



# CONFLICT IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

Why a global ceasefire could offer a window of opportunity for inclusive, locally-led peace



The equation is simple: we cannot effectively respond to a global pandemic when millions of people are still caught in warzones. We cannot treat sick people when hospitals are being bombed, or prevent the spread of coronavirus when tens of millions are forced to flee from violence. We must have a global ceasefire, and we must put our collective resources behind making that ceasefire a reality.

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Cover photo: Rohingya refugee Ayesha collecting water for her family in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Credit: Maruf Hasan/Oxfam.





Huguette Yago during a hygiene awareness session in Pissila, Burkina Faso, a few weeks before the coronavirus crisis broke out in the country. Photo: Sylvain Cherkaoui/Oxfam Internón.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

***'If the conflict in Yemen continues while the coronavirus pandemic keeps spreading, this will only bring more destruction and devastation.'***

– Civil society activist (anonymous), Yemen

***'[A] ceasefire is not enough. It must be combined with inclusive dialogue that will make it possible to reach genuine peace and true reconciliation.'***

– Naomie Ouedraogo, Network of Faith Women for Peace in Burkina Faso

The coronavirus pandemic is making the human and economic cost of conflict clear. At the very moment where we need all of our resources to overcome the virus, wars continue **to increase food insecurity, destroy healthcare systems, drive displacement and deny people their livelihoods**. To compound this, the global economic devastation caused by coronavirus is going to be felt most acutely by the people already living in the margins,<sup>3</sup> including **the two billion people living in fragile and conflict-affected states**.<sup>4</sup> We simply cannot afford to waste the valuable resources needed to build back better on fuelling wars. Even with vaccines, diseases are often hardest to eradicate in conflict zones; as UNICEF noted, 'In many ways, the map of polio mirrors the conflict in Afghanistan.'<sup>5</sup> We need to properly address the coronavirus pandemic in conflict-affected states, as none of us are safe until all of us are safe.

The international community needs to work collectively, channel appropriate funding to address the root causes of crisis and conflict resolution, and show the necessary political will to address the highly toxic and dangerous interplay between coronavirus and conflict.

## The cost of conflict

*'Global military expenditure rose to \$1,917 billion in 2019... the highest level of spending since the 2008 global financial crisis. This represents 2.2 per cent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), which equates to approximately \$249 per person.'*<sup>1</sup>

*While the global economic losses from armed conflict in 2016 reached a staggering \$1.04 trillion, just \$10bn was spent on peacebuilding during that year. This means that the financial resources devoted to consolidating peace constituted a mere 1% of the total cost of conflict.'*<sup>2</sup>

# UN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S CALL FOR A GLOBAL CEASEFIRE FOR CORONAVIRUS

Recognizing that violence and war completely undermine our collective ability to respond to the virus, in March 2020 the **UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire**.<sup>6</sup> In doing so he provided crucial leadership at a time of global instability, when the world desperately needs to silence the guns and respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

To date, 59 states have signed a statement led by the French government in support of the global ceasefire<sup>7</sup> and 70 states have expressed support for the global ceasefire call in some way,<sup>8</sup> as have a number of non-state armed groups.<sup>9</sup> But this support must move beyond rhetoric into practice.

## FAILURE OF MULTILATERALISM

At a time when the need for international cooperation has never been greater, the rules-based international order and the multilateral institutions that should underpin our collective response are paralysed by political deadlocks and the individual interests of states. Almost two months on from the ceasefire call, the **UN Security Council (UNSC) has failed to collectively respond and attempts to broker a resolution have been met with deadlock**.

Instead of uniting to face the coronavirus crisis, the UNSC continues to be hamstrung by a crisis of power, relevance and legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> **This inability to recognize the shared threat to peace and security is emblematic of the failure of UNSC members, particularly permanent members, to unite to address situations of global impact.**

UNSC members who we could expect to be showing leadership, and many of those members who have expressed their support for the ceasefire, remain active participants in conflicts around the world – conducting military operations, selling arms to parties to conflicts and supporting third parties.<sup>11</sup>

This pandemic is presenting an era-defining choice: do we follow narrow nationalism and turn inwards, as is already the case in a few countries, or do we respond in solidarity, recognizing that we must face this crisis together?

We must use the global ceasefire call as a window of opportunity to address the root causes that continue to drive conflict and inequality, and to hold states accountable for their actions (or lack thereof).

