named borderland system, the probability of a rise on the other side increased from 15.7% to 28.5% in the same month and 25.8% in the following month.

Data use note: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data) is the source of the underlying event data. Border buffers, landmass comparisons, connected borderland systems, and REC summaries were derived in QGIS for this paper.

Hugh Lamarque

1. Border distance and event type

Research question. How strongly was political violence concentrated near internal land borders, and did the pattern differ by event type?

Key findings

30.9% of political violence incidents fell within 50 km of an internal land border and 49.3% fell within 100 km.

Violence against civilians was the most border-oriented category: 36.3% fell within 50 km, compared with 28.5% for battles and 21.0% for explosions/remote violence.

The separation was already visible at 20 km: 18.9% of violence against civilians fell within that band, compared with 13.2% of battles and 11.2% of explosions/remote violence.

Method note

Battles capture armed clashes between organised actors.

Violence against civilians captures direct violence by an organised actor against civilians.

Explosions/Remote violence captures shelling, air or drone strikes, grenades, IEDs, and similar stand-off attacks.

These categories were used because they track organised violence more consistently across borders than protest or strategic-development events.

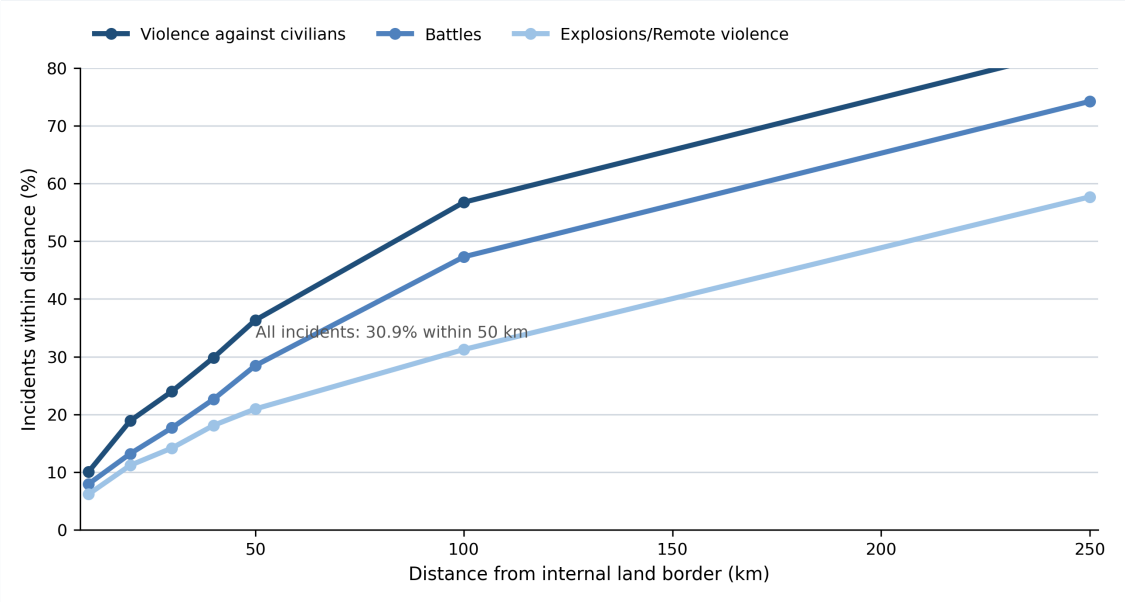

Figure 1. Cumulative share of political violence incidents within increasing distances of an internal land border, by event type.

