

The weekly briefing | 14 April 2014

Political and security risk updates

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Africa

UN Secretary-General calls for independent rights monitoring in Western Sahara ahead of peacekeeping force debate

In a report to the UN Security Council on 10 April, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called for independent human rights monitoring in Western Sahara. His report reopens the debate over whether the existing UN peacekeeping force in the Moroccan-controlled territory should widen their remit to include the reporting of human rights violations, for which Morocco has come under renewed criticism in recent months.

While Ban welcomed Moroccan efforts to improve the situation in the disputed territory, including the decision to end the trial of civilians by military tribunal, controversy over the disputed territory remains. Western Sahara has been under Moroccan control for almost 40 years, annexing the former Spanish colony in a move never recognised by the international community. Morocco has been criticised internationally following recent clampdowns on pro-independence groups in the territory. The exploration of Western Saharan waters by foreign oil companies has also become a contentious issue. The existing UN peacekeeping force, MINURSO, has monitored a ceasefire between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, since 1991, but it is currently not responsible for reporting on human rights.

With the UN force's mandate renewal coming up later this month, controversy is likely to re-emerge over the disputed territory. A US-led effort to extend the mandate to include human rights reporting was dropped last year following intense Moroccan lobbying efforts. Morocco proposes autonomy measures for the territory, but the Polisario Front rejects this, insisting instead on the right to a referendum. The Security Council will next consult on Western Sahara on 17 April.



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Other developments

The UN has approved the deployment of 12,000 troops to the Central African Republic (CAR). The Security Council resolution was endorsed unanimously on 10 April, marking the UN's most decisive step yet to stem the spiral of sectarian violence. As the force will not deploy until September, the currently deployed 8,000-strong peacekeeping force (an amalgamation of African Union and European forces, led by France) is likely to be conspicuously under-resourced due the controversial recent withdrawal of Chadian forces, following allegations of Chad's pro-Séléka involvement in CAR. The continuing conflict and retaliation by the Christian anti-balaka self-defence militias has led to an exodus of predominantly Muslim refugees into neighbouring countries, with the UN refugee agency reporting the daily arrival of thousands of refugees to Cameroon in particular.

The United States has announced sanctions targeting individuals involved in the South Sudan conflict, the State Department announced on 11 April. The United States, which backed South Sudan's bid for independence in 2011, expressed increasing concern over the conflict that has destabilised the country over the past months despite repeated ceasefire attempts. President Salva Kiir's army is fighting rebel forces tied to former Vice President Riek Machar, who is accused of conspiring to initiate a coup against the current president. Meanwhile, rebel forces claim that Kiir is trying to purge internal opposition before next year's elections. The decision to impose sanctions, including visa bans and asset seizures, follows a decree signed by US President Barack Obama last week authorising punitive sanctions against South Sudanese individuals threatening peace negotiations.

Human Rights Watch has accused Kenya of mistreating the large Somali population living in the country. On 11 April, the NGO heavily criticised the Kenyan government for its heavy-handed approach towards Somalis following increased security measures against those suspected of sympathising with Somalia's radical al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist movement that claimed responsibility for the 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. Over the previous week, police have detained close to 4,000 people, a significant proportion of which were detained within Nairobi's main Somali district, Eastleigh. The Kenyan government has announced that several hundred of the arrested are still undergoing identity checks, and 82 have already been expelled from the country.

On the radar

- **Anti-government protests possible in Swaziland** surrounding the birthday of King Mswati III on 19 April.
- **First round of the presidential election in Algeria** on 17 April.
- **General elections in South Africa** on 7 May.
- **Investigations are to be carried out into the shooting of British and French consultants to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),** who were attacked upon their arrival in Galkayo, central Somalia, on 7 April.
- **The UN is warning of the risk of food insecurity to up to four million people in Sudan** due to poor harvest, conflict and displacement.

