

# THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL'S CALL FOR A GLOBAL CEASEFIRE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

23 JUNE 2020



**MEDIATION SUPPORT UNIT**  
POLICY & MEDIATION DIVISION



On 23 March 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres issued an appeal for an immediate global ceasefire to help create conditions for the delivery of lifesaving aid, reinforce diplomatic action and bring hope to places that are among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 23 June 2020, the Secretary-General's call had received support from 179 Member States and one non-member observer State, as well as a range of regional organizations and international and local civil society actors.<sup>1</sup> Some of these 179 Member States supported the call only in specific conflict contexts or while stressing the right to continue with counter-terrorism operations. Meanwhile, a number of conflict parties responded to the call by announcing unilateral ceasefires.<sup>2</sup> This note analyses the response and discusses the opportunities and challenges presented by the Secretary-General's appeal.

<sup>1</sup> Civil society networks in Afghanistan, Colombia and DRC issued collective appeals for humanitarian ceasefires in their respective contexts, for example. Ninety-one women's organizations from Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen issued a joint statement, joining the Secretary-General's call for global ceasefire.

<sup>2</sup> In some cases the ceasefires announced by conflict parties were not clearly anchored in the Secretary-General's call.



## OBJECTIVES OF THE CALL

The appeal for a global ceasefire is anchored in short to medium-term humanitarian objectives, even as it seeks to reinforce diplomatic action in pursuit of peace. Past practice demonstrates that humanitarian ceasefires or truces can provide trust-building opportunities for conflict parties and possibly help revitalize broader peace processes, but not in all cases.

While focused on situations of armed conflict, the global call has resonance in contexts where gang violence impacts the COVID-19 response. It is also relevant in contexts with high levels of political polarization, where COVID 19 responses may be hampered by weakened governance structures. UN messaging and efforts, therefore, should not be restricted to conventional conflict resolution efforts or an overly literal interpretation of ceasefires.

## INITIAL RESPONSES TO THE CALL AND IMPLEMENTATION

The ceasefire call has been viewed by conflict parties (and their backers) through the prism of their own calculations, which are based on conflict dynamics and short-term objectives. To put the responses into perspective, this note suggests a broad categorization of conflict settings where the ceasefire call found some response, although these are not mutually exclusive:

- Protracted conflicts with **stalled/inconclusive ceasefire negotiations or peace processes;**
  - **Ongoing implementation** of a ceasefire/peace process, with its own pre-existing challenges;
  - **Nationally led** peace process/ceasefire being planned or in the process of being launched or relaunched;
  - **International or third-party mediated/facilitated** ceasefire and/or a peace process **in preparatory, planning or launch phase;**
  - **Existing partial or localized** ceasefire arrangement;
  - **No history of peace process/ceasefire** but potential for one;
  - **Frozen conflicts** with a disputed inter-state border or breakaway territories with de facto lines of control in place;
  - Violence predominantly attributed to **proscribed armed groups** with trans-national agendas and co-existing with other conflict settings.
- 



To date, over twenty armed groups and their political entities/fronts have responded positively to the Secretary-General's call, while the take up by States has been more limited. Some conflicts, especially those with external backers, increased in intensity after the call was made.

Meanwhile, proscribed groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Daesh, Al-Shabab and Al-Qaeda disregarded the call and urged followers to take advantage of COVID-19, including by spreading disinformation in distressed communities. The Sahel has been particularly hard hit by extremist action.

Broadly speaking, the responses of conflict parties have been based on one or more of the following overlapping motivations:

- To explore or resuscitate peacemaking channels. Such an approach often comes with an assumption that the government counterpart will be under additional pressure to respond; governments, however, may see this as an attempt to internationalize the conflict and be reluctant to do so.
- As an opportunity to claim moral high ground, and seek or reclaim political relevance and/or legitimacy at national/regional/international levels. Some actors may have used the call to gain attention and recognition, where little existed, while some may have used it to enhance their stature in the eyes of their constituencies.
- To reassert or consolidate authority and legitimacy to govern in areas of control, which may be highly contested, including through delivery of medical support. Some armed actors (and gangs) have used the opportunity presented by COVID-19 to assert their control over local populations by assuming the role of quarantine enforcers, with punitive measures for perceived violators.<sup>3</sup>
- To freeze a favourable or avoid an unfavourable military situation. Some of the initial and later responses have been guided by battlefield gains or reversals.

In many cases, in the absence of a realistic appraisal of the impact of COVID-19, the pandemic may not yet be a central concern in the calculations of the conflict parties. This may change, as the severity of its direct (on conflict waging abilities) and indirect (broader socio-economic) implications become clearer. Conflict parties may experience disproportionate effects in a given context, or downplay its gravity to seek favourable change in conflict dynamics. From Afghanistan to Libya, Yemen and elsewhere the impact of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics will continue to evolve in response to the varying trajectory of both the virus' spread – itself difficult to determine given weak testing capacities in many conflict contexts – and political and military developments.