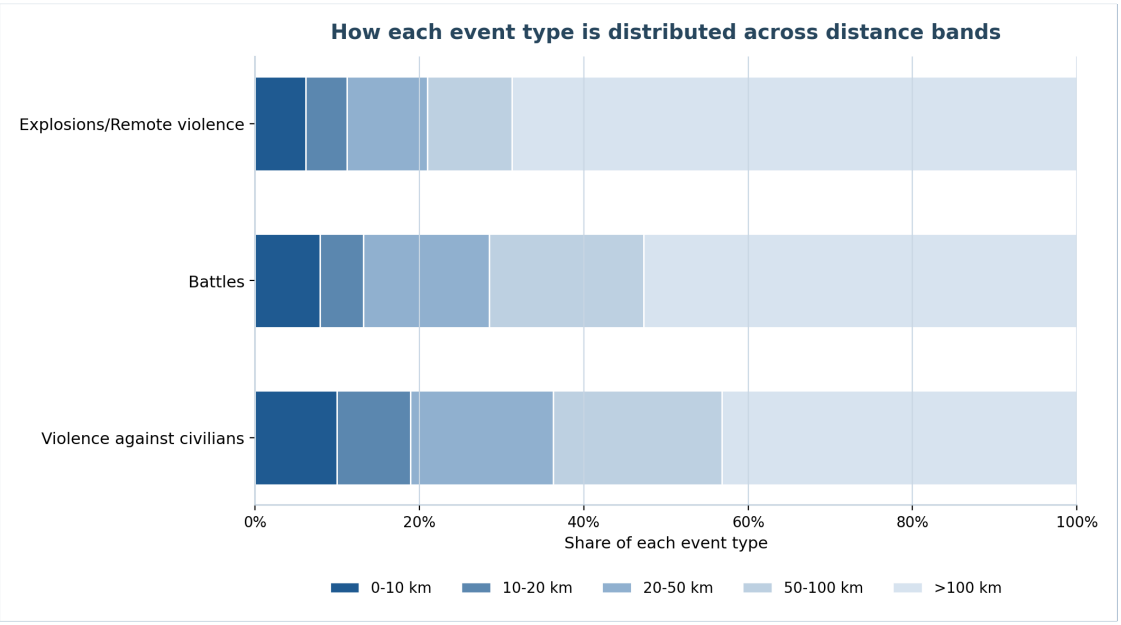

Figure 2. Distribution of each political violence event type across 0-10 km, 10-20 km, 20-50 km, 50-100 km, and >100 km bands.

2. Regions and countries

Research question. Which regions and countries drove the continental relationship between borders and political violence?

Key findings

Among ACLED regions, Central Africa (ACLED's "Middle Africa" coding) recorded the most border-concentrated political violence: 56.5% of incidents fell within 50 km and 89.6% within 100 km. Northern Africa was the least border-concentrated region.
Across the 48 mainland countries in Figure 4, 24 lay above the parity line, 23 below it, and Gambia sat exactly on it; the median country recorded 37.7% of incidents within 50 km, compared with 34.1% of landmass in the same band.
The clearest positive gaps were in Niger (80.3% of incidents vs 21.3% of landmass) and the DRC (66.0% vs 18.1%), while Nigeria (18.6% vs 19.6%), Kenya (25.1% vs 25.6%), and South Sudan (31.3% vs 32.5%) were close to parity. The comparison therefore shows uneven concentration near borders, not a uniform pattern in every country.

Method note

Regions follow ACLED regional coding; "Central Africa" here corresponds to ACLED's "Middle Africa" label.
The country comparison sets the share of incidents within 50 km against the share of national landmass within the same band.
The diagonal line marks parity between the two shares.

