



1.0 Introduction

This Issue analyzes key developments that shaped the Greater Eastern Africa region through a conflict and geopolitical foresight lens during the month of January 2026. The period was marked by critical developments that underscored persistent structural pressures on regional security, governance, and environmental stability. Escalating armed confrontations, particularly in Sudan, South Sudan, and eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), continued to threaten civilian populations, displace communities, and challenge institutional capacity (UN News, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026). Concurrently, political contestation and state realignments emerged in Kenya and Uganda, reflecting contested governance, digital regulation, and the securitisation of information flows (Dawan Africa, 2026; BBC, 2026). Geopolitical manoeuvres, including shifts in bilateral partnerships and maritime access agreements, further highlighted the interplay of domestic decisions with regional power balances (Softpower, 2026). Environmental and climate-linked pressures persisted, with drought, flooding, and resource scarcity intensifying competition over water, pasture, and food supply chains, particularly in the Nile Basin and northern Kenya and Somalia (OCHA, 2026; World Bank, 2026). These factors collectively demonstrate a convergence of conflict, geopolitical, and environmental stressors that compound structural vulnerabilities across the subregion. The purpose of this monthly outlook is to provide a forward-looking, evidence-based security foresight assessment to guide national authorities, regional organisations, and international partners in anticipatory decision-making.

2.0 Key Themes

2.1 Conflict Trends

In January 2026, the Greater Eastern Africa region experienced intensified localised conflicts and cross-border insecurity, with dynamics reflecting both persistent structural drivers and emergent pressures. In Sudan, clashes between Rapid Support Forces and community militias in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states resulted in civilian casualties and displacement, exacerbating humanitarian vulnerability (UN News, 2026). South Sudan faced renewed inter-communal violence in Unity and Jonglei states, with armed groups exploiting governance vacuums to assert territorial control, complicating ongoing peacebuilding efforts (ReliefWeb, 2026). In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, M23 and allied militias advanced toward Rutshuru and Bunagana, triggering population flight into Uganda and Rwanda, demonstrating the persistent spillover of conflict across porous borders (Al Jazeera, 2026). In northern Kenya and Somalia, clan-based skirmishes over pasture and water intensified due to seasonal resource scarcity, highlighting the interconnection between environmental stress and armed violence (OCHA, 2026).

Collectively, these events indicate that conflict in the region is increasingly structural rather than episodic. Armed group proliferation, cross-border displacement, and governance fragility are reinforcing each other, creating self-sustaining security risks. National authorities, humanitarian agencies, and regional mechanisms face overlapping pressures that undermine civilian protection, constrain institutional response capacity, and threaten long-term stability. The convergence of localised, cross-border, and environmental drivers underscores the urgency for anticipatory conflict management, coordinated monitoring, and targeted intervention to mitigate spillover effects while preserving fragile community resilience.

Foresight Recommendations

- **Protect civilians in Sudan:** Sudanese authorities, supported by AU and IGAD teams, must establish secure humanitarian corridors in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, deploy rapid response units, and guarantee access to food, water, and shelter to prevent militia attacks on civilians
- **Mediate inter-communal violence in South Sudan:** IGAD and UNMISS should facilitate structured dialogues in Unity and Jonglei states, using trained mediators and community elders to resolve disputes, prevent armed escalation, and reinforce local governance mechanisms
- **Contain cross-border spillover in DRC:** DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda must coordinate border security operations, implement early-warning monitoring, and establish temporary reception centres for displaced civilians in collaboration with the AU and UNHCR to reduce humanitarian and security risks
- **Manage resource conflicts in northern Kenya and Somalia:** County governments, in partnership with FAO, OCHA, and local councils, should deploy community-based water and pasture management frameworks, coupled with conflict-sensitive monitoring and rapid response teams, to reduce clan-based clashes and protect livelihoods.

Forward-looking scenario planning: If coordinated measures are implemented across Sudan, South Sudan, DRC, and the northern Kenya–Somalia corridor, structural conflict pressures may be mitigated, spillover contained, and civilian protection strengthened. Failure to act risks entrenched militia networks, expanded cross-border displacement, and regional destabilisation, reinforcing the self-perpetuating cycle of armed violence and institutional fragility across Greater Eastern Africa.

2.2 Geopolitics

During January 2026, Greater Eastern Africa experienced heightened geopolitical contestation, marked by strategic realignments, evolving alliance structures, and intensified competition over regional influence. Ethiopia and Djibouti formalised an energy-sharing agreement, enhancing infrastructure interdependence but also introducing potential leverage points for interstate disputes (Reuters, 2026). Kenya's engagement with the East African Community (EAC) on transnational border management reflected a growing recognition that unilateral security approaches are insufficient to manage shared risks (Africanews, 2026). Somalia's diplomacy with Gulf and Horn states over maritime security underscored competing claims to strategic resources, while Uganda expanded bilateral security cooperation with Rwanda, signalling efforts to balance external partnerships against domestic stability (BBC, 2026).

These developments collectively demonstrate simultaneous strategic alignment and interstate rivalry, increasing the risk of rapid escalation without coordinated multilateral oversight. Regional mechanisms such as IGAD and the AU PSC continue to provide forums for mediation, but operational gaps and inconsistent engagement create vulnerabilities that external actors may exploit (UN Security Council, 2026). Cross-border security, economic interdependence, and diplomatic manoeuvring are increasingly intertwined, amplifying systemic complexity and highlighting the need for anticipatory, coordinated interventions.

