

FROM BAD TO WORSE?

BRIEF / 13
Jun 2020

The impact(s) of Covid-19 on conflict dynamics

by

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CONFLICT
SERIES

In December 2019, when the novel strain of coronavirus first hit the headlines, 12 countries in the world were experiencing organised violence on an extensive scale, with more than 100 incidents of violence and attacks against civilians recorded in that month.¹ To most of these countries, the virus seemed a distant threat at the time. Yet, a few months and over 7 million recorded Covid-19 cases later, it has evolved from a distant threat to a stark reality. The global crisis – which has unleashed an emergency in the world's public health, political, and economic systems simultaneously² – has subjected even the most stable societies to unprecedented disruption. In conflict-affected countries, i.e. countries with ongoing conflicts or a high risk of relapse into conflict, and countries emerging from conflicts, the pandemic has added another layer on top of often multiple existing layers of crisis.

Against the backdrop of expert warnings over the particular vulnerabilities of conflict-affected countries to Covid-19,³ this Brief analyses key emerging dynamics and repercussions in conflict-affected countries in general, and in five countries in particular: Colombia, Libya, Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen. The focus here is especially on conflicts and countries previously covered by our Conflict Series, so as to build on already accumulated analysis.

Summary

- › There are three main ways in which the pandemic affects peace and conflict dynamics: the public health crisis, the policy responses to it, and the economic fallout arising from the coronavirus.
- › Thus far, the pandemic has been accompanied by a rise in political violence around the world.
- › Armed groups have capitalised on the crisis, while the global distraction caused by the pandemic has made it difficult to seize opportunities for peace.
- › Clearly defined ceasefire frameworks, support towards local peacebuilders, and the provision of substantive and long-term economic support in conflict-sensitive ways are crucial for mitigating the risk of an escalatory spiral.

The Brief identifies three main ways in which the global crisis impacts conflict-affected countries. First, **the pandemic itself** risks exacerbating inequalities and further burdening already vulnerable groups within conflict-affected societies. Second, local and external conflict parties are quick to capitalise on various opportunities arising from **the policy responses** to the crisis which also complicate peace and crisis management efforts. Third, **the economic fallout** puts severe strain on already weak state institutions and undermines governance outcomes (thus increasing the risk of conflict). Of these three dimensions, the policy responses and distraction created by the pandemic have thus far had the most significant repercussions for conflict dynamics, unfortunately often for the worse. The global scale of the crisis and its continuing evolution complicate efforts to seize momentum for peace and set the pandemic apart from previous catastrophic/disruptive events, such as the tsunami in 2004, that in some cases led to a positive shift in local conflict dynamics.

The Brief is structured as follows: the main text analyses the emerging trends catalysed by the pandemic crisis in conflict-affected contexts, while the case study boxes discuss the unfolding processes in specific countries.⁴ The last section discusses the policy options for preventing further escalatory repercussions.

OPPORTUNITIES YES, BUT FOR WHOM?

On March 23, the UN Secretary General António Guterres made an unprecedented call for a global ceasefire. The call gained broad political support and encouraged hopes that the pandemic might serve as a catalyst for a cessation of armed hostilities. Nevertheless, if anything, a trend of intensifying conflicts and increased insecurity has been observed, as the pandemic responses have created opportunities for armed actors and left civilians more exposed to violence.

There are some countries, such as Colombia (see the case study box on page 7), Cameroon and the Philippines, where armed groups followed up on the ceasefire call and temporarily refrained from violence. However, the positive impact on the ground has been limited at best, as the mostly unilateral ceasefires have not been reciprocated by other armed actors in the respective countries and there has been little follow-up after the initial ceasefire periods. In many conflict-affected countries, the weeks since the call have witnessed unabated or increased violence.⁵

The pandemic responses have created opportunities for armed actors and left civilians more exposed to violence.

Non-state armed groups in particular seem to have taken advantage of the global disruption to step up violent activities. In Western Africa, for example, violence by non-state armed groups and militias was over 50% higher between 23 March and 25 April than the monthly average.⁶ Likewise, the so-called Islamic State has ramped up its activities in both Iraq and Syria.⁷ As the case studies here demonstrate, armed actors in Yemen, Libya, and Colombia display similar opportunism.