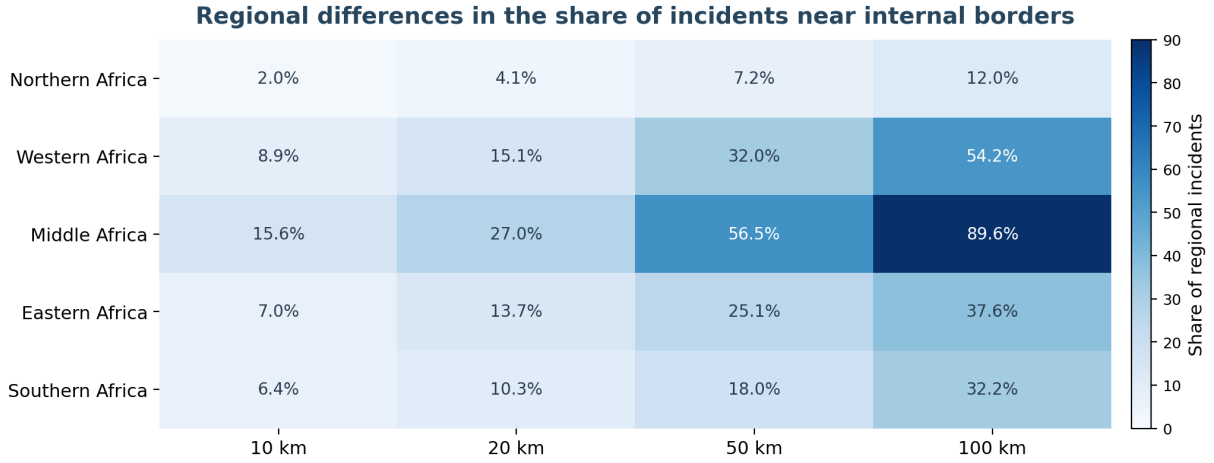

Figure 3. ACLED regions: share of incidents within 10 km, 20 km, 50 km, and 100 km of an internal land border.

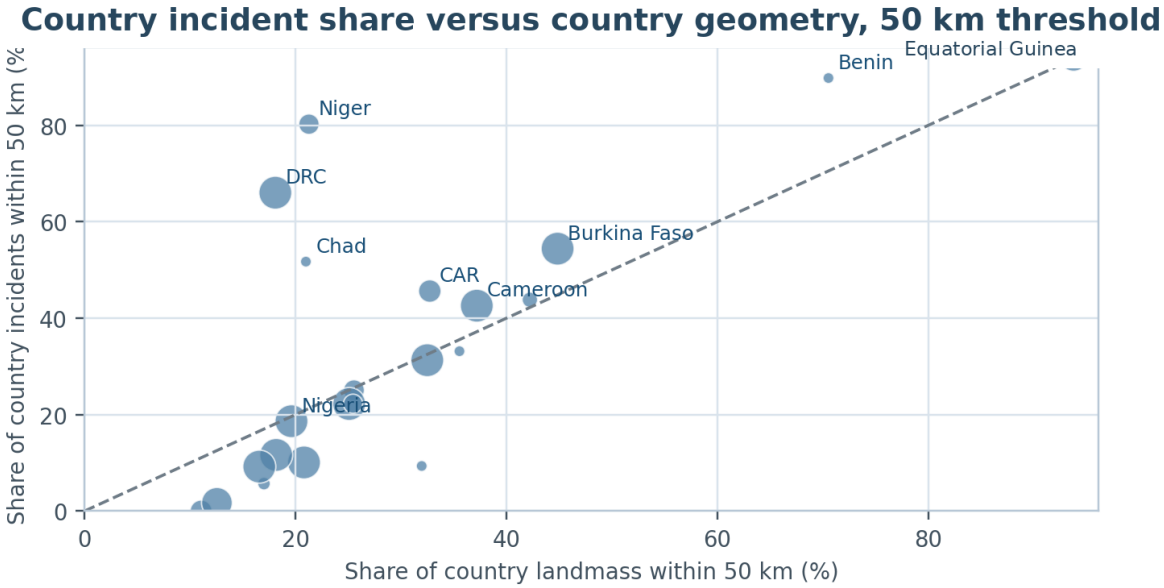

Figure 4. Share of political violence incidents within 50 km against the share of national landmass within 50 km. Each point is a country; the diagonal marks parity.

3. Connected Borderland Systems

Research question. Which connected borderland systems accounted for the heaviest concentrations of violence within 50 km?

Key findings

The connected borderland systems with the highest incidence of political violence within 50 km were DRC - Uganda, DRC - Rwanda, Cameroon - Nigeria, Burundi - DRC, Burkina Faso - Mali, and Niger - Nigeria.

These connected borderland systems were not all alike: some were tightly concentrated very close to the border, while others were spread more widely across the 50 km zone.

Table 1 is ordered by incident totals within 50 km over the full study period.

Method note

Connected borderland systems were assigned where admin2/admin3 areas overlapped a 30 km internal land-border buffer.

The 30 km threshold was used because it captures a plausible day-scale walking interaction zone around a land border.

The map below shows a selected eastern and north-eastern example of incident clustering within the border zone.