## LOCALLY LED ACTION

International buy-in for the global ceasefire is a critical signal of political will. However, the call will remain of little value for people trapped in conflict zones if the ceasefires that follow are just elite bargains negotiated between those who are otherwise spoilers of peace. A global ceasefire has the potential to stop the immediate hostilities and protect populations affected by violence, but only if it is implemented locally. Grounded in local realities, it could create space for national and local dialogue. This would be especially welcome now, when the pandemic has diverted much-needed international

*Despite the global moves to support the ceasefire, international arms sales have continued, with many states either continuing to license arms exports or actively sending arms to conflict-affected countries.*

attention away from existing fragile peace processes in places such as Central African Republic, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

Supporting peace is critical both to enable us to face the coronavirus crisis now, and as a long-term investment to save lives and create a more stable future for all.

## INVESTING IN PEACE

The COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) has asked donors to commit to \$6.7 to meet basic needs to reflect the unprecedented scale of the crisis.<sup>12</sup> Fully funding the GHRP is critical to ensuring that a holistic response, including healthcare, water and sanitation, can be delivered quickly, and that local humanitarian partners are supported in implementing this. Ongoing conflict is impeding an effective coronavirus response. **If the GHRP is not supported with an immediate halt to fighting and increased long-term investment to shore up peace, the world's ability to protect the most marginalized people from the virus will be severely compromised.**

### Peace funds

Funding for peace should include opening new rapid response funding for peacebuilders and, where requested, supporting them in adapting their work for coronavirus. **We are calling for a dramatic increase in funding to support local peacebuilders to strengthen peace in these unstable times.** Donors must make a commitment to channel funds directly to local civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), as they are best placed to understand local conflict dynamics and how these interact with coronavirus responses. They should build on existing structures, networks and programmes. Any obstacles to direct funding should be removed, so that those who are closest to conflicts can lead in building peace.





Farah\*, 8, collects water from the water distribution point in Al-Manjorah IDP camp in Bani Hassan District, Hajjah, Yemen. Photo: Moayed Al-Shaibani/Oxfam. (\*Name changed)

## 2 A CEASEFIRE AS A VITAL HUMANITARIAN EFFORT

**A global ceasefire is a first step to making the violence stop and allowing an effective coronavirus response, with unimpeded access to desperately needed humanitarian assistance. This is a race to stop the coronavirus infecting millions of people who do not have access to healthcare or the opportunity to practise social distancing, and who, if the fighting continues, may be forced to flee for their lives. Ceasefires in some of the most protracted crises such as Yemen, Colombia and Afghanistan will save lives now.**

### **Box 1: Yemen on the brink**

Yemen has recently experienced its first COVID-19 deaths<sup>13</sup> – a cruel blow, adding to the 1,023 people who died from Acute Watery Disease or cholera last year.<sup>14</sup> Five years of violent conflict has devastated the lives of Yemeni women, men, girls and boys,<sup>15</sup> and ongoing fighting continues to block live-saving aid.<sup>16</sup> Airstrikes have destroyed hospitals and infrastructure, and military fighting has left barely half of health centres fully functional. Parts of Yemen have been on the brink of famine for the last five years, meaning that malnutrition is rife. The combination of food insecurity, poor sanitation and the prevalence of other diseases means that the population is particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.

As Oxfam's partner organizations and our programmes in these countries are showing us, the coronavirus is exposing and exacerbating existing issues in conflict-affected and fragile countries.<sup>17</sup> Rohingya people taking to boats to flee conflict and persecution in their home country are being blocked from ports due to fear of the virus spreading. In South Sudan, soaring food costs mean families are going even hungrier, decreasing their ability to cope with the disease, while the pandemic risks destabilizing a fragile peace. In Yemen, where the population is weakened by years of conflict and continuing obstacles to access humanitarian aid, the rapid spread of the virus will risk even more lives. Movement restrictions in Burkina Faso to prevent the spread of the virus are putting an additional strain on already limited access to services and essential resources, and could lead to increased tensions over those resources. In Afghanistan, an already faltering peace process has been put under additional pressure, with no sign of a ceasefire. Around the world, women – who in every crisis pay the highest price – are now facing increasing violence at home.

#### **Box 2: Communities in Colombia: caught between conflict and quarantine**

In Chocó, Colombia, one in three people live in extreme poverty. People are hemmed in between measures to contain coronavirus on the one hand, and the conflict between guerrillas, paramilitary groups and the national army on the other. There are currently 10,495 cases of COVID-19 in the country<sup>18</sup> and structural inequalities mean the impact of the pandemic is hitting African-Colombians and indigenous people, among others, hardest.<sup>19</sup> The armed conflict is an enormous barrier to activities to contain the spread of the virus, while its effects are driving up hunger and insecurity.