The increased activity of non-state armed groups reflects the broader effect of a power vacuum created by an external crisis.⁸ The pandemic hits incumbent state authorities hard, as they face political pressures and responsibility to take drastic measures to combat the virus. Reallocation of

resources and manpower (often military) can harm counterinsurgency efforts and weaken a state's capability to respond to armed challengers – unless it can rely on external support to avoid losing capacities (e.g. Libya). Armed groups, who do not face the same pressure to manage the crisis, are quick to seize the momentum to weaken their opponents.⁹ Aside from violent tactics, actors aiming at destabilising the incumbent authorities can hinder or obstruct the state's response to the pandemic and/or act proactively and present themselves as more reliable alternatives – a tactic that may well work in the face of inadequate or unpopular policy measures. In internationalised conflicts (see the cases of Libya and Yemen), the extent to which armed actors are (or are not) constrained by the pandemic is contingent on the responses of their external allies.

On the other hand, the policy responses appear to also create opportunities for militarist and autocratic state actors at the expense of civil actors. From Iran's Revolutionary Guard to South African troops, militaries play an active role in combating the pandemic across the world. This prominent role during the crisis can strengthen their power *vis-à-vis* civilian leaders, as discussed in the case of Sudan (see page 6). In several countries, authorities enforcing lockdowns have committed violence against civilians or used the lockdown measures to suppress political opposition.¹⁰

Moreover, the counter-pandemic measures have complicated and in some cases interrupted existing peace negotiations (see the cases of Ukraine, Sudan and Libya) and imposed operational changes on international peacekeeping and crisis management missions. The footprint of forces mandated to protect civilians has been reduced in contexts such as South Sudan and Mali, making locals even more vulnerable to violent state and non-state actors.¹¹ As the case of Colombia demonstrates, the confinement measures have also made it harder for local peacebuilding or protective efforts to continue.

Yemen and political opportunism

In Yemen, Covid-19 threatens to exacerbate what the UN has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis, while providing the armed groups and competing local authorities with another opportunity to further their political aims. The rising numbers of recorded Covid-19 cases and the lack of capacities to track the spread of the virus present an enormous challenge to the country, where 80% of the population rely on aid and 110,000 cholera cases have been recorded since January 2020.¹²

The pandemic has altered the ongoing political dynamics between the main local and external armed actors. Saudi Arabia, which heads the military coalition supporting the internationally recognised government (IRG) against the Iran-backed Houthis, has announced two consecutive unilateral ceasefires as a reaction to the pandemic. Analysts suggest that Saudi Arabia – struggling with Covid-19 at home and bogged down by its involvement in Yemen – is seeking an exit strategy from a war that is proving protracted and costly.¹³ However, the ceasefire announcements have not translated into stopping violence on the ground. In fact, armed fighting intensified after the first ceasefire announcement.¹⁴

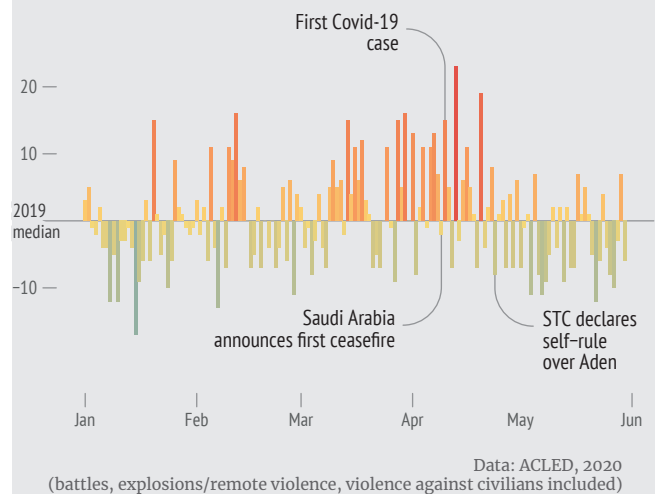
The Houthis – the *de facto* governance authority over northern Yemen including the capital Sanaa – have rejected the unilateral ceasefire announcements and demanded a more ambitious deal including the lifting of the Saudi blockade and other conditions for a political settlement. Saudi Arabia's apparent eagerness to exit the conflict amid the public health crisis improves the bargaining position of the Houthis – who advanced in the battlefield in recent months – *vis-à-vis* their opponents. The insurgents also appear to be using the threat of Covid-19 to mobilise fighters and undermine their opponents' efforts to manage the crisis while concealing the spread of the virus.¹⁵ Further complicating Saudi Arabia's and the IRG's political position, in late April the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) declared self-government in Aden (the area most impacted by Covid-19 thus far) and thus reneged on its agreement with the IRG. The move reflects opportunism in a changed situation where the IRG and its allies are suffering from weakened credibility.¹⁶ The STC has also prevented the recognised government from accessing World Health Organisation (WHO) aid coming through the port of Aden.¹⁷