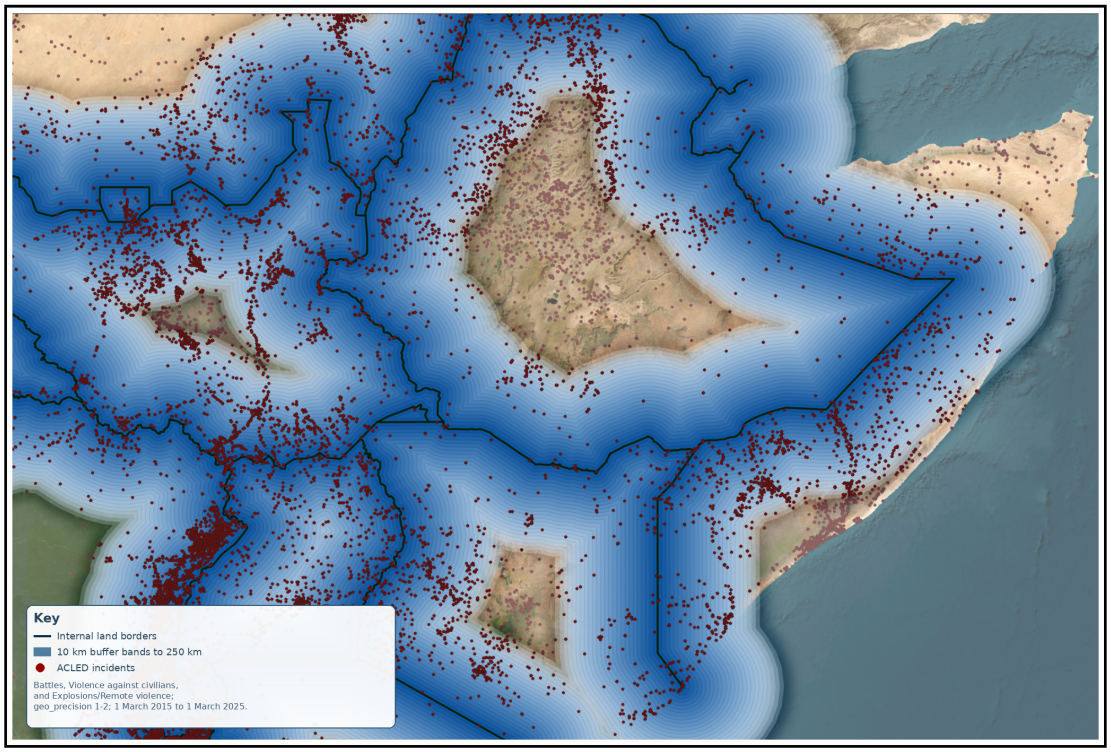

Figure 5. Incident clustering in selected eastern and north-eastern connected borderland systems.

Table 1. Connected borderland systems with the highest incidence of political violence within 50 km, 1 March 2015 to 1 March 2025

Borderland pair	Incidents within 50 km	Reported fatalities	Share within first 20 km
DRC - Uganda	8,660	19,469	37.5%
DRC - Rwanda	7,013	9,232	57.8%
Cameroon - Nigeria	6,828	21,269	64.2%
Burundi - DRC	5,496	5,200	75.4%
Burkina Faso - Mali	3,326	11,727	40.4%
Niger - Nigeria	2,755	10,798	61.0%

Note. Selected because they recorded the highest incident totals within 50 km over the study period. Totals identify high-incident connected borderland systems and are not intended to sum to the continental total.

4. When violence rose on one side of a borderland

Research question. When political violence incidents rose on one side of a borderland, how often did violence also rise on the other side in the same month or in the following month?

Key findings

Across monthly observations for 30 km named borderland systems, the other side recorded an average increase in 15.7% of months overall.

When incidents rose on one side, the probability of a rise on the other side increased from the 15.7% background rate to 28.5% in the same month and 25.8% in the following month. This indicates linked escalation across connected borderland systems, but not a consistent or automatic increase on the other side.

Cameroon - Nigeria illustrates the asymmetry: a rise on the Cameroon side was followed by +2.4 pp in Nigeria, while a rise on the Nigeria side was followed by -10.5 pp in Cameroon. The point is that shared borderlands can be linked in uneven, directional ways rather than through automatic reciprocity.

Method note

This section uses incidents flagged within 30 km of an internal land border. Monthly counts were created separately for each country side of each named borderland system.

The 15.7% background rate is the share of all monthly observations in which the other side recorded an increase. The same-month correlation (r) reported in Table 2 is descriptive only and summarises how often monthly changes moved together; it is not evidence of a uniform spillover effect.