*'Women do not have the means to isolate themselves because what do they live on? They get their livelihood from the sale of fish. They have to interact with people, [so] they are exposed to contagion.'* – Maria, Oxfam partner, Colombia

## 2.1 HOW THE PANDEMIC EXACERBATES EXISTING NEEDS

The pandemic is not just a health crisis: its impacts will touch every aspect of people's lives. The coronavirus crisis is making already dire situations even worse, including lack of access to health, protection or education. It is also giving rise to a dramatic increase in food insecurity.

### **The effects of on food insecurity in conflicts**

According to the latest data, 135 million people are currently suffering acute food insecurity; over half of them live in countries affected by conflict.<sup>20</sup> The World Food Programme (WFP) is warning that coronavirus could trigger a hunger pandemic and double the number of people facing acute food shortages in 2020, with famines of 'biblical proportions.'<sup>21</sup> Many regions or countries facing severe food crises – the Sahel, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Afghanistan, Venezuela, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Syria and Nigeria, for example – are also experiencing violent conflict. They do not have the resources to stage a large-scale coronavirus response on top of protecting livelihoods and family income. As the WFP starkly states, countries 'may face an excruciating trade-off between saving lives or livelihoods or, in a worst-case scenario, saving people from the coronavirus to have them die from hunger'.<sup>22</sup>



Women carrying water in buckets that they have collected in Buong, South Sudan. Credit: Tim Bierley/Oxfam.



### Box 3: Rising hunger in South Sudan

To date, 156 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in South Sudan.<sup>23</sup> Preventative and containment measures include the closure of businesses and movement restrictions on goods and people. In stable countries, this is highly disruptive; in South Sudan, it could be catastrophic. Five years of conflict has shattered food security, undermined livelihoods and forced over four million people to flee their homes.<sup>24</sup> Even before coronavirus, over six million people – more than half of the population – were struggling to find enough food each day,<sup>25</sup> and many children were suffering from acute malnutrition.<sup>26</sup> All of this makes them more susceptible to disease and less likely to recover if they are infected.

Coronavirus will almost certainly also reduce agricultural production, affecting long-term food security. As the country approaches the peak of the lean season, when household stocks have generally been exhausted and market prices are already at their highest, food prices are climbing higher still. People simply cannot afford to buy food any more. This is particularly affecting women, who prioritize their families and eat 'least and last'.<sup>27</sup> In addition, closures have restricted the provision of school meals to children from vulnerable communities.<sup>28</sup>



## The effects of the pandemic on displacement

Lockdown measures have been crucial to containing and limiting the spread of coronavirus in stable countries across the world. However, for many people living in conflict-affected countries, threats to life, fear and desperation continue to drive them from their homes, making such containment measures impossible. Over 70 million people across the globe have fled their homes due to conflict, violence, persecution and human rights violations,<sup>29</sup> and last year alone there were 33.4 million new internal displacements, the highest figure since 2012. Most of these internally displaced people are in five countries which are deeply affected by conflict: Syria, Colombia, the DRC, Yemen and Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

A large number of displaced people are living in camps, which often house thousands of people for years at a time. These camps are often hugely under-resourced, and even food and access to basic water, sanitation and hygiene are in short supply. In such tightly packed, squalid living conditions, the risk of the spread of disease is high. There have already been unofficial reports of people fleeing refugee sites due to fear of being infected by coronavirus, despite the continuation of the violence that drove them there in the first place. Other displaced people live among host communities, often in the poorest areas where access to services is extremely limited. The coronavirus crisis is putting a further strain on resources, which risks heightening tensions between local populations and displaced people. In addition, measures to contain the virus, including border closures and travel restrictions, are preventing people from fleeing conflict or violence.<sup>31</sup>

**A scaled-up humanitarian response is crucial.<sup>32</sup> However, this will only be possible if access for humanitarian relief – often blocked in conflict-affected countries by air strikes, armed groups and informal checkpoints – can be secured.**

*'Refugees [in this area] are cut off from the rest of the world and do not have access to television or the internet to access the information going around. Refugees in these settlements do not have access to clean water, sanitizer and soap for washing hands. There is no way we can implement social distancing, as the refugee settlement is so congested.'*

Stephen Wandu, Executive Director, I CAN (refugee organization responding to the pandemic in Uganda)



Oxfam partner JAGO NARI distributes hygiene kits in Bangladesh while ensuring participants keep social distance in the process. Photo: Duke Ivn Amin/JAGO NARI.