Americas

Growing discontent with Argentine president amid economic U-turn

On 10 April, a national labour strike was staged in Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, and the major cities Mendoza and Cordoba. Over a million people went on strike to demand a 40% wage increase to compensate for inflation, which private consultancies say currently stands at 35% per year. During 24 hours, airports, docks, and road and rail networks were blocked. The action was called by the Confederation of Labour (CGT), a union that represents dockers and road hauliers. The CGT is headed by the powerful labour magnate Hugo Moyano, a former friend and now bitter rival of President Fernández de Kirchner. Nearly one out of five employed – and two out of three unionised workers – belong to the CGT, making of it one of the largest labour federations of the world.

Since the beginning of the year, the country has endured a U-turn in economic policies. The initial shift can be identified in January, when the Central Bank of Argentina (BCRA) devalued the peso by nearly 20%. Up until then, Fernandez had consistently rejected the idea of such a severe devaluation because it would predominantly affect the working class, which tends to rely exclusively on savings to pay for retired. Furthermore, in an effort to bolster the accountability of its economic indicators, the government has recently reviewed its GDP and inflation indexes. Such a review was demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which threatened the country with sanctions if it failed to provide more reliable economic indicators. As a result, the official inflation rate was increased and the output growth of 2013 was revised from 4.9% to 3%. These transformations reflect a broader shift in the country's economic model in an attempt to bolster foreign investment and access to cheap credit. This was a major factor behind the recent agreement to pay \$5 billion to the Spanish oil and gas company Repsol in order to end an international legal suit after the government expropriated Repsol's majority stake in YPF in 2012. This return to more orthodox policies was also reflected in the recent 20% reduction in state subsidies for gas and electricity tariffs.

The recent national protests should be understood in the context of this U-turn in economic policies. Aware of the limits of its economic model, the Argentine government is undertaking a gradual fiscal and monetary adjustment, notably to address the problems of rising inflation and decreasing foreign reserves. As such, further national strikes are likely to occur as the government deepens the economic reforms. In May 2014, the government is to meet with the Club of Paris to renegotiate the repayment of \$9 billion of unpaid debt issued during the country's 2001 economic crisis.

Other developments

On 10 April, Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro initiated a cycle of meetings with the opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD). The talks were organised at the behest of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). The opposition notably demands an armistice for its imprisoned leaders, which the government has not yet accepted.

Peruvian authorities captured 23 leading members of the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) militant group during a national operation initiated on 6 March. Created in 1980, the Maoist guerrilla group has been implicated in the death of 70,000 people, though following the capture of its founder and leader, Abimael Guzman, in 1992, the threat posed by the group has become marginal. Around 400 members of the organisation are believed to be still actively engaged, especially in the south of the country.

On 12 April, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius, paid a visit to Cuban President Raul Castro to discuss political topics, human rights and bilateral relations. Since February, the European Union has initiated a process of normalisation of its relations with the island's communist regime. The Cuban government is currently undertaking a progressive liberalisation of its economy in order to attract foreign investors. However, trade with the country is limited due to the continued US embargo.

On the radar

- **Presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in Panama** on 3 May.
- **Unrest almost certain to continue across Venezuela's main cities**, particularly in the capital, Caracas, amid the ongoing political crisis.
- **Nationwide demonstrations are likely across Brazil** on 17 April, surrounding the anniversary of the killing of 19 landless demonstrators by police in 1996.
- **Activists plan to rally on 15 April in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil**, against the forthcoming FIFA World Cup tournament.

Asia and Pacific

Maoist violence mars India's elections in Chhattisgarh state

Maoist rebels have caused the deaths of 14 people in two attacks on 12 April in India's central state of Chhattisgarh. During the first attack, a land mine exploded underneath a bus in the Bijapur district of Karnataka state, which resulted in the deaths of five election workers and two bus drivers. Rebels then opened fire on the bus, injuring a further five people. In a second attack on the same day, insurgents killed two civilians and five security officials in Darbha Forest. The attacks are believed to have been designed to disrupt the general election, which began on 7 April and is set to continue across the country until 12 May. Voting began in Chhattisgarh on 10 April and is due to continue in two additional rounds later this month.