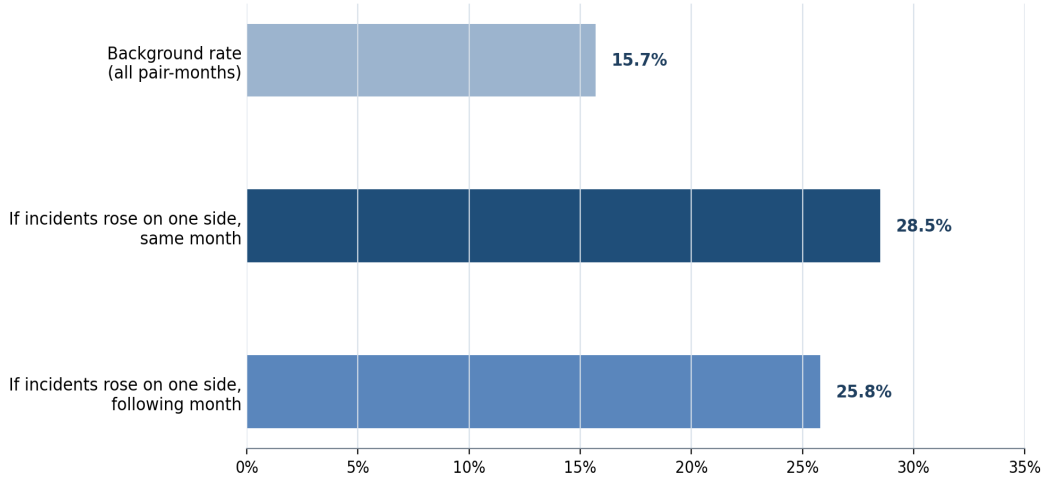

Figure 6. Probability that incidents also rose on the other side of the same 30 km named borderland system.

Table 2. Selected 30 km named borderland systems, monthly changes on both sides of the border

Borderland pair	Same-month correlation (r)	After the first side rose, next month	After the second side rose, next month
Burkina Faso - Niger	0.74	Burkina Faso -> Niger: +5.6 pp	Niger -> Burkina Faso: +14.7 pp
Ethiopia - Sudan	0.22	Ethiopia -> Sudan: +10.8 pp	Sudan -> Ethiopia: +10.3 pp
Cameroon - Nigeria	0.48	Cameroon -> Nigeria: +2.4 pp	Nigeria -> Cameroon: -10.5 pp
DRC - Rwanda	0.39	DRC -> Rwanda: +2.1 pp	Rwanda -> DRC: -9.2 pp
Burkina Faso - Mali	0.68	Burkina Faso -> Mali: +2.8 pp	Mali -> Burkina Faso: -1.2 pp
Cameroon - CAR	0.00	Cameroon -> CAR: -13.5 pp	CAR -> Cameroon: +5.8 pp

Note. Monthly changes are calculated over 1 March 2015 to 1 March 2025. Positive values indicate a higher probability than the 15.7% background rate; negative values indicate a lower probability.

5. Annual change and local setting

Research question. When did violence close to internal land borders become most acute, and what local settings stood out?

Key findings

Political violence incidents within 50 km rose by 3,940 between 2016 and 2024, from 2,722 to 6,662, after peaking at 8,113 in 2022. This 144.7% figure is a raw-count change within the border band.

The 2022 within-50 km peak was led by the DRC (2,873 incidents), Burkina Faso (872), South Sudan (536), Cameroon (532), and Nigeria (532). By 2024 the concentration had shifted more clearly toward the DRC and the Cameroon - Nigeria borderland.

Border districts contained 27.8% of all incidents but 31.5% of reported fatalities. On this mean measure, lethality was 2.83 fatalities per incident in border districts, compared with 2.36 elsewhere, a gap of 0.46.

Using ACLED's population_5km field as a local population proxy, the lower-population third of localities showed higher near-border shares than the upper-population third: 37.6% within 50 km, compared with 21.2%.

Method note

Annual raw counts use full calendar years 2016-2024 to avoid comparing partial years from the March-to-March extraction window.

Border districts are admin areas intersecting the border buffer. The 2.83 versus 2.36 result is a mean comparison, with a 95% confidence interval for the gap of 0.36-0.57.