#### Box 4: Displacement in Myanmar and Bangladesh

In 2017, an estimated 750,000 Rohingya people – one of the most persecuted minorities in the world – fled for their lives in response to horrifying violence<sup>34</sup> and what the UN described as ‘a textbook example of ethnic cleansing’ in Myanmar.<sup>35</sup>

One million Rohingya refugees now continue to live in overcrowded and poorly resourced camps in Bangladesh. There are 40,000 people per square kilometre,<sup>36</sup> making even basic handwashing and social distancing virtually impossible. The pandemic has exacerbated the existing displacement crisis;<sup>37</sup> Rohingya people attempting to flee on boats are being blocked from ports due to coronavirus fears. A number of boats are still at sea, finding no country who will give their passengers refuge.<sup>38</sup> Malaysia has denied entry, citing coronavirus border closures, leaving boats stranded in the Bay of Bengal.

To date, there have been 180 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Myanmar and 14,657 cases in Bangladesh,<sup>39</sup> and the risk of the rapid spread of the disease is extremely high. Across the border from the refugee camps in Bangladesh, 128,000 internally displaced Rohingya and Kaman Muslims remain confined to camps in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, facing conditions of overcrowded shelters and a lack of access to water, soap and basic healthcare.<sup>40</sup> Further risks also now stem from the escalating conflict between the Myanmar military and the ethnic armed group, the Arakan Army.

As the call for a comprehensive ceasefire goes unheeded, including with respect to the active conflict in Rakhine and Chin states, civilian casualties have mounted.<sup>41</sup> An internet shutdown impacting the ability of close to one million people to access life-saving information continues, and thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes in the midst of the pandemic. Yanghee Lee, who is concluding her tenure as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, recently stated, ‘While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine State, targeting the civilian population.’<sup>42</sup>

*‘Living here in the camps, everything gives us diseases. The camp infects everyone with diseases, and I have no money to see a doctor.’ – Rohingya woman living in the confined camps in central Rakhine, Myanmar.*<sup>43</sup>

## The gendered impact of the coronavirus crisis

Women and men experience conflict differently and are also differently impacted by the coronavirus crisis: while the mortality rate for men is higher, women are being disproportionately exposed to infection, given existing structural inequalities and gender roles. Women are often at the forefront of addressing crises, for example as humanitarian actors, building social cohesion and negotiating peace.<sup>44</sup> The restrictions imposed to contain coronavirus are already impeding women in carrying out this valuable work and putting them at additional risk.

#### Box 5: Violence against women human rights defenders in Colombia

In Colombia, one of the countries which has endorsed the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire, armed groups are increasingly ignoring the risks of the pandemic and using the heightened insecurity to target human rights defenders, many of whom are indigenous and Afro-Colombian women. According to one human rights advocate: ‘Despite the national quarantine in Colombia, killings and attacks on social leaders and armed confrontations continue and have become more targeted.’<sup>45</sup>



A woman human rights defender told Oxfam: *'Here they continue to kill leaders and social leaders. Four days ago, they killed a human rights defender... they do not care about the tragedy of the pandemic.'*

#### **Box 6: Women's rights in Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan, years of war have curtailed development and reinforced negative social norms, meaning the country is already close to the bottom of the Gender Equality Index.<sup>46</sup>

There are multiple ways in which the pandemic could disproportionately affect women and girls in Afghanistan. Women's rights activists have long fought for women's basic rights and freedoms; these were severely restricted under the Taliban and are once again under threat, with lockdown measures confining women to their homes.

One young woman from Daikundi province said: 'Women are now used to going out to work and earn[ing] income. My concern is [that] if this situation lasts longer than anticipated, it may change the whole concept again [such that people believe] that women should stay at home and should be responsible for house chores, like it was in the past.'<sup>47</sup>

In addition, women have limited access to healthcare: social norms and customs mean that families do not want women to be treated by male doctors, yet only 15% of nurses and 2% of medical doctors in Afghanistan are women.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Gender-based violence**

The UN Secretary-General has expressed concern that the coronavirus pandemic has led to a 'horrifying global surge in domestic violence'.<sup>49</sup> Gender-based violence (GBV) are rooted in unequal gendered power relations. GBV often increases when a breakdown of law and order leads to impunity for the perpetrators of violence; in situations of displacement; and during violent conflict and war, when rape and sexual slavery are used as weapons by parties to the conflict.<sup>50</sup> Domestic violence, which can be exacerbated by the availability of weapons, may also increase during and after conflict. In conflict-affected countries, the coronavirus pandemic adds an additional level of threat and insecurity for women and girls, linked to rising social and economic pressures and lockdown measures. This is why African women's organizations are already proposing gender-specific plans to address the coronavirus impact based off of their Ebola experience in 2014-2015, such as establishing safe houses.

