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# Global Ceasefire Call Deserves UN Security Council's Full Support

*At least twelve conflict parties have signed on to UN Secretary-General António Guterres's appeal for a worldwide cessation of hostilities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a promising start, and despite setbacks in some places, the Security Council should endorse the call wholeheartedly.*

The initial international reaction to COVID-19 has more often than not been characterised by divisions and suspicion, as states failed to cooperate and accused one another of mishandling the disease. UN Secretary-General António Guterres's call for a global ceasefire in the face of the pandemic thus struck a rare positive note amid the prevailing gloom. On 23 March, when Guterres first proposed an immediate cessation of hostilities "in all corners of the world", to allow all actors to focus on battling the virus and facilitating humanitarian aid to affected populations, the idea seemed fanciful. Still, armed groups from Colombia to the Philippines endorsed the idea in the days that followed. By early April, the UN could cite twelve countries in which at least one party to a conflict had acknowledged the appeal, although with differing levels of zeal and very unequal degrees of follow-through.

Crisis Group has joined other non-governmental organisations in backing the Secretary-General's initiative. It represents the clearest formulation of the need to limit deadly conflict in the face of COVID-19. The disease has the potential to undermine weak states, aggravate social tensions, give unscrupulous leaders an excuse to repress dissent and distract major powers from diplomacy and crisis management. But there are also historical precedents for major natural disasters (such as the 2004 Asian tsunami) creating conditions for peacemaking in affected regions. This Secretary-General's initiative offers a useful reference point for international efforts to find similar opportunities as the coronavirus spreads. It could also act as a simple framing device for the Security Council, which has been split over how to handle the pandemic, to take a common stance on its emerging security implications.

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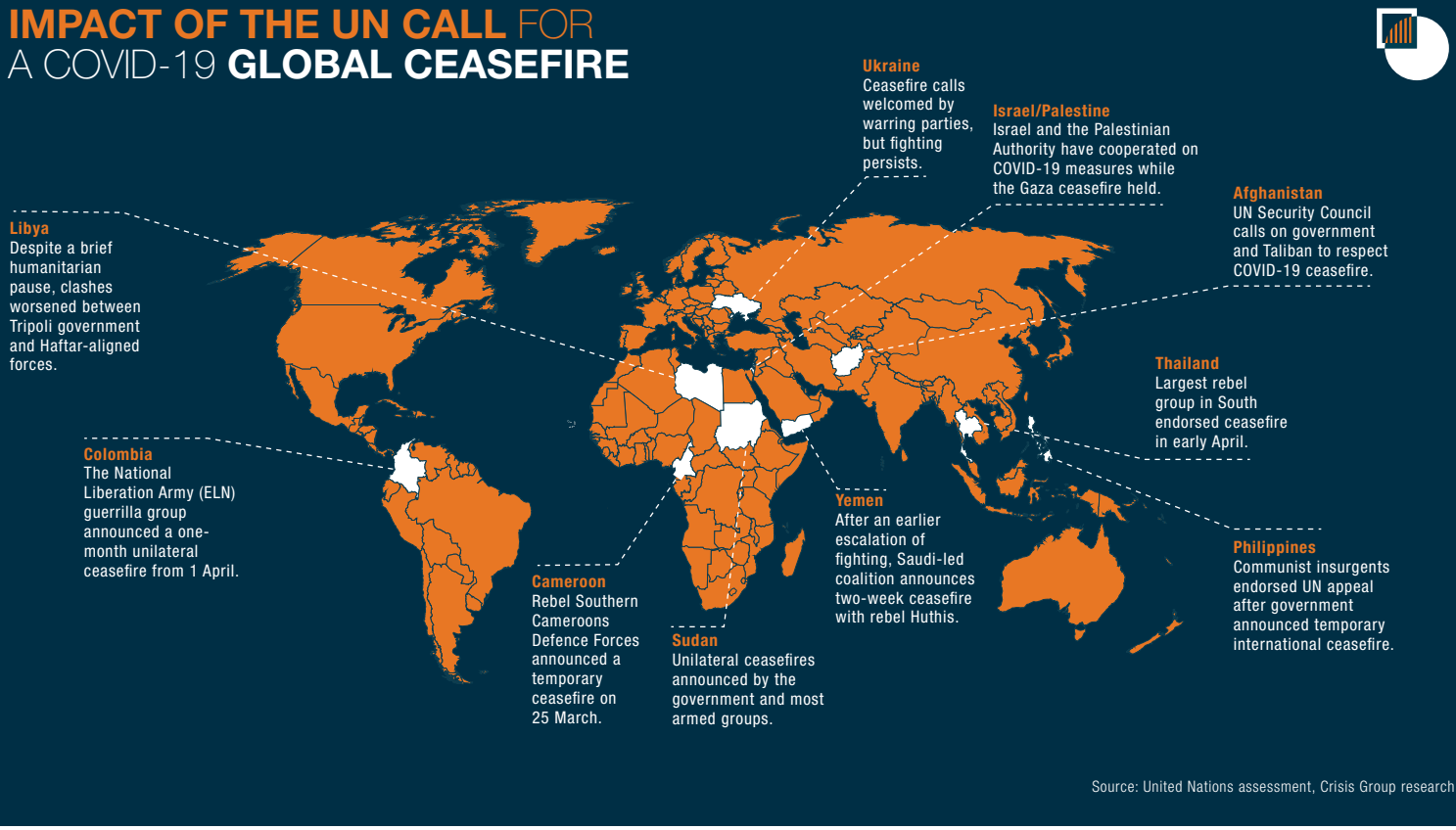
As Guterres has acknowledged, the ceasefire call will have little value if it remains a rhetorical device only. Yet shifting from rhetoric to reality is no small task. The governments and armed groups that endorse the UN ceasefire appeal may be reflecting universal fear of COVID-19, but they continue to be driven by the particular grievances and tensions that prompted them to fight in the first place. As Crisis Group's work demonstrates daily, the motivations and interests that lie at the source of these conflicts are singular and often highly local. No universal appeal, however powerful, can erase them. If the UN and sympathetic actors want to translate the Secretary-General's initiative into durable ceasefires, they will need