For the local-population comparison, the chart contrasts the lower and upper thirds of ACLED's population_5km values (roughly below 6,500 and above 33,700 people within 5 km); the middle third is omitted.

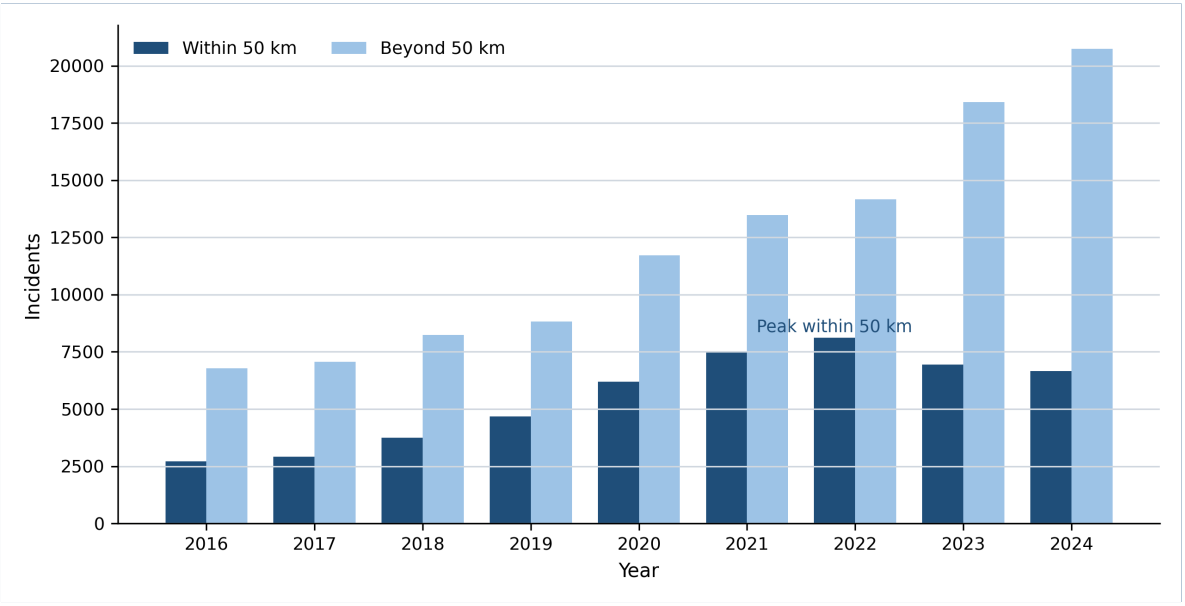

Figure 7. Annual incident counts within 50 km of an internal land border and beyond 50 km, full years 2016-2024.

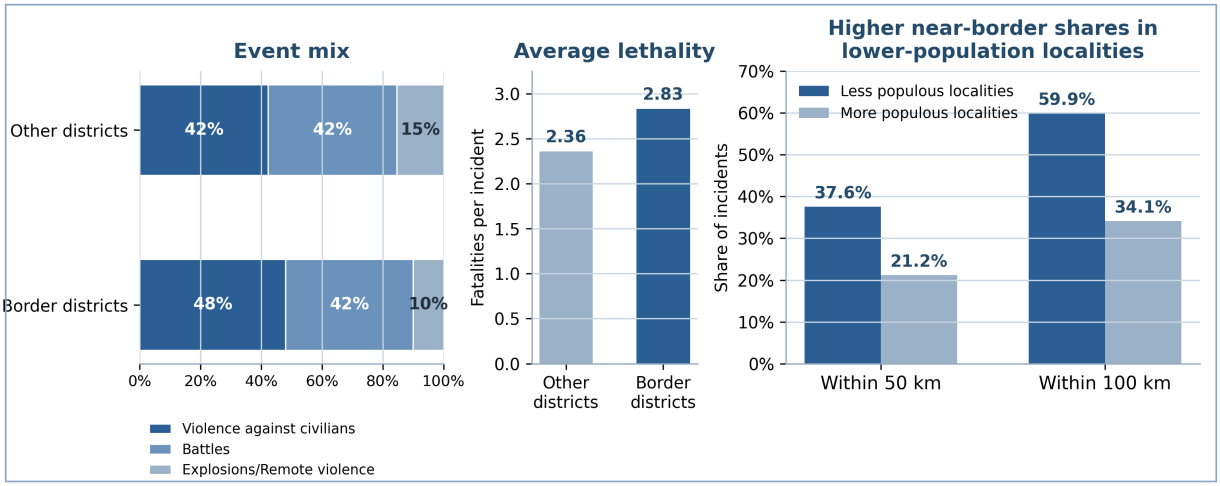

Figure 8. Border districts versus other districts, alongside a local-population comparison using lower- and upper-third bands of ACLED's population_5km field as a proxy for local population.