#### **Box 7: Central African Republic**

In Central African Republic, with 179 cases of COVID-19,<sup>51</sup> 'women are already staying at home to take care of their husbands, their children are out of school, and they have had to leave their jobs,' according to Rosalie Kobo-Beth from the women's coalition I LONDO AWÈ!

She added, 'the confinement risk[s] increasing domestic violence and violence against children, making women more... vulnerable'. In the current context, women's care burden is increasing, and while they are trapped at home, they are exposed to rising levels of domestic violence. The coronavirus crisis also risks causing long-lasting reversals of women's social, political and economic rights.

## 2.2 IMPEDED HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

### Box 8: Humanitarian access in Yemen

Yemenis urgently need an end to fighting. 'The coronavirus pandemic cannot be [overcome] if the conflict continues in Yemen, as the health system is crumbling as a result of the long years of war,' one women's rights activist told Oxfam. Yet violent conflict and the wilful blocking of aid continue: last year saw 2,380 reported instances of humanitarian aid being blocked or disrupted in Yemen, including 540 incidents of violence against humanitarian aid workers and goods. This violates international norms and has prevented the delivery of essential supplies, including food, healthcare provisions and WASH facilities, to up to 4.5 million people.<sup>52</sup> A long-term ceasefire is urgently needed, as the destruction of health facilities and disruption in aid delivery caused by fighting is making communities extremely vulnerable to the pandemic.

Armed conflict, bureaucratic impediments, sanctions and counterterrorism measures are already huge challenges to the delivery of life-saving aid in conflict-affected countries. Measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus are an additional barrier and may make these existing challenges worse. Restrictions on the movement of people and goods has limited supply chains and resulted in the suspension and scaling down of a large number of humanitarian activities.

**A ceasefire would reduce security-related access constraints to allow a focus on preventing the spread of the virus to already vulnerable populations.**

### Box 9: Access to essential services in Burkina Faso

It is not just the ability of humanitarian actors to reach people in need that is under threat, but also the access that such people have to essential goods and services such as water, healthcare and food. Even before the arrival of coronavirus, Burkina Faso – with 751 cases of COVID-19 to date<sup>53</sup> – had seen closure of services on a massive scale. For instance, ongoing violence has resulted in the full or partial suspension of 275 health centres; in the country's northernmost region, over half of healthcare facilities have closed.<sup>54</sup> For many people, the risk of violence on roads means that travelling to reach services further afield is not an option. Now access is even more of a challenge, as markets have been closed, towns have been put under quarantine and public transport has been suspended.

'Without water, there is no hygiene,' says Huguette Yago, a water and sanitation engineer in Burkina Faso.<sup>55</sup> Yet water is increasingly scarce in the country. Almost two million people – around 10% of the population – are in need of water and sanitation assistance,<sup>56</sup> and in certain areas access to potable water has reduced by 40% since the crisis began.

With communities already under enormous strain, the arrival of displaced people has in some cases led to an increase in local-level tensions around water and other resources.<sup>57</sup>

In the context of the pandemic, the need for access to water, and tensions around such access, are likely to increase. Women – who are traditionally tasked with collecting water, often along already unsafe routes – are particularly vulnerable to increased insecurity.<sup>58</sup>

An end to violence in Burkina Faso would go some way to ensuring that, in the short term, people can safely access the services they need. It would also allow people to travel safely to tend their fields, which is essential to ensuring they will have enough to eat come the harvest season. For the re-establishment of services in the longer term, of course, the call for a ceasefire in Burkina Faso must pave the way for a genuine and inclusive peace process that addresses the root causes of the conflict.



Mary, Mangaten IDP Camp, South Sudan – ‘Peace will give us our home back.’ Photo: Robert Fogarty/Oxfam.



### 3 A CEASEFIRE TO ALLOW LOCAL DIALOGUE

A global ceasefire could create space for dialogue and stop immediate violence to protect populations trapped in conflicts across the world.

The motivations and interests that lie at the source of most conflicts are context-specific and linked to local issues and grievances.<sup>59</sup> Deep-rooted issues that prompted groups to fight in the first place will not vanish upon realization of the UN Secretary-General’s call, and the pandemic has the potential to heighten existing tensions. Therefore, to truly impact people’s lives, ceasefires must be driven by political will, from the ground up and be born of inclusive negotiations that involve local peacebuilders and the people most affected by the conflict. But these local efforts must be supported and funded by the international community to lead to peaceful transformation and a safer world for all. They must include dialogue with all actors and make sure women can participate and be free of narrow and politicized approaches to counterterrorism. While preventing acts of terrorism is crucial, it must not shut down the ability of local actors to engage with armed groups to build peace. A ceasefire which excludes one’s enemies cannot last.