The Maoist insurgency in India, also known as the Naxalite movement, began in the 1960s. Since that time, violence associated with the group has reportedly claimed more than 12,000 lives. The movement currently has operations in 20 out of India's 28 states. They are, however, most active in the states of Chhattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. Naxal violence has targeted both civilians and state officials, and has been deemed the country's most significant internal security threat by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Although the Naxals have caused sporadic violence in India, they are not expected to cause widespread disruption to election procedures. In response to these attacks, the government has deployed thousands of paramilitary officers and other security personnel to protect voting stations across the country. The largest concentrations of security forces are being stationed in those areas where the Naxal presence is strongest. The insurgents have called for a boycott of the elections and threatened increasing violence as the polling continues throughout the month.

This year's Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) elections have also caused strong tensions between the leading parties. The Congress Party, currently led by the incumbent prime minister and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are typically considered the primary parties in India's elections. Recently, however, a variety of locally-oriented parties and the Aam Aadmi Party, which runs on a primarily anti-corruption platform, have gained strength in the Indian political arena. Despite the recent episode of violence, the elections have so far been largely peaceful, though occasional violence has been reported across the country when supporters of competing parties have clashed. Although some further violence at campaign events is possible, Naxal violence is not likely to escalate considerably, nor have any significant impact on voter turnout.

Other developments

The Myanmar government announced the creation of a new committee to protect foreign aid workers. The government has called for an investigation into attacks on aid workers in late March in Rakhine State. The attacks destroyed over 30 offices and residences, with damage estimated to exceed \$420,000. The investigation yielded a report that was delivered to the president, as well as the leaderships of many large non-government organisations operating in the region. As part of the investigation report, the government indicated that it will establish a committee with national-level authority to ensure the security of aid workers. The new committee will be aimed at providing both increased physical security and fostering greater community relations with local residents in Rakhine. NGO operations were suspended in some areas following the violence. The majority of these restrictions have since been lifted and aid work has resumed, but some areas remain inaccessible to NGO activity.

Over 190 million people casted votes in Indonesia's parliamentary elections on 9 April. Although official results will not be known until early May, exit polls indicated that the country's main opposition party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), earned around 19% of the popular vote. This number falls below the 25-30% that many had predicted for the party. The PDI-P is the party to which popular politician Joko Widodo belongs. Dubbed 'Jokowi' by many Indonesians, Widodo recently announced that he would be running for president in the country's presidential elections in early June of this year. However, in order for a party to offer a candidate for the presidency, they must secure either 20% of parliamentary seats or a minimum of 25% of the popular vote in the parliamentary elections. Although the official number is not yet known, it appears that Jokowi will likely need to form a coalition with at least one other party in order to run for the presidency. In contrast to Jokowi's rising popularity, the Democrat Party of incumbent President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono earned only 9% of the popular vote, down from 21% in 2009.

South Korea has announced that they will be engaging in a joint military air drill with the United States. The drill, known as Max Thunder, is typically held twice a year, but this year's exercises will be the largest US-South Korean air drills conducted to date. The exercises will involve 103 aircraft and 1,400 troops. In addition to Max Thunder, the United States and South Korea are continuing regular exercises known as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve, which are set to conclude on 18 April. The Max Thunder exercise will last two weeks and is likely to focus on practical scenarios between the US and Republic of Korea Air Force pilots. The announcement comes as tensions between South Korea and North Korea continue to rise.

On the radar

- **Sunni Muslim groups plan to rally in Lahore, Pakistan**, on 15 April to condemn the alleged desecration of shrines in Syria.
- **Increased security expected across India and Sri Lanka surrounding Puthandu** (also known as Tamil New Year), which commences on 14 April.
- **The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has called for a shutdown strike** in the Rangpur district of Bangladesh on 16 April.
- **Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott hopes to expedite the signing of a free trade deal with China** at this year's Bo'ao Forum for Asia.
- **Increased security and associated disruption expected in the Philippines during Holy Week** (also known as Mahal na Araw or Semana Santa), which commenced on 13 April and ends on 20 April.