Beyond the political and strategic repercussions it has generated, Covid-19 appears to have further catalysed the fragmentation of security governance in Yemen. The public health crisis has forced multiple governance providers at different levels and in different territories to react by introducing and enforcing policy measures, which can consolidate their territorial footprint and/or put them at odds with other governance actors.

Particularly in the IRG-held areas, rivalry between local security providers (tribal chiefs, local militias) and the central government has increased, which can further weaken the recognised government's territorial control.¹⁸ As the crisis evolves, momentum for pressuring the major armed actors to cease hostilities might increase, particularly if the crisis significantly worsens and impacts armed groups more directly (by affecting their troops and/or support bases). However, if the policy responses contribute to emboldening local militias and security providers at the expense of the recognised government, a sustainable nation-wide ceasefire might become increasingly difficult to achieve.

No ceasefire on the ground

Daily number of violent incidents in Yemen in 2020: comparison with the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 28)



FROM COVID-19 TO INCREASING INEQUALITIES AND CONFLICT

Independently of the policy responses, the pandemic itself risks fuelling grievances and contributing to conflict.

Even with often relatively young demographics, many conflict-affected countries face disproportionately high mortality risks and humanitarian costs as they have population groups suffering from lowered immune systems due to violence and exposure to disease and relatively weak healthcare, water and sanitation infrastructures.¹⁹ This vulnerability to the pandemic also varies considerably within a conflict-affected country, as the multiplicity of armed actors and variations in governance across territories influences how different communities access healthcare and other

services – including tracking and treating Covid-19 cases.²⁰ Consequently, the pandemic can further contribute to political grievances deriving from perceived inequality and marginalisation, which can spark a violent backlash. A study examining the effects of the Ebola outbreak in Western Africa in 2014–2016 found that outbreaks of violence against the authorities increased particularly in areas with low levels of trust towards the state.²¹ Regions such as Darfur, where there are low levels of trust towards the state authorities and the pandemic can exacerbate marginalisation, are particularly vulnerable in this regard.

Libya and the power of patrons

The combination of a highly internationalised armed conflict and decimated public health system makes Covid-19 a major threat to civilians in Libya. The close to 700,000 migrants and refugees and growing numbers of IDPs, often confined in detention centres and camps with poor sanitation facilities, are particularly vulnerable to the spread of the virus.²² One year after General Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA) launched a fresh attack against the Government of National Accord (GNA), the pandemic has further disrupted international conflict mitigation efforts while incentivising the parties to seek new unilateral openings.²³

Amid the coronavirus-induced interruption in the UN-led talks, armed fighting in Libya intensified between March and April.²⁴ Despite repeated calls for a ceasefire, both conflict sides appear to have attempted to use the global distraction caused by the pandemic to unilaterally advance their position in the conflict. Haftar's LNA reportedly intensified its shelling in and around Tripoli, which drew wide condemnation as the attacks hit densely populated and confined neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, the GNA – aided by Turkish equipment and armed support – advanced to seize control of new areas and push back the LNA forces.²⁵ The heavy support provided by Turkey to the GNA has shifted power dynamics on the ground, and the Russian-backed General Haftar has faced mounting military setbacks since late April.²⁶