**A meaningful ceasefire must be founded on local solutions and give the communities, women’s groups and youth who work tirelessly for peace the**

power and representation necessary to make it a reality and to yield long-term positive outcomes.

**Box 10: While world powers bicker, local peacebuilders raise the alarm in Yemen**

While international diplomacy has failed to bring peace to Yemen, and some members of the UNSC continue to actively support parties to the conflict, **59 Yemeni CSOs and international aid organizations have mobilized in support of the UN Secretary-General's call. They are urgently calling for a ceasefire** as a first step to address the pandemic, ensure that humanitarian aid can reach everyone, and end the war:

*'A cessation of hostilities in Yemen can only be a first step...Yemenis need a durable ceasefire, a comprehensive and inclusive political settlement to the current conflict, unencumbered access to humanitarian aid and commercial imports, and accountability for the violations all sides have committed during this war.'*<sup>60</sup>

Women's organizations in particular have been active in the coronavirus response, engaging with authorities to promote gender- and age-sensitive health provisions and creating social media campaigns on the importance of stopping the war in order to stop the spread of the virus. This builds on ongoing peace efforts led by women on 'counter radicalization, releasing detainees, humanitarian relief and early recovery, demilitarization of schools, reintegration of child combatants, and social cohesion'.<sup>61</sup> Yet movement restrictions and isolation measures are making it more challenging for local peacebuilders to continue to fulfil these roles.

***'I fear that the ceasefire will take place after coronavirus has spread... so what would be the benefit of peace to a land without people?'***

Woman peace activist, Aden, Yemen

### 3.1 STALLING PEACE EFFORTS

*'Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, all our activities, like community gatherings... are on hold. It's very difficult to follow up on reports of human rights violations when we can't travel and we can't hear the community's voice.'*

– Woman peace activist with Ta'ang Women's Organization in northern Shan, Myanmar

The past year has seen important steps to realize peace in countries including Afghanistan, Yemen and South Sudan, but the coronavirus pandemic risks destabilizing these efforts and losing these gains. Restrictions on travel and gatherings, as well as closures of embassies and offices in many conflict-affected countries, mean that events and initiatives related to their peace processes are being halted. In communities, peacebuilders are facing ever more barriers to their work.<sup>62</sup>

As international and regional actors turn their attention to addressing the pandemic, and governments turn inwards, there is a risk that the sustained political pressure needed to hold conflict parties to account will abate, slowing momentum and providing opportunities for peace spoilers to exploit.<sup>63</sup>



### Box 11: Locked out of peace in South Sudan

Six years after the beginning of the civil war that claimed nearly 400,000 lives, South Sudan's peace process is at a delicate stage.

Civil society and particularly women's groups<sup>64</sup> have played a crucial role in local peacebuilding and securing the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. However, coronavirus restrictions on travel and public gatherings mean that community-led reconciliation efforts can no longer take place and donors are also deprioritizing peace efforts.

Ongoing diplomatic pressure has been crucial to maintain momentum, but now international guarantors are shifting focus to their own domestic coronavirus-related challenges, putting the peace process at risk.<sup>65</sup>

**'Donors are saying that we [should] put [peacebuilding activities] on hold until COVID-19 is gone, but we are not sure when COVID-19 will be gone... peace will not wait!'**

Riya Williams, Executive Director of Crown the Woman, South Sudan

### Box 12: Faltering peace talks in Afghanistan

*For me [a] ceasefire is not only [about] stopping the conflict between the parties; it means considering the social security for all civilians.'* – Woman civil society actor, Herat province, Afghanistan

Coronavirus could not have come at a worse time for the people of Afghanistan. After 40 years of protracted conflict, communities are counting on the intra-Afghan negotiations – scheduled to start in March, and already delayed – for a permanent end to violent conflict. These negotiations were agreed after more than a year of discussions between the US and the Taliban. While several political impasses remain, there was nonetheless hope that the talks could be a step towards a sustainable ceasefire and peace agreement.

Now the pandemic could end the negotiations before they have even begun. Given the contentious issue of prisoner releases, prisoner deaths related to COVID-19 could trigger strong recriminations between the government and the Taliban, unravelling the hope of talks.<sup>66</sup> There have already been 4,402 reported cases of COVID-19 in Afghanistan,<sup>67</sup> but the country's close proximity to and porous borders with Iran, which has reported 107,603 cases,<sup>68</sup> as well as low testing rates, mean the real figure is likely to be considerably higher.