to tackle these specific challenges on a case-by-case basis – and to do so just as COVID-19 is making it harder for international mediators and peacekeepers to travel, deal directly with decision-makers or devote the attention necessary for conflict resolution. It also is worth keeping in mind that COVID-19's full implications for fragile states and associated conflicts are not yet clear – the disease has only started to escalate in many poorer or institutionally weaker countries.

Still, for all these question marks, the Secretary-General's call has created at least some useful momentum for pausing violence that could help pandemic response efforts and perhaps begin building the trust that will be needed to pursue longer-term peace deals. UN envoys are already doing their best to link the global appeal to their existing political efforts in cases such as Sudan, South Sudan and Syria. If the Security Council and its most powerful members get behind the Secretary-General's call, it could create still more opportunities for peacemaking.

## Disparate Motives

The states and armed groups that have acknowledged or endorsed the Secretary-General's ceasefire appeal are a disparate group. Some have nodded to the call, most likely for public relations purposes, without any seeming intention of putting it into practice. As the UN has noted, both the Ukrainian and the Russian-backed de facto authorities that control parts of eastern Ukraine welcomed the call, but shooting and shelling continues along the line of control that separates their respective forces at only a marginally lower level than before. In Libya, combatants escalated hostilities immediately after expressing an interest in the Secretary-General's initiative. For some conflict parties, acknowledging the appeal may be little more than gesture politics, with battlefield stakes and potential openings outweighing fear of COVID-19.

Others, including a significant number of non-state armed groups, seem to see real practical advantages in signing onto the Secretary-General's appeal. Early adopters of the ceasefire included the Communist Party of the


MONUSCO peacekeepers patrol amid the COVID-19 outbreak, in Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, 19 March 2020. REUTERS/Olivia Acland

Philippines (CPP) and the National Liberation Army (in Spanish, Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN) in Colombia. Both appear genuinely concerned by COVID-19's health risks and economic consequences for the people they say they represent. In the Filipino case, lockdowns in many cities and provinces have threatened food and medical supplies to the CPP's supporters, and limited Communist fighters' freedom of movement. A ceasefire, if respected, should enable these supplies to get through. In Colombia, the ELN tied a promise to cease hostilities for one month to a demand for economic aid to low-income families, farmers and businesses, which it presumably sees as important for boosting its popular profile.