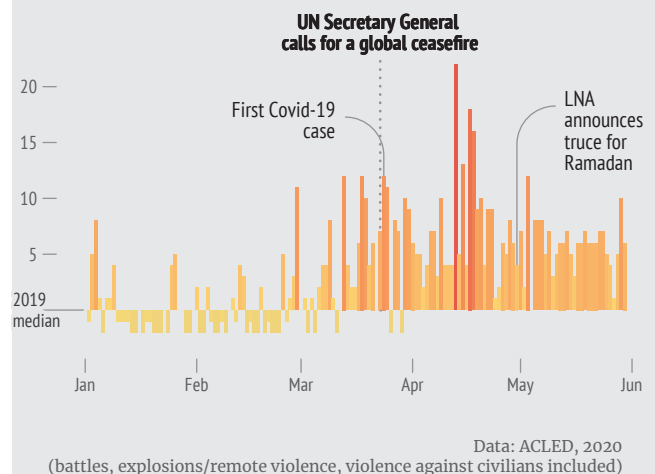
A successful ceasefire in Libya would require the commitment of the main local but also the external parties, a difficult equation to achieve even without the added technical difficulties in trust-building and oversight caused by Covid-19. The high level of external involvement in the conflict is particularly noteworthy with regard to the effects of Covid-19 on conflict dynamics in Libya. The intervention of external powers makes the conflict parties less dependent on local resources and less pliant to wider international pressures, which shapes the way the pandemic and its repercussions influence the armed parties. Both sides can continue

fighting even while facing negative consequences of the pandemic, if they continue receiving the necessary resources from their external allies. Conversely, Covid-19 might over time facilitate conflict de-escalation if the key external powers on one or both sides become weakened by the pandemic to the extent that this impairs their capacity and will to continue investing in the conflict and incentivises them to support a political settlement.

As rescue missions are also hampered by the counter-pandemic measures, the Mediterranean has become even more dangerous for those trying to reach Europe.²⁷ A deteriorating situation in Libya can in the long term play into the hands of organised criminal groups who, amid the chaos of the conflict and the distraction created by the crisis, can exploit the plight of migrants and step up their trafficking activities.

Violence escalates

Daily number of violent incidents in Libya in 2020: comparison with the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 3)



The global economic fallout that follows the pandemic will also hit conflict-affected countries hard. The World Bank projects that 40–60 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty in 2020, and the correlation between poverty and conflict means that many of them will be in conflict-affected countries. The income losses and worsened food insecurity generated by the policy responses are already sparking violent civil unrest from Kenya to India and Honduras.²⁸ As the emergency prolongs, countries such as Mozambique, where there is growing distrust towards the authorities, may witness increased mobilisation against the government, especially if the increasing economic costs exacerbate inequality.²⁹ The looming global recession is likely to have particularly destructive consequences for countries emerging from conflict, such as the two Sudans and Colombia, that rely heavily on the global economy to implement much-needed economic reforms. The recession can also further harm

peace efforts by leading to budget contractions: during the 2008 financial crisis, UN peacekeeping efforts faced cuts of approximately 20%.³⁰

HOW TO MITIGATE FURTHER DISASTERS?

Covid-19 is impervious to politics and its impact on peace and conflict dynamics derives from policy responses that create certain opportunities and hinder others as well as generating humanitarian and socio-economic hardship. The analysis and the case studies have indicated that many of the effects witnessed or projected are conflict and instability-inducing. There are two broad reasons for this. First, the global and inter-systemic nature of the crisis – affecting all countries and multiple sectors – simply makes it very difficult to seize the momentum and invest in building common ground between conflict parties in a given context. Cultivating peace requires attention and money – both of which are in particularly short supply right now. Second, the nature of the crisis differs significantly from that of a tsunami or other catastrophic event: Covid-19 is a slow, protracted crisis that does not affect conflict parties equally and simultaneously. Combating Covid-19 is a marathon, which in conflict-affected countries takes place amid heavy headwinds and among contestants that do not share the same rules.