The pandemic is sending shockwaves through the already weak economy and people's livelihoods, which could further stoke local tensions over access to resources, including food and water. If unaddressed, these issues will continue to feed the national-level conflict, increasing dissatisfaction towards the government and encouraging disaffected people – who are desperate for economic opportunities – to join armed groups. Without increased and immediate international support for a permanent ceasefire and a political solution, Afghanistan could be pushed over the brink as the Taliban starts its spring offensive, which would further displace people and contribute to the spread of the virus.

## 3.2 RISKS OF INCREASED TENSIONS

The response to coronavirus risks exacerbating two existing trends: the erosion of respect for international norms, and the shrinking of civic space.<sup>69</sup> In order to avoid the spread of the virus, governments across the world have introduced strict measures which are limiting citizens' basic rights and freedoms, such as freedom of movement, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. While often legitimate, there is concern that some states are using these measures disproportionately to squash dissent.<sup>70</sup>

Further, in many fragile and conflict-affected states, trust in the state is so low that people often do not believe what their government is telling them. This has already been witnessed in Afghanistan, where dozens of patients in quarantine, at least one of whom had COVID-19, broke out of a hospital.<sup>71</sup>

The Ebola response in eastern DRC has shown that the use of UN peacekeepers, considered by the population as a party to the ongoing conflict, in the epidemic response could lead to a severe deterioration of the people's trust in the response and to growing tensions. In Beni and Butembo for instance, this has greatly impeded responders' access and has even led to violence against them.<sup>72</sup> The coronavirus response must remain civilian in nature, as the effectiveness of public health responses depends on populations' acceptance of and trust in the response.

To ensure that support for local peacebuilders and groups does not exacerbate tensions and potential violence in communities, all responses must be conflict sensitive. Where possible, coronavirus interventions should support existing capacities for peace in communities, such as existing forums where rival groups come together to resolve conflicts.

**The coronavirus pandemic is a real threat, which requires immediate action. It must not, however, be used as an excuse to weaken political efforts towards peace, when achieving peace is key to tackle the pandemic and prevent cycles of crises.**

### 3.3 MOMENTUM FOR WOMEN-LED LOCALIZATION

The pandemic is creating major disruptions at the global and national levels. In conflict-affected contexts, many governments are struggling to ensure the wellbeing of their populations and to maintain peace efforts in the face of the challenges posed by the crisis.

#### **Box 13: Women-led efforts are more successful**

On the international stage, women are leading the pandemic response: Taiwan, New Zealand and Germany, governments all led by women, are credited with some of the most effective responses to date.<sup>73</sup> Women are also leading the coronavirus response and peace efforts in their communities – efforts that must be further supported.

Women and girls' crucial contribution to conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding is recognized by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and related resolutions.<sup>74</sup> Despite this, those in power continue to push women to the periphery of peacebuilding and political solutions.<sup>75</sup> This must change: women, especially young women and girls, must be at the forefront of efforts to respond to the pandemic and to build sustainable peace.

Women peace actors build coalitions, bridging divides across social groups<sup>76</sup> and ensuring that the issues crucial for sustainable peace are on the table. In fact, when women participate in peace processes, agreements are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years.<sup>77</sup>

At national level, in some countries, a government-led approach will not work for those who are most marginalized or socially and politically excluded, and where trust in the state is low.<sup>78</sup> In instances where governments are unable or unwilling to fully protect and assist their citizens or people seeking safety in their country, the response will require global support. This globally coordinated and supported response to

coronavirus needs to be founded on and led by communities and local responders that are trusted, accountable and seen as representative, such as local refugee- or women-led organizations. Local civil society is uniquely positioned to be a trusted source of information, especially in countries where conflict, inequality and human rights abuses have eroded confidence in the state and the institutions associated with it.<sup>79</sup>

Sustainable peace – which allows people and communities to flourish – is more likely to take root if efforts are locally owned and provide local solutions to local problems.<sup>80</sup> When peace efforts are inclusive, with strong contributions from women and young people, they are also more likely to last.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the current challenges, from Colombia to Yemen, Central African Republic to Myanmar, women, young people and wider civil society are adapting and continuing their crucial efforts to build sustainable, inclusive peace. Local organizations, community groups and peace activists are amplifying calls for a global ceasefire, leading the coronavirus frontline response, standing up for justice and building peace.