6. Regional economic communities

Research question. How did REC groupings compare once the share of political violence incidents within 50 km was set against the average share of member-country landmass in the same band?

Key findings

ECCAS, SADC, and the EAC combined high incident shares within 50 km with lower mean member-country landmass shares in the same band.
ECCAS was the clearest case: 61.3% of incidents fell within 50 km, compared with a mean member-country landmass share of 41.4%.
ECOWAS and IGAD showed the opposite pattern: their incident shares within 50 km were below the mean member-country landmass share of member countries in the same band.
Because REC membership overlaps, the same country can contribute to more than one REC total.

Method note

REC membership is country-based. Countries contribute their full incident totals to each REC they belong to.
The comparison against landmass uses the mean member-country landmass share within 50 km.
REC comparisons here are descriptive and exploratory only; they do not by themselves show whether trade, integration, or REC membership reduced violence.

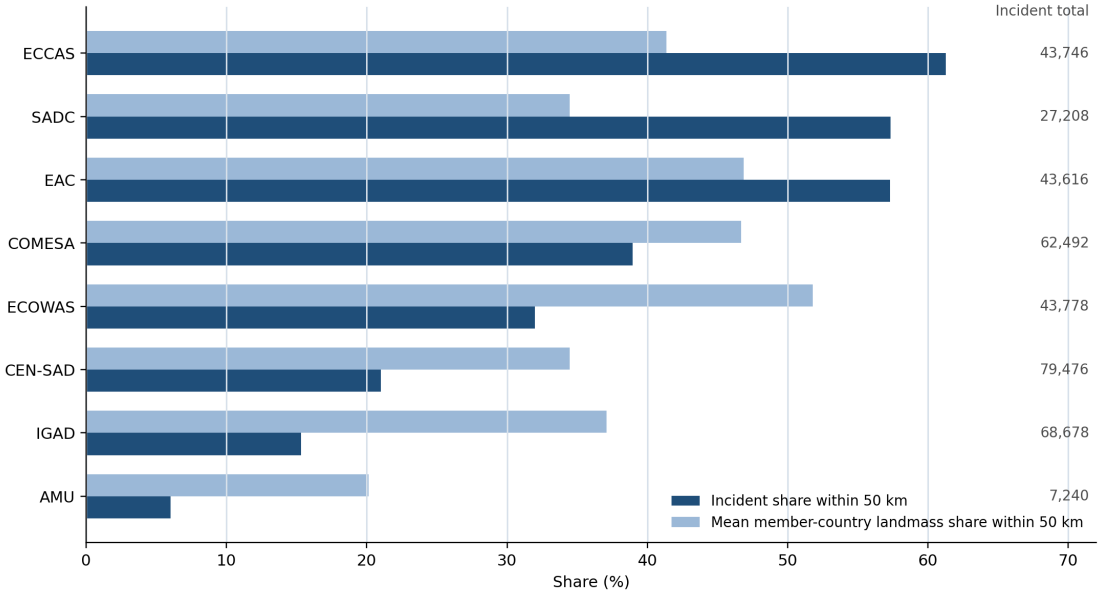

Figure 9. REC comparison of the incident share within 50 km and the mean member-country landmass share within 50 km. Incident totals are shown at right; countries can appear in more than one REC.

7. Actor 1 categories

Research question. How did the composition of ACLED's Actor 1 categories change close to internal land borders?

Key findings

Across all political violence incidents, rebel groups accounted for 31.2% of events, state forces 28.8%, political militias 23.4%, and identity militias 14.0%.
Within 50 km, the composition shifted toward political militias and rebel groups: political militias rose to 28.4% of incidents and rebel groups to 33.3%, while state forces fell to 24.3% and identity militias to 11.2%.
By incident rate, political-militia events were the most border-concentrated: 37.5% fell within 50 km and 55.5% within 100 km. State-force events were less concentrated at 26.2% and 42.7%.
Violence close to internal land borders was therefore not dominated by state forces; it tilted relatively more toward rebel groups and especially political militias.