Ukraine and freezing movement

The political process to settle the conflict in Donbas between the Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian government had been moving forward – albeit not unproblematically – when Covid-19 evolved into a pandemic.³¹ The crisis has since hampered people's movement across the contact line, hindering international monitoring efforts, amid continuing ceasefire violations. While the negotiations over the implementation of the Minsk agreements have continued in teleconference format, pushing forward with the negotiations amid the crisis comes with some risks.

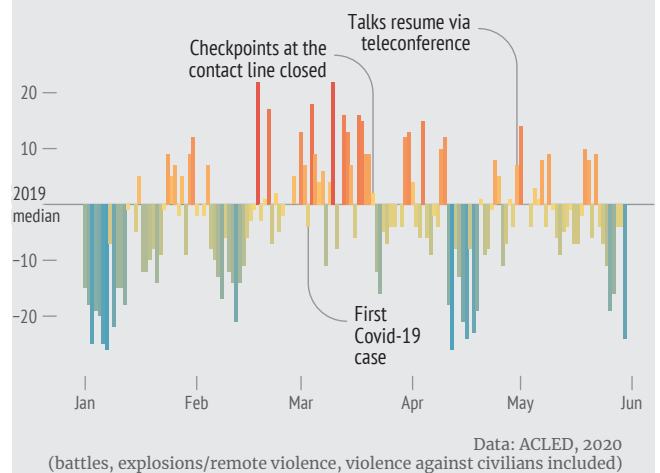
The most visible effect of the pandemic on the political dynamics concerning Eastern Ukraine derives from the counter-pandemic responses that have severely restricted movement across the contact line between the government-held territories and the non-government controlled areas (NGCA) that are under the control of the separatist forces. In addition to exacerbating humanitarian conditions – people, many of them elderly, living in NGCA have been unable to seek medical help in the government-held territories or receive their

pensions – armed groups have used the measures to prevent the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) from moving freely in Donbas.³² Relatedly, the pandemic response has exposed the governance weaknesses of the *de facto* authorities in the NGCA but also in the government-held areas, making the conflict regions increasingly dependent on support from Ukraine and Russia respectively.³³

Albeit in teleconferencing mode, the political process concerning the conflict in Donbas has continued amid the pandemic. The Normandy Four talks continued in April and the two parties also exchanged prisoners. While maintaining the political process and communication between the conflict parties is a positive step, there are some risks in pushing forward a political settlement during the pandemic. Given the controversies and significant opposition to the settlement plan in Ukraine (with regard to the question of self-rule in Donbas), moving forward with the high-level negotiations during the crisis runs the risk of fuelling grievances and opposition against the settlement.³⁴ As the public's attention is distracted and their opportunities to voice their concerns constrained, agreeing upon key political issues concerning the conflict – without an inclusive process – might become perceived as cheating the public and pushing forward a hasty peace plan amid a general crisis.

Armed clashes continue

Daily number of violent incidents in Ukraine in 2020: comparison with the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 41)



This is not to say that the race is lost. In fact, as we have barely finished the first lap of the race, what political actors do now will influence how the next phase will unfold. The evolution of the crisis and existing research suggest that certain measures can be helpful in mitigating escalatory dynamics in the short-term and strengthening long-term conditions for conflict prevention.

Sudan and the threat of re-militarisation

As an unconsolidated regime, Sudan's transitional government – a civil-military coalition formed in August 2019 after a nonviolent uprising triggered the end of the three-decade long authoritarian rule of Omar al-Bashir – is particularly vulnerable to any added crisis.³⁵ With acute economic problems and a severely under-capacitated healthcare system, there is a heightened risk of reversing democratic transition and peaceful development, as the virus continues to spread and cause disruption.