Some groups or their members may have signed on to the UN appeal for more tactical political reasons. For the ELN, another motivation for signing up to the ceasefire was the opportunity to call on the Colombian government to return to peace talks that were suspended in January 2019. In Cameroon, meanwhile, just one of twelve small armed groups that claim to fight on behalf of the Anglophone minority against the Francophone-dominated government signed onto the UN ceasefire call. It may have done so with an eye to gaining international recognition relative to the other eleven (some of which are stronger militarily).

Many groups have placed caveats on their ceasefire pledges or left ambiguity about how they will carry them out. The ELN reserved the right to respond to attacks by the military or other armed groups, and it has already clashed with criminal organisations in the days since the ceasefire was announced. Although the group also released some hostages to signal its commitment to the ceasefire, it has kidnapped several more. In Syria, the Kurdish-led Syrian

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Democratic Forces (SDF) that control much of the country's north east have declared a ceasefire, but it is not clear whether this applies to asymmetric attacks against Turkey-backed forces inside Syria for which the SDF does not take public responsibility.

Of course, not all conflict parties have responded to their rivals' COVID-related ceasefires with enthusiasm. The Colombian government has treated the ELN declaration sceptically, and it is unlikely to accede to the guerrillas' main goal of peace talks. In Cameroon, the government has shown no interest in the separatists' ceasefire offer, in line with its enduring opposition to engaging in talks with them. Its reluctance may also be a symptom of a broader leadership issue as President Paul Biya has remained out of public view since the virus emerged, fuelling speculation about his health. Perhaps not surprisingly, UN efforts to persuade armed groups to cease hostilities seem to have more traction in cases – such as Sudan – where parties had already engaged in peace talks, meaning that COVID-19 adds impetus to existing processes.

One case in which the UN was initially hopeful of using COVID-19 to advance a ceasefire and restart a political process was Yemen. In the wake of his global ceasefire call, Secretary-General Guterres launched a specific appeal for a Yemeni ceasefire – an initiative that had been in the works before – and both the domestic parties to the conflict and the international military coalition backing the UN-recognised government indicated an interest. Nonetheless, violence escalated and UN-led talks among the government, its regional patrons and the Huthi rebels over the ceasefire did not come to pass. UN officials continued to work on launching new talks, conscious that the combatants in Yemen often ratchet up hostilities before agreeing to ceasefires in the hope of gaining leverage in talks. At the time of writing, the Saudi-led coalition has announced that it will suspend military operations in Yemen for a fortnight in response to the UN efforts.

More troubling, UN efforts to support a COVID-related ceasefire in Libya appear to have derailed completely. The UN-recognised Government of National Accord and Arab Libyan Armed Forces launched fresh hostilities in late March, apparently with foreign forces participating on both sides. While the UN is attempting to revive deadlocked political negotiations, neither party is invested in making the process work. The fact that reported cases of COVID-19 remain rare in Libya may have reduced the UN call's resonance, at least for the time being.

None of these setbacks should call into question the desirability of the UN's ceasefire call. They do, however, raise questions about how to sustain those pledges that have been made. In the short term, the best answer may lie in creating greater incentives for armed groups to halt their operations by addressing some of the social and economic difficulties facing their supporters. If, for example, the relevant authorities could guarantee the supply of food and medicine in the Philippines or cater to the economic woes of peripheral regions in Colombia, groups like the CPP and ELN would have good reason to extend their ceasefires – and face greater popular backlash were they to resume shooting. In Cameroon, too, rebels and the government alike are more likely to buy into a ceasefire if aid agencies use it to address COVID-19 and help provide necessary assistance. Such help could include testing people for the virus and mending badly degraded medical infrastructure. UN agencies may be able to marshal some resources to meet these needs, although the overall challenge of raising funds to address the pandemic is already daunting.

For its part, the UN Security Council could offer additional political backing to those actors

who are prepared to cooperate with the Secretary-General's initiative. The Security Council has already alluded to the global ceasefire call in a press statement on Afghanistan, encouraging the Kabul government and Taliban to halt hostilities in light of COVID-19 (while the Afghan government has reiterated its long-standing demand for a ceasefire, the Taliban have indicated that they will unilaterally pause violence in coronavirus-affected areas under their control).