Method note

Actor 1 records the first named actor in each ACLED event record.
The figure compares the overall composition of incidents with the composition of incidents within 50 km of an internal land border.
Categories shown are state forces, rebel groups, political militias, identity militias, and external/other forces.

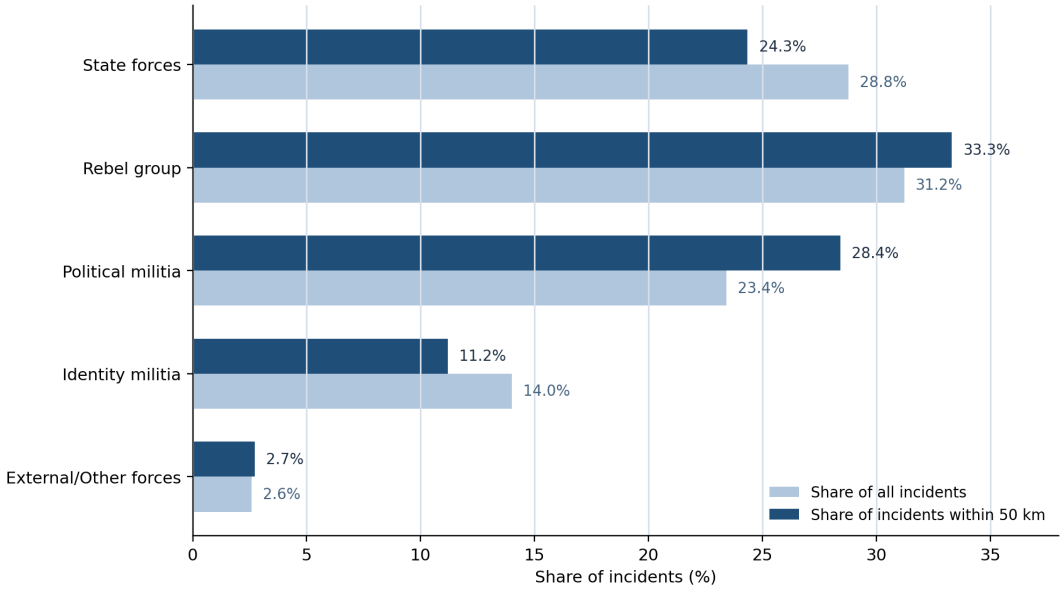

Figure 10. Composition of incidents overall and within 50 km of an internal land border, by ACLED Actor 1 category.

8. Overall conclusions

Across mainland Africa, political violence was disproportionately concentrated near internal land borders. The pattern was strongest for Violence against civilians, less pronounced for Battles, and weakest for Explosions/Remote violence. At regional level it was most pronounced in Central Africa, and the largest concentrations were around the DRC, the Cameroon - Nigeria borderland, Burundi - DRC, and parts of the central Sahel.

This was not a uniform borderlands story. In Figure 4, 24 mainland countries lay above the parity line, 23 below it, and Gambia sat exactly on it. The median country recorded 37.7% of incidents within 50 km of a border, compared with 34.1% of landmass in the same band. The clearest positive gaps were in Niger and the DRC, while Nigeria, Kenya, and South Sudan were close to parity.

Border districts were somewhat more lethal on average, incidents in lower-population localities were more likely to occur near borders, and the near-border actor mix shifted toward rebel groups and political militias and away from state forces. When violence rose on one side of a named borderland, a rise on the other side became more likely in the same month or the following month, but the relationship was uneven rather than automatic. The overall border share was similar in 2016-2019 and 2020-2024, even though the geography of violence changed over time. The REC comparison is best read as exploratory rather than as evidence that REC membership itself reduced or increased violence.

Source and acknowledgement: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data), accessed 25 March 2026. This paper covers mainland African events from 1 March 2015 to 1 March 2025 and analyses Battles, Violence against civilians, and Explosions/Remote violence with geo_precision 1-2. Internal land-border buffers, landmass comparisons, connected borderland systems, and REC summaries were constructed in QGIS for this analysis.