**This is why we need more than a temporary global ceasefire; we also need global solidarity with local action, to realize durable and inclusive peace.**

**Box 14: How can donors invest in an inclusive and locally-led peace?**

We need to ensure that the global ‘coronavirus ceasefire’ yields long-lasting, positive results for all. To do this, peace funding must:

Provide direct funding to local peacebuilders. Funding should go to people who need it most, and to where it will be most effective: the frontlines of peace efforts. Decisions must be based on widespread consultation with women’s groups, youth, peacebuilders and civil society in conflict-affected countries.

Invest in people rather than projects. Ending conflict means investing in people, to build trust and cohesion within and across communities. This does not fit neatly into a project logframe or within a short-term project timeframe. Local peacebuilders need sustained and flexible support to allow them to navigate conflict, and for their ideas and efforts for a more peaceful society to flourish.

Support ‘systems’ of local peacebuilders rather than organizations. Women, youth and communities involved in peacebuilding often do so informally, for example via community groups, movements and coalitions. They need transparent, long-term support to undertake peacebuilding efforts in a complementary and collaborative manner, and to respond to shifting contexts.

***‘COVID-19 is threatening the whole of humanity – and the whole of humanity must fight back. Global action and solidarity are crucial.’***

– António Guterres, UN Secretary-General



# RECOMMENDATIONS

To the UN Security Council:

- **Unanimously and unequivocally endorse the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire**, recognizing the coronavirus pandemic as a threat to peace and security.
- Recognize women and youth as leaders and equal partners from the start by ensuring their inclusion in ceasefire processes, beginning with planning, all the way through to the monitoring of agreements' implementation, in line with S/RES/1325 (2000), S/RES/2250 (2015) and S/RES/2282 (2016).
- Bring to the attention of the Council conflicts that are not currently on the Council's agenda but where ceasefires are needed, and ensure regular briefings on ceasefire implementation in all conflict contexts that are on its agenda.

To conflict parties, military forces and groups involved in violence:

- **Join the call for a global ceasefire now** and end all forms of violence and marginalization and allow all populations unimpeded humanitarian and commercial **access** to assistance and basic services.
- **Respect international norms**, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights law, which includes ensuring that civilians are not targeted and that measures are taken to minimize any harm to civilian lives and property.
- Use the ceasefire to **engage in meaningful negotiations for peace** – inclusive of women's groups, youth groups and civil society – which are essential to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

To states and the diplomatic community:

- **Unequivocally endorse and ensure respect for the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire** to address the coronavirus pandemic and commit all efforts to its implementation.
- **Suspend all arms sales and transfers** to conflict parties that are not adhering to the global ceasefire.
- Ensure that existing peace processes and conflict prevention, management and peacebuilding efforts continue, ensuring the meaningful participation of women's groups and including investing in adapted ways of working that consider the constraints imposed by coronavirus.
- **Open humanitarian and commercial access**; ensure the protection of, and allow transit for, humanitarian staff as well as peacebuilders to reach crisis-affected areas despite coronavirus-related movement restrictions, safely fast-tracked across borders and within countries.
- **Respect international humanitarian law and human rights law** and other international norms, and take concrete actions to prevent aid workers and facilities from being targeted in attacks, to ensure an effective coronavirus response.
- Maintain the **civilian character of the coronavirus response** and ensure that the well-established international guidelines on **civil-military coordination** are respected, and that there are clear and strong safeguards to prevent and report any abuses against civilians.
- Ensure that the coronavirus response is not exploited to deny assistance, discriminate or deny asylum, and ensure that emergency measures are not abused to suppress human rights.

To humanitarian, development and peacebuilding donors and actors:

- Ensure **full funding for the Global Humanitarian Response Plan** and provide additional funding for countries that most need assistance in dealing with the impact of coronavirus. Continue to **fully fund and support ongoing humanitarian responses** to pre-existing needs. Adopt a flexible approach which enables programmes to be adapted to best respond to the changing context.
- Support the **participation and leadership of women**, which is key in pandemic responses, and women's groups as well as CSOs, in the design and implementation of the responses, and support women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and security efforts.
- **Invest in conflict sensitivity, conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts** at both national and community levels. Encourage cooperation and joint programming between health responders and local peacebuilding actors to mitigate potential knock-on effects of the pandemic, and to ensure that the global ceasefire call is grounded in local realities and is used as an entry point to engage with conflict parties, civil society, women's groups and communities more broadly.

To citizens around the world:

- We need our leaders to take bold actions, which until recently were thought impossible. Demand that your political leaders deliver on the global ceasefire, in solidarity with people across the world and for a more peaceful future for us all.<sup>82</sup>



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