Council members might not be comfortable making such direct statements on all the conflicts mentioned here – the Council has, for example, held only one informal discussion on Cameroon and has not dealt with the Philippines at all. But it could reinforce the Secretary-General's efforts in at least one significant way: it could create a formal framework for Guterres to monitor and update ceasefire implementation. The UN has already put out a useful update on international responses to his appeal, but if the Council were to request a monthly or bimonthly update on its implementation, then both governments and armed groups would be aware that their behaviour is under scrutiny. That measure might deter some actors from breaking their commitments or encourage others to join in.

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## Council Dynamics

This scenario, however, would require the Security Council to tackle COVID-19 in a unitary and strategic fashion. To date, it has proven impossible for the Council to do so. To date, inter-governmental discussions in New York of the pandemic's security implications have not gone well. The Security Council's permanent five members were unable to agree on a resolution on the matter, tabled by France in mid-March, apparently because the U.S. demanded that it refer to the Chinese origins of the virus. A proposal by Estonia for a less weighty Council press statement on the coronavirus failed when China, supported by South Africa, argued that the illness was not properly a matter of "peace and security". While the General Assembly has passed a resolution promoting cooperation in the face of COVID-19, it did not mention the disease's impact on conflicts.

With the Security Council in a state of confusion, the Secretary-General's global ceasefire call offers a relatively straightforward initiative around which states inside and outside the Council can rally. Canada (not a Security Council member at present) orchestrated a statement of support for the initiative that now has the backing of over 70 states, including France and the UK. There are still some notable gaps among the signatories. The U.S. did not join up, claiming that the call could get in the way of counter-terrorism operations, and China and Russia are also absent. For representatives of poorer countries at the UN, the main concern is the economic impact of COVID-19 rather than its political and security ramifications. A recent statement by members of the G77 of southern countries at the UN, co-signed by China, praises Guterres for flagging the pandemic's economic effects, but not the ceasefire call.

Those Security Council members that believe the Council should speak out on COVID-19 increasingly see the Secretary-General's ceasefire appeal as the best vehicle for their efforts. Tunisia has worked with other elected Council members on a draft resolution that highlights the ceasefire call, although early drafts contained material on global public

health and economic issues that even sympathetic diplomats felt fell outside the body's purview. French President Emmanuel Macron has tried to push other P5 leaders to find common ground on Security Council action, but as yet he has been unable to forge consensus. Russia has used the COVID-19 debate to argue for relaxation of international sanctions, which the U.S. and its allies view with suspicion, although Moscow is far from alone in flagging the issue. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet and a growing roster of international luminaries have called for humanitarian exemptions to sanctions (a position that Crisis Group supports) although Russia has argued for an even broader end to unilateral economic penalties.

The Secretary-General will brief the Security Council on COVID-19's security implications on 9 April. Some diplomats hope that he can nudge the members to agree on wording for a Security Council output, despite the outstanding obstacles. The Council risks further diminishing itself if it cannot come to some sort of common position on the threat coronavirus presents to international peace and security soon. The best compromise at this time may be for the Council to get behind a narrow resolution that backs the Secretary-General's ceasefire call and, as noted above, signals that the Council will track how the call is implemented, giving it some additional credibility among sceptical states and armed groups.

A global humanitarian ceasefire is a commendable aspiration, but it is most likely to be embraced by some, rejected by others and – even when accepted – observed with varying and evolving degrees of rigour. Its future appeal could depend in part on the extent to which the pandemic grips highly vulnerable countries where its effects are only now showing up. It is possible that some armed groups that have not taken the Secretary-General's call seriously to date will do so if large numbers of their fighters or followers succumb to the disease. Equally, some groups that have signed on might defect if they conclude that COVID-19's effects are less awful than feared.

The Secretary-General has done an important service by framing a debate about the need for international cooperation to handle the political crises and deadly violence that will result from the pandemic and to ensure that extremely vulnerable populations keep getting aid while it lasts. His efforts may have produced limited successes thus far, but that is hardly an excuse for failing to consolidate and build on what he has achieved wherever possible. He deserves the Security Council's belated but full support.

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