---

<sup>3</sup> In Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico, many armed groups or gangs have issued pamphlets with warnings related to quarantine measures in local communities.



# SUSTAINABILITY OF GLOBAL CEASEFIRE – THE CHALLENGES

The ceasefire call has served to draw attention to the impacts of COVID-19 in settings of ongoing armed conflict and received a good initial response. UN envoys and other officials have worked hard to champion its implementation. However some elements of the response and the persistence – and in some cases worsening – of violence represent challenges to progress towards its ends.

In most cases conflict parties declared limited duration unilateral ceasefires (15 to 90 days). Some declarations by non-state armed groups included conditions which made a positive response by the State concerned essentially impossible and complicated full support by the UN. Meanwhile, in a number of the settings where ceasefires were called, the UN may not be in the peacemaking lead, or at least not the only such actor involved. These factors, compounded by the limited response of state parties to the call, impact on implementation.

None of the announced unilateral ceasefires had a well-defined scope or a credible monitoring and verification oversight. This contributed to the emergence of contending claims of violations and rights to respond – in Libya, Ukraine and Yemen, for example. In the Philippines, neither the Government nor the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) extended their respective unilateral ceasefires.<sup>4</sup> In Colombia, the ceasefire of the National Liberation Army (ELN) also elapsed after one month. While there is no immediate opening for dialogue, there is nonetheless increased discussion in country about the need for a political solution to its conflict with the Government.

The UN and other international actors can provide a range of support to conflict parties in their efforts to sustain the humanitarian benefits of ceasefires and transform fragile unilateral initiatives into durable peace efforts. However, a realistic assessment of what will be possible will also be necessary, given the restrictions that COVID-19 has imposed on the ability to gather human, material and financial resources in support of any mid to large scale operation, at least in the coming months.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Government of the Philippines had announced its unilateral ceasefire on 19 March 2020, before the Secretary-General's call.



# POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES AND NEXT STEPS: ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- Focus on what is achievable is required. Care should be taken not to conflate humanitarian objectives with political ones, in order to avoid the risk of undermining both. It is important that political actors coordinate with humanitarian actors regarding messaging and activities in supporting ceasefires and vice versa.
- An assessment of comparative advantage in terms of which national or international actor does what, and at what level, should guide approaches and efforts to sustain the spirit of this call.
- Where opportune, efforts should be made to reinforce context-specific unilateral ceasefires by exploring options on how to strengthen ceasefire or violence reduction mechanisms with minimal military or political costs, for example through simple liaison and coordination arrangements. These options can be generated by technical advice from relevant humanitarian and security experts, including those from the UN Mediation Support Unit.
- Civil society and local community networks can be important catalysts in this process, as illustrated in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, and Yemen, where communities organized to sustain the ceasefire call in their respective contexts. International peacemakers, mediators, and/or facilitators need to further deepen engagement with local peacebuilders, including women peacebuilders and Track 2 conflict resolution actors/entities, supporting their capacity and profiling their campaigns at the local level.
- Some existing regional, inter-state and intra-state agreements have provisions for cooperation and coordination in addressing epidemics, communicable diseases and natural disasters.<sup>5</sup> Where relevant, the UN and other entities with required expertise can provide technical advice to the parties for effective implementation or operationalization of these provisions.
- The impact of COVID-19 is still unfolding, and in places worsening, in different parts of the world. The calculations of conflict parties will keep changing. The discourse on sustaining the call for a global ceasefire and/or reduction of violence should link with the broader discussions on the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, including on women and children.<sup>6</sup> Women must be engaged as a vital constituency in achieving sustainable ends.
- Regional and sub-regional organizations can play an important role in amplifying the call for a global ceasefire in specific contexts, including through partnerships with the UN where relevant. These collaborative efforts must be guided by an understanding of different diplomatic channels and actors, and the ways in which the UN can contribute to sustaining the ceasefire call.
- Technological opportunities should be harnessed to facilitate consultations and engagements as we pursue options to reinforce the call for a global ceasefire.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on The West Bank and the Gaza Strip; 1996 Agreement between Russian Federation, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan and People's Republic of China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area; amongst others.

<sup>6</sup> "Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to socio-economic impacts of COVID-19", Policy Brief issued by the Secretary-General, March 2020. Policy Brief on The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, issued by the Secretary-General, 9 April 2020. Policy Brief on The Impact of COVID-19 on Children, issued by the Secretary-General, 16 April 2020.