Europe

NATO raises concerns over Russian build-up near Ukrainian border

On 8 April, NATO called on Russia to pull back its forces that had been gathered at the border with eastern Ukraine and warned that Russia would face grave consequences if any further intervention was carried out. NATO's Secretary-General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, also called for Russia to engage in dialogue with the Ukrainian government. On 10 April, NATO's chief military commander suggested the possibility of deploying US troops to NATO-member countries in Eastern Europe to countermeasure Russian military threats against Ukraine. The foreign ministers of NATO countries have tasked US Air Force General Philip Breedlove with presenting a package of land, air and maritime measures by 15 April to assure Eastern European members of their safety in the face of an increasing Russian military presence in the region. At a NATO conference in Paris, photographs were presented, showing a continuing build-up of a combat-ready Russian military presence along the Ukrainian border, including warplanes, combat helicopters, armour, artillery and airborne or special forces brigades. It is believed that Russia has gathered a force of approximately 40,000 troops in the area.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk visited Donetsk on 11 April. In a bid to resolve the standoff with pro-Russian protesters in the city, Yatsenyuk announced that the Ukrainian government was committed to addressing the grievances of eastern Ukrainians. He said that in upcoming constitutional reforms, the government would take steps towards decentralisation and give regions more power, such as the abolition of local administrations controlled by the Ukrainian government. Pro-Russian separatists have occupied a regional administration building in Donetsk since 6 April. The protesters originally called for a referendum; however, during the week they lowered their demands to autonomy, though they warned that a referendum could be held at a later date. Tensions remain high around the country, especially in eastern Ukraine, which has a high percentage of ethnic Russians. Ukrainian authorities regained control of a building in Kharkiv on 8 April, but have stated that occupiers of a state security building in Luhansk are holding 60 people hostage and have placed explosives in the building. On 11 April, at least seven people were injured in clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian protesters in Odessa. The clashes occurred outside a hotel where one of the presidential candidates was staying.

Concerns rose last week over the future of Russian natural gas supply to Europe. On 10 April, in a letter addressed to 18 leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned of the possibility of a cut-off of Russian natural gas supply through Ukrainian pipelines to the continent if European leaders did not help Ukraine swiftly settle its gas debt. According to Russia, Ukraine owes \$17 billion in gas discounts and may have incurred another \$18.4 billion fine from the 2009 contract signed with Russia. As in the 2009 political crisis, Russia is using gas as a leverage to influence the direction of the crisis in Russia's favour. This week, senior officials from Russia, the European Union, the United States and Ukraine will meet to discuss the situation for the first time since the beginning of the crisis. Officials present at the talks will include the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton; the US Secretary of State John Kerry; the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov; and the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Andrii Deschchytsia.

Other developments

On 8 April, the Spanish parliament voted against a proposal to hold an independence referendum in the Catalonia autonomous community. In December 2013, the Catalan President, Artur Mas, announced that a referendum would be held on 9 November 2014 and that a question had already been chosen. Mas proposed the referendum to congress. Prior to the voting, the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy addressed congress, appealing against the referendum and stressing the importance of Spanish unity. The leader of the Socialist Party, Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba, argued a requirement to respect Spanish law, and that the referendum could not be decided solely by Catalonia. It is very likely that the referendum will nevertheless go ahead as Mas had previously asserted that the referendum would be held irrespective of the vote in congress.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls's new government survived a confidence vote in parliament on 8 April, winning the backing of 304 MPs in the national assembly. The vote gives Valls the mandate for his government and ministers to carry out their pledges. Following the vote, Valls laid out his government's political, social and economic plans for the next three years. The prime minister promised to expand growth, to reduce the unemployment rate and to win support for the government. Valls pledged that the government would pursue budget responsibility rather than austerity measures. Valls told MPs that additional budget savings would be unveiled in the summer in order to further reduce the public deficit. In a recent report, the European Commission warned the French government that it risked being unable to reach its budget deficit reduction target if appropriate action was not taken immediately.

A car bomb exploded outside the Greek Central Bank in Athens in the early hours of 10 April. The explosion caused serious damage to offices, shops and cars surrounding the bank. Local authorities prevented any injuries by cordoning off the area following an anonymous tip-off to the offices of local media warning of a bomb containing around 70 kilograms of explosives. The explosion came on the same day as Greece returned to the international bond markets for the first time in four years and the day before the visit of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. No group has come forward to claim responsibility; however, police believe that a left-wing or anarchist guerrilla group are responsible.

