

The Strategic Use of Ceasefires in the Coronavirus Crisis

On 23 March, the UN Secretary General called for a global