Foresight Recommendations

- **Strengthen multilateral coordination:** IGAD Secretariat, in coordination with the AU PSC, should convene quarterly strategic reviews of bilateral and trilateral agreements affecting regional security, including Ethiopia-Djibouti energy initiatives, to prevent escalation.
- **Monitor maritime and trade corridors:** EAC member states, supported by AU technical teams, should deploy joint monitoring of key ports and sea lanes to anticipate disputes and mitigate risks to commerce and strategic assets.
- **Enhance conflict mediation capacity:** Somalia and Djibouti, with AU facilitation, should establish a high-level dispute resolution framework for maritime and border security issues to reduce potential flashpoints.
- **Manage external influence:** Regional capitals should transparently report foreign security and infrastructure partnerships, particularly with Gulf and Horn actors, to minimise covert influence over domestic and interstate decision-making.

Forward-looking scenario planning: If current trends persist, Greater Eastern Africa is likely to witness a continuation of competing alignment and rivalry over the next quarter, with strategic partnerships shaping access to resources, influence over border governance, and capacity for rapid escalation. Timely, coordinated multilateral oversight, transparency, and diplomatic mediation could stabilise key corridors and prevent opportunistic interventions by external actors.

2.3 Environmental Security

During January 2026, environmental and climate-related pressures in Greater Eastern Africa intensified, intersecting with fragile governance structures and conflict dynamics. Northern Kenya and southern Somalia experienced prolonged drought conditions, disrupting pastoralist livelihoods and triggering localised competition over water points and grazing land (OCHA, 2026; FEWS NET, 2026). Simultaneously, heavy seasonal flooding in the Nile basin and along the Tana River damaged transport infrastructure, undermined agricultural production, and disrupted food supply chains in Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan (World Bank, 2026; FAO, 2026). In Ethiopia's Afar and Somali regions, recurrent heatwaves contributed to heightened intercommunal tensions as herders and agro-pastoralist communities contested scarce resources (ReliefWeb, 2026). These environmental stressors, combined with limited state capacity for rapid response, exacerbated population displacement, increased vulnerability of civilians, and heightened the risk of spillover conflict across borders.

The cumulative effect of these developments demonstrates a systemic convergence of climate risk, humanitarian stress, and governance fragility. Environmental shocks are increasingly inseparable from political and security outcomes, as resource scarcity amplifies competition, undermines institutional legitimacy, and challenges multilateral mitigation mechanisms. Early-warning systems, adaptive resource governance, and regional coordination remain critical to managing both immediate impacts and long-term structural vulnerabilities (UNEP, 2026).

Foresight Recommendations

- **Strengthen early-warning systems:** National meteorological agencies, supported by IGAD and AU climate units, should integrate satellite, ground, and community-level data to monitor drought, flooding, and heatwave trends in Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

- **Enhance cross-border water governance:** Nile Basin Initiative and relevant national ministries should coordinate adaptive water management protocols to mitigate disputes and ensure equitable resource access.
- **Protect climate-vulnerable populations:** Governments of South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya, with UNHCR and IOM support, should establish mobile humanitarian response units to provide food, water, and shelter to displaced and affected communities.
- **Invest in resilience infrastructure:** AU and World Bank technical teams should assist regional governments in climate-resilient transport, irrigation, and energy projects to safeguard economic activity and reduce vulnerability to recurrent environmental shocks.

Forward-looking scenario planning: With lack of coordinated action, environmental stress in Greater Eastern Africa is expected to intensify displacement, localised conflict, and competition over water and pasture in the coming quarter. Drought-affected pastoral zones and flood-prone basins will remain focal points of livelihood erosion and governance strain. These pressures are likely to increase humanitarian demand and cross-border spillover risks. Where early-warning, adaptive resource management, and coordinated response mechanisms function effectively, vulnerability and displacement pressures can be moderated. Fragmented or delayed responses will allow environmental shocks to reinforce broader cycles of insecurity and fragility across the region.

3.0 Conclusion

Conflict and geopolitical developments in January 2026 in Greater Eastern Africa confirm that insecurity is no longer driven by isolated crises but by the interaction of conflict, geopolitical realignment, and environmental stress operating simultaneously. Armed violence persists where political fragmentation intersects with climate-induced displacement and weakened state capacity, allowing local shocks to generate regional spillovers. Concurrently, shifting alliances, infrastructure diplomacy, and maritime positioning are altering strategic balances faster than existing coordination frameworks can absorb. Environmental pressures now function as direct security multipliers, undermining livelihoods, accelerating competition, and eroding institutional legitimacy across borders. These converging dynamics indicate a region under sustained structural strain rather than episodic instability. The central strategic challenge is therefore anticipatory rather than reactive: aligning governance, security cooperation, and climate risk management before pressures translate into irreversible destabilisation. With absence of such alignments, conflict cycles, humanitarian stress, and geopolitical friction will continue to reinforce one another, constraining regional resilience and complicating collective responses well beyond the immediate period under review.

4.0 References

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