

Ceasefires in armed conflicts during Coronavirus Pandemic

Escola de Cultura de Pau

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Summary

On 23 March, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on all parties in conflict around the world to observe a ceasefire that will allow us all to face the coronavirus pandemic, thereby facilitating the work of humanitarians accessing the most vulnerable populations affected by violence. The UAB Escola de Cultura de Pau (ECP) joins this call for a global ceasefire. In support of local and international efforts to build peace and respond to the pandemic, it documents below some of the situations of armed conflict or tension in which armed actors have answered the UN Secretary-General's call, adopted other confidence-building measures between the parties or made important appeals at the start of the cessations of hostilities.

On 23 March, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on all parties in conflict around the world to observe a ceasefire that will allow us all to face the coronavirus pandemic, thereby facilitating the work of humanitarians accessing the most vulnerable populations affected by violence. Different armed actors

have answered his call in the last few days. By late March, 53 countries had responded with a statement from member countries of the Group of Friends of Women, Peace and Security, the Group of Friends of Children and Armed Conflict and the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians. Their joint statement expressed concern about the disproportionate impact of armed conflicts on people such as the elderly and those with functional diversity, displaced persons, the wounded, detainees, sick people and others, and stress that an immediate worldwide ceasefire would lessen these impacts, facilitate humanitarian assistance and protection and possibly help to reduce the spread of COVID-19. International figures such as the Pope also echoed these concerns.

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AFRICA

NIGERIA: Peace agreement to resolve the inter-community conflict in Benue State, Nigeria

Representatives of 10 agricultural and livestock communities reached a peace agreement in Benue State, Nigeria, in force during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, in response to the appeal made by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. Signed by community leaders, youth groups and women leaders from these communities and made public on 30 March, this agreement is the result of a negotiating process facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue to resolve the inter-community conflict that affected the state.

CAMEROON (Ambazonia/North West-South West): The armed group SOCADEF declares a temporary humanitarian ceasefire

The armed group Southern Cameroons Defense Forces (SOCADEF) declared a 15-day ceasefire so that the civilian population can be tested for the coronavirus as a gesture of goodwill. It is currently the only armed group in the North West and South West regions (known as Ambazonia) that has responded to the global call for a ceasefire made by UN Secretary-General António Guterres on 23 March. Alexandre Liebeskind, the director for Francophone Africa at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, has noted that there is no news whether the main armed group, the Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF), is observing the ceasefire and participating in the negotiations, but hopes that other groups join the SOCADEF initiative.

SUDAN (DARFUR): The armed group SLM/A-AW observes the ceasefire

In the Darfur region, the Sudan Liberation Movement faction led by Abdel Wahid al-Nur (SLM/A-AW) announced on 30 March that it had heard the call made by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and decreed a ceasefire in Darfur. The statement came three days after the head of the United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), Jeremiah Mamabolo, asked the insurgents to implement a ceasefire and to participate in the ongoing peace process in the South Sudanese capital of Juba. While the SLM/A-AW signalled its commitment to the international call for an end to the violence to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the Darfur refugee

and displaced persons camps, it repeated its refusal to join the Darfur peace process that is taking place in Juba between the Sudanese transitional government and other Darfuri armed groups. In turn, Abdel Wahid al-Nur asked the United Nations to provide humanitarian support to civilians affected by the war in Darfur and to maintain UNAMID.

THE AMERICAS

COLOMBIA: The ELN declares a one-month unilateral ceasefire

The ELN guerrilla group declared a one-month unilateral ceasefire, calling it a “humanitarian gesture” in response to the UN Secretary-General’s global call regarding the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. The announcement came days after the start of a quarantine period decreed by the Colombian government. The ELN also asked the government to order the “billeting of its troops” and to hold a meeting with the guerrilla delegates in Havana so that the ceasefire becomes bilateral and temporary. The government indicated that it upholds its demands to resume the peace negotiations and to make the ceasefire permanent. However, it designated the former guerrilla leaders Felipe Torres and Francisco Galán promoters of peace. The fact that both announcements were made at the same time could provide an opportunity for the negotiations to resume, according to different analysts.