Thus far, Covid-19 has seriously tested the civil-military transitional regime, while also demonstrating its resilience. As in many other states, Sudan's security forces (including the infamous Rapid Support Forces) have assumed a prominent role in enforcing the counter-pandemic policy measures. There are fears that this situation presents the generals with an opportunity to tighten their grip on power, particularly as the confinement measures constrain the space to protest against such attempts. In early March, Prime Minister Hamdok survived an assassination attempt, which increased concerns over the transition. The pandemic has further fuelled rumours of growing tensions among the elites, with such rumours spiking in mid-April amid a dispute over the lockdown measures between the prime minister and a General governing Khartoum. The crisis appears to have also emboldened supporters of the former autocratic regime to try to undermine the transitional government, as indicated by protests held in support of al-Bashir and in defiance of the confinement measures.³⁶

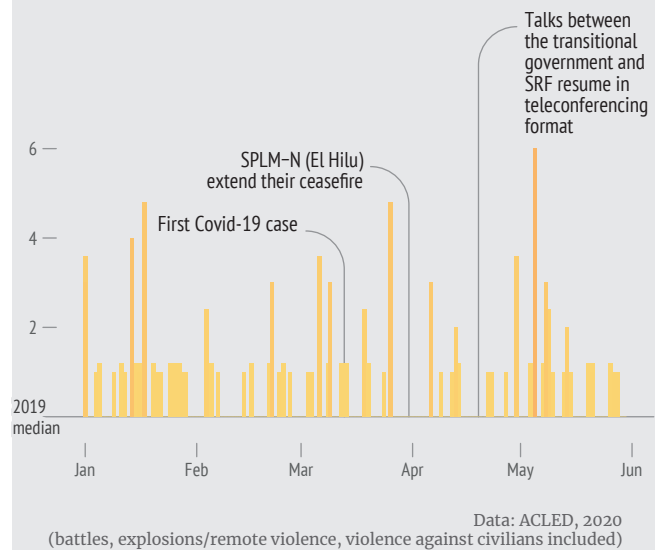
Nevertheless, the new government has thus far managed to push back and pursue its transitional agenda amid the crisis. The peace talks concerning the conflict regions (Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile) between the rebel alliance and the transitional government have continued, albeit in teleconferencing format. Both the transitional authorities and the armed movements have shown commitment to ceasing hostilities, for example the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N El Hilu) faction extended their unilateral ceasefire as a sign of goodwill towards the ongoing negotiations.³⁷ On the other hand, Covid-19 has caused delays in implementing agreed-upon steps with regard to Abyei, the disputed border region between Sudan and South Sudan, which has experienced escalating violence amid the pandemic.³⁸ The unabated communal violence in parts of the country, whose most marginalised areas are particularly exposed to the spread of the virus, also easily reinforces perceptions of neglect, which can undermine the ongoing peace efforts.

The political pressures on Sudan's transitional authorities, particularly the prime minister, will likely grow as the negative economic fallout of the pandemic

increases. Reduced access to food and other basic commodities as well as a rise in insecurity – of which the attacks on medical personnel are indicative – can reduce support for the transitional government, spark outbreaks of civil unrest, and provide military factions with a pretext to assume more power. On the other hand, if international donors delivered on their long overdue commitments to support Sudan's transition, this could help the civil authorities convince the people of their ability and determination to combat the crisis and continue the democratic transition.

Signs of increasing communal violence

Daily number of violent incidents in Sudan in 2020: comparison with the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 1)



Seizing the momentum for ceasefires. Despite the limited success of the ceasefire initiative on the ground thus far, empirical evidence demonstrates the potential of ceasefires for humanitarian and peace purposes.³⁹ For ceasefires to hold, the frameworks need to be clearly defined (to avoid manipulation) and, in the long term, developed.⁴⁰ Particularly in the midst of a crisis that hampers communication between the stakeholders, developing humanitarian ceasefire frameworks with clear red lines on the timeframe, monitoring and sanctions for violations is important. As the crisis continues and possibly begins to affect armed parties more directly, the momentum for ceasefires may increase. With regard to broader peacemaking opportunities, research indicates that forging peace out of disaster is difficult, particularly without a pre-existing process.⁴¹ Given the scale of the crisis and the attention it absorbs, pushing forward with political solutions – without inclusive participation – risks creating unsustainable settlements.

Colombia and the challenge to protect

In Colombia, Covid-19 threatens to further undermine the implementation of the Final Agreement for Ending the Conflict and Building a Stable and Lasting Peace between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army (FARC–EP), while providing opportunities for the various illegal armed groups to continue their violent strategies. The crisis initially prompted modest progress in the dynamics between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the government, as indicated by the ELN’s April ceasefire.