On the radar

- European Union's Foreign Affairs Council will be held in Luxembourg on 14-15 April.
- Anti-austerity related protests and clashes are almost certain to continue in Italy's capital, Rome.
- 24 April marks the anniversary of the 'Armenian Genocide', carried out by Ottoman Turks in 1915-16 during World War I.
- 6 May marks the anniversary of violent clashes during a demonstration in Bolotnaya Square in Russia's capital, Moscow, during 2012.
- European Union MEP's will debate Russia's pressure on Eastern Partnership countries and attempts to destabilise eastern Ukraine on 16 April and vote on 17 April.

Middle East

Violence in Iraq increases in run up to election

At least 50 soldiers and seven armed men were killed on 10 April in the city of Ramadi, western Anbar province, Iraq. Fighters belonging to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have frequently clashed with military forces in the Sunni-dominated province this year, and the al-Qaeda linked group continues to have some influence over areas of the provincial capital, Ramadi, and Fallujah. Elsewhere in Iraq, two car bombs claimed the lives of at least 13 people on the same day in predominantly Shi'ite neighbourhoods in Baghdad.

Anbar province has slipped into chaos this year due to the police removal of anti-government protest groups outside the city of Ramadi in January, following intelligence claiming that the camp was serving as headquarters for the leadership of ISIL. The ISIL has gained territorial control and influence in Anbar since the withdrawal of US troops and the outbreak of civil war in neighbouring Syria. Moreover, Sunni grievances against the Shi'ite led government have boosted recruitment for militant groups. On average, Anbar province has experienced at least 15 violent incidents per day between January and March and some 400,000 people have been displaced so far this year.

Parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place on 30 April, the first since US troops left Iraq in 2011, and security remains a key issue. Voting is likely to be severely affected in Sunni areas where violence has been frequent, and the process in Anbar province seems unlikely to take place at this stage. Even if polling stations are established in Anbar, turnout will be low as many have fled the violence and others will be dissuaded from taking part. Bombings and attacks on public places are expected to increase in the run-up to the polls.

Other developments

Security forces arrested 13 members of a Yemeni gang on 7 April in connection with a number of kidnappings targeting foreigners and businessmen. The military has carried out several operations in response to the recent spate of high-profile kidnappings in the country. Last month, two UN workers were kidnapped and released unharmed in Sanaa and three foreigners were kidnapped in February. Groups seeking either ransom or negotiation with the government regularly target foreigners. The declining security situation in Yemen is likely to continue as the government struggles to control various separatist movements and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The United States has named the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis group as a foreign terrorist organisation. The group is widely considered to be Egypt's most active militant organisation and has claimed responsibility for several high-profile attacks throughout the Sinai Peninsula and in Cairo. Military infrastructure and personnel have regularly been targeted in operations. In addition to a failed assassination attempt on Egypt's interior minister, the group has also conducted rocket attacks into Israel. Militants have carried out attacks across Egypt since the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, and similar incidents are likely to increase in the run-up to elections in May.

At least 25 people were killed when two car bombs exploded in the Syrian city of Homs on 9 April.

The bombs exploded half an hour apart in the Karam al-Luz district of the city causing widespread damage and injuring 107 people. Syrian state television blamed the attack in the predominantly Alawite neighbourhood on rebel fighters, though no group has taken responsibility. The conflict in Syria has become increasingly drawn out between supporters of President Bashir al-Assad and the Sunni opposition groups opposed to his rule. Rebel fighters have come under increasing pressure as government troops, backed by Hezbollah militants, have advanced on strategic rebel strongholds along the Lebanese border.

On the radar

- **17 April marks Syrian Independence Day** following the withdrawal of the last French troops in 1946.
- **Construction on Egypt's largest oil refinery is expected to begin this week,** to be completed by 2017. The refinery will reduce Egypt's reliance on imports of crude oil and petroleum products.
- **The trial of three al-Jazeera journalists in Egypt has been adjourned yet again until 22 April.** The journalists are accused of spreading false news and providing the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood with a public platform.
- **Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails are to begin protests** over Israel's decision to scrap the latest release of prisoners agreed upon as part of peace talks.
- **The first round of the presidential election will commence in Algeria** on 17 April.

Polar regions

Nordic defence ministers form united front against Russia.