EL SALVADOR: Various gangs have imposed a curfew since 30 March

Local media reported that since 30 March the gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS13), Revolucionarios del Barrio 18 and Sureños have imposed what they call a curfew, which implies a ban on staying in public spaces and the regulation of business hours and shopping shifts in areas under their control or influence. According to these reports, these nationwide measures have been agreed by all three gangs and are aimed at blocking any increase in the police presence in the areas in which they exercise greater social control while avoiding the hospitalisation of gang members, because some of their leaders argue that the Salvadoran health system would not allocate resources to their medical care. The

government complained that the steps announced by the gangs seek to increase their legitimacy while eroding the legitimacy of the state. The Salvadoran authorities also announced that there has been a notable drop in the number of homicides since the COVID-19 pandemic started.

ASIA

AFGHANISTAN: The Taliban are willing to cease armed activity in areas under their control affected by coronavirus

The Taliban said they were willing to cease armed activity in areas under their control if coronavirus cases were detected, according to their spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed. They also said that they would guarantee the security of humanitarian workers who travel to the affected areas to deal with the pandemic. In the days running up to this announcement, Defence Minister Asadullah Khalid had made a public statement with Interior Minister Masoud Andarabi to promote a ceasefire and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission had also called for the Taliban to answer the UN Secretary-General's call.

THE PHILIPPINES: The Philippine government and the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines decree separate cessations of offensive hostilities

The Communist Party of the Philippines ordered its armed wing, the New People's Army, to unilaterally cease its offensive actions between 26 March and 15 April. Previously, the Philippine government had decreed a Suspension of Military and Police Operations (SOMO and SOPO) between 19 March and 15 April, shortly after decreeing confinement in the Luzon area, arguing for the need to concentrate the efforts of state security forces and agencies on containing the coronavirus. Two days earlier, on 16 March, President Rodrigo Duterte had asked the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (the political organisation that negotiates on behalf of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the NPA) to cease hostilities, but the group's founder, Jose María Sison urged the government to make this demand through official channels and called for the government

negotiating panel to ask the NDF negotiating panel.

The Communist Party of the Philippines wanted to emphasise that its decision to decree a unilateral cessation of hostilities was not linked to the government's declaration a few days earlier, but was a response to the call for a global ceasefire by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. However, the NDF also noted that its cessation of hostilities could be seen as a gesture of goodwill that could facilitate the resumption of long-halted peace negotiations.

THAILAND (SOUTH): The BRN, the main armed group in the southern part of the country, issue a statement regarding COVID-19, though without decreeing any ceasefire

The main insurgent group operating in southern Thailand, the BRN, released a statement urging the population to cooperate with the regional medical, community and religious authorities to contain the spread of the coronavirus and not wait for a response from the Thai government because the number of infections was rising in the southern provinces. Though it did not mention any offer to suspend or reduce hostilities, the statement also urged the population not to stigmatise or accuse any particular community for spreading the virus.

INDONESIA (PAPUA): The leader of the Papuan independence movement criticises the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Papua region

In Indonesia, the president of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), Benny Wanda, who is recognised as one of the region's leading independence leaders, argued that the Indonesian government's decision not to confine the region was yet another example of the state's genocidal policies towards West Papua, especially taking into account the precariousness of the regional health system that he also blamed on the state. Wanda accused the central government of ignoring and belittling the governor of West Papua's request to ban air and sea travel to and from the region. Days before, the ULMWP spokesman-in-exile had urged the governors of Papua and West Papua to immediately confine the region and accused the Indonesian government of using the current pandemic to continue military operations in the region.

EUROPE

MOLDOVA (TRANSDNIESTRIA): Joint measures to guarantee the displacement of some parts of the population, such as health workers

As part of the COVID-19 crisis, the Moldovan government and the self-proclaimed government of Transdniestria agreed on measures to facilitate and guarantee the movement of various groups of people, including medical workers, emergency service providers such as firefighters, farmers in agreed perimeters, electrical and natural gas network maintenance personnel, penitentiary employees and others. The Moldovan government said that it is in permanent contact with the local authorities of towns in the “security zone” (protection zone that covers a narrow strip of territory that runs along both sides of the Dniester River, supervised by a peacekeeping force with personnel from Moldova, Transdniestria and Russia), as well as with Transdniestrian authorities, including Transdniestria’s chief negotiator. The Moldovan government has emphasised the importance of communication as an effective tool amidst the current crisis.