One of the biggest challenges in the implementation of the Final Agreement remains ending targeted violence against social leaders, human rights defenders and ex-combatants. Thus far, the pandemic appears to have made these groups increasingly vulnerable to armed militia engaging in various illegal activities and lethal attacks, particularly in rural areas.⁴² The lockdown measures prevent social leaders and other vulnerable groups from moving around frequently to protect themselves, which has made it easier for violent militias and other armed actors to target them.⁴³ At the same time, local protection procedures in place have been hampered by the policy measures against the pandemic. In some regions, civil society organisations report increases in violence against their communities and leaders amid the lockdown measures.⁴⁴ The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project reports a relative increase in violence against civilians during lockdown in some areas (e.g. Cauca), while the overall level has remained unchanged.⁴⁵

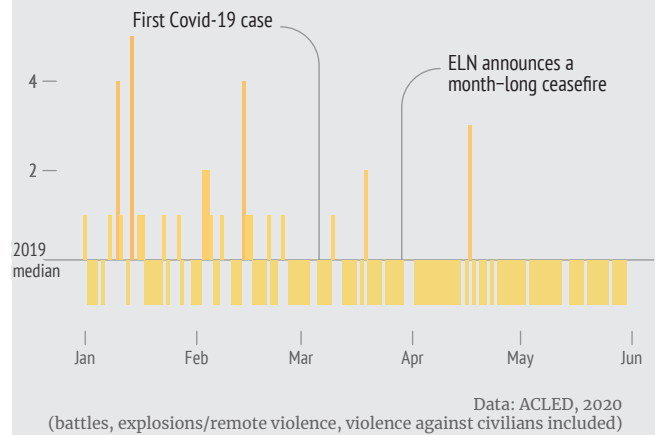
The policy responses to the pandemic have, at least temporarily, also suppressed the popular protests against the government’s slowness in moving forward with the implementation of the peace agreement. This can endanger the peace process by lifting the pressure on the central government to take the promised steps, such as restitution of lands and repatriation of ex-combatants – especially amid the economic problems caused by the pandemic. While there have been some positive steps that can help the authorities and different conflict parties to seize opportunities for peace – most notably the month-long ceasefire by the ELN – following up on these and more broadly on the commitments made as part of the peace process remains the key challenge.

As in other conflict-affected countries, the effects of the pandemic in Colombia are unevenly spread across different regions and communities, highlighting the role of subnational governance structures and threatening in particular already vulnerable and marginalised population groups, such as indigenous communities and displaced people. Ensuring concrete steps to improve the situation of these and other conflict-affected groups and territories would not only move the peace

process forward but help to mitigate the long-term negative repercussions of the pandemic.

One violent event per day

Daily number of violent incidents in Colombia in 2020: comparison with the median daily number of such incidents in 2019 (baseline = 2)



Supporting locally-embedded peacebuilding actors and governance providers. Building and maintaining peace should always rest on local leadership: this has become even clearer as international peacebuilding organisations and peacekeeping and crisis management missions are hampered by the adopted policy measures. More broadly, local leaders, including traditional authorities, and civil society actors can be crucial partners for national authorities and international aid organisations in combating the virus, including by dispelling harmful rumours.⁴⁶

Covid-19 aid. Economic shocks increase the risk of armed violence, but this risk can be curtailed by well-managed and targeted financial aid.⁴⁷ Initiatives such as Team Europe are vital for supporting conflict-affected societies in mitigating the negative consequences of the economic fallout. In order for this support to prevent rather than induce conflict, its distribution in conflict-affected countries needs to be based on a conflict-sensitive risk and vulnerability assessment.

The power of knowledge. Rumours and misinformation can worsen the public health situation and create societal tensions between communities or between citizens and the authorities. This again emphasises the role of locally trusted actors in communication (both on the ground and online). Knowledge is essential also to pre-empt potential conflict escalation. In order for actors seeking to maintain or build peace to be able to act early, evidence-based conflict analysis on national and subnational-level vulnerabilities is vital.

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