The defence ministers of Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland met in the town of Tromsø in Norway's far north on 8-9 April to discuss joint security concerns. The conference was dominated by the question of how the Nordic countries should coordinate their foreign policy towards Russia in light of continuing developments in Ukraine. The Norwegian defence minister, Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide, told journalists in a subsequent press release that 'Nordic countries are united in condemnation of Russian action and violation of international law'. The ministers discussed how to increase defence coordination between the countries under the aegis of two international organisations: NATO, of which only Iceland, Denmark and Norway are members, and NORDEFCO, a regional defence organisation established in 2009 to coordinate military cooperation across the Nordic states.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine has developed alongside an increasingly belligerent stance in the Arctic and Baltic regions: numerous bombing simulations were flown last year over Finland and Sweden, and the Russian armed forces have reopened military bases near the Finnish border. While defence coordination is nothing new amongst the Nordic states, whose governments have an excellent track record of close and effective cooperation, Russia's increasing belligerence towards its neighbours provides a spur to this process. It also challenges Finland and Sweden's stance towards NATO, which up to now has been one of close partnership but not full membership. Both Norway and the United States have repeated that the option of membership is on the table, but Finland and Sweden will have to weigh up the likely benefits by gauging the real level of threat from Russia and the potential adverse reactions from Moscow that such membership would entail. Both countries have advocates for NATO membership in their political and military establishments, and whatever decision their governments reach will be discussed at the upcoming NATO summit in September.

In recent weeks, all the five Nordic states have called off their military cooperation with Russia, yet the unanimous condemnation relayed in Søreide's press release is the strongest indication thus far of the region's stance towards Moscow. The logic of such a condemnation would suggest that the prospect of NATO membership for Finland and Sweden is becoming more realistic. This week, former Finnish president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari became the latest in a long line of respected individuals from the country's military and political establishments to call for NATO membership. Yet estimating the likelihood of full NATO membership for Sweden and Finland is still a matter of guesswork. Tellingly, a press release from the Swedish Ministry of Defence published after the meeting in Tromsø, referred to the possibility of NATO involvement only in terms of considering 'partnership issues'.

Other developments

Russian paratroopers landed on a drifting ice floe in the Arctic Ocean on 8 April for the first time in modern Russian history. In a training exercise more than 90 paratroopers from the Ivanovo-based 98th Airborne Division jumped from an Ilyushin Il-76 to the drifting research station Barneo close to the North Pole. The exercise follows a similar drill conducted three weeks ago when Russia dropped 350 paratroopers from the 98th Airborne Division over the far northern New Siberian Islands, off Russia's eastern arctic coast. It also follows numerous statements from Russian defence officials, generals and President Vladimir Putin on the need to develop military capacity in the Arctic.

Finno-Russian shipbuilders Arctech displayed an icebreaker built to a new innovative design in a demonstration in Helsinki Shipyard on 9 April. The Finnish-designed vessel, launched as the Baltika, features an asymmetrical hull which allows it to break ice with its bow positioned at a 30 degree angle from the path of travel, resulting in the opening of a much wider ice-free path. Breaking ice in this way is also reported to be more cost effective. The design also features a helipad, which makes it suitable for search and rescue operations and oil spill clean-ups. The Baltika will be deployed in the Gulf of Finland by the end of the spring. Arctech already have orders for two more ships of the same design, one each for the Russian and Finnish markets.

A test well drilled in the Johan Castberg field off the far-northern coast of Norway has yielded only non-commercial traces of gas. The well has now been permanently plugged and abandoned. The test well is the latest in a series of failed attempts to find enough oil to secure the commercial development of the Johan Castberg field. The pace at which the extractive industries develop Arctic fields is a major political, security and environmental concern in the Polar regions, where the ambitions of national governments, international energy companies and environmental NGOs opposed to such development regularly clash.

On the radar

- **A conference on the theme of 'Navigating the Oil Frontier' will be held in Washington DC, United States, on 21 April.**
- **The giant Russian icebreaker Yamal is heading towards the Kara Sea, its first stop in one of the largest Russian scientific expeditions since the soviet period.**
- **Gazprom plans to make the first shipment of oil from its controversial Prirazlomnaya platform in late April.**

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