MIDDLE EAST / MENA REGION

YEMEN: The warring parties hear the call for a ceasefire, but clashes persist

Upon hearing the UN Secretary-General’s call, the main warring parties in Yemen announced that they were agreeing to a ceasefire. Thus, the internationally recognised government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the Yemeni Houthi armed group, which controls part of the country, and Saudi Arabia, the leader of the international coalition that intervened in 2015 in support of the Hadi government, accepted a cessation of hostilities on 26 March. However, since then the fighting has continued. The Houthis, which Riyadh considers Iran’s “proxies”, denounced Saudi airstrikes in the area under their control, and Saudi Arabia announced the destruction of drones flying over two of its cities. In late March, Riyadh intercepted missiles launched by Houthis against targets on Saudi soil and shortly thereafter launched over a dozen attacks against Houthi positions in the capital, Sana’a. Yemen is facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world due to the armed conflict and is in a particularly fragile situation to face the pandemic.

SYRIA: The SDF announce the suspension of military activities, but a broad ceasefire in the country remains in doubt

Twenty-four hours after UN Secretary-General António Guterres made his appeal, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition led by the Kurdish group YPG/YPJ, proposed establishing a humanitarian truce and announced the suspension of their military activities in northeastern Syria so that the warring parties can focus on their response to the coronavirus. The UN special envoy for Syria has repeated the need to observe a complete and immediate ceasefire in the country. According to media reports, the coronavirus threat is fostering a reconfiguration of forces. Among the actors supporting the Syrian regime, for example, a greater separation between Russian and Iranian forces is taking place, at Moscow’s request, since Iran is one of the countries most affected by the pandemic.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE: The tension subsides and mechanisms of cooperation are activated, but the alert persists due to Gaza’s particularly vulnerable situation in the face of the pandemic

Since the spread of the coronavirus, and prior to the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire, tensions has subsided, particularly in the Gaza Strip. In recent months, Israelis and Palestinians have been trying to implement a truce reached under the auspices of Egypt, while also trading recriminations. At the same time, the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority have shown some cooperation in tackling the pandemic and some have pointed out that these efforts could become a confidence-building measure that extends to other areas. However, various actors have insisted on the importance of guaranteeing critical supplies and equipment for the population of the occupied Palestinian territories and especially of the Gaza Strip, one of the places with the highest population density in the world. The WHO has warned that Gaza’s health system is not in a position to deal with a coronavirus outbreak and some have insisted that Israel must lift the restrictions on the area. Media reports indicate that Hamas representatives have demanded that Israel release prisoners to avoid exposure to the virus.

CALLS BY OTHER ACTORS

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue lanza una iniciativa global de respuesta al COVID-19

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) launched a global initiative on 23 March in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative, which focuses on areas affected by conflict, sets out the steps that HD will take to help to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact. The executive director of HD, David Harland, has stressed the vulnerability of civilians in conflict zones and the risk that they may become places where the virus spreads, for which they have launched

an initiative with four objectives that will be pursued through the HD health access network in countries in armed conflict, in cooperation with global health experts:

- Deliver life-saving information to hard-to-reach populations.
- Work with communities to monitor the outbreak, to strengthen the global response.
- Facilitate humanitarian access to these hard-to-reach populations.
- Promote humanitarian breaks in areas of active armed conflict, to provide space for an effective response against the pandemic.



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èc̃p̃ escola de
cultura de pau

UAB
Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona

Escola de Cultura de Pau
Parc de Recerca, Edifici MRA,
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
08193 Bellaterra (Espanya)
+34 93 586 88 42
pr.conflict.escolapau@uab.cat
escolapau.uab.cat

Amb el suport:

ACD Agència Catalana
de Cooperació
al Desenvolupament

**Generalitat
de Catalunya**

@escolapau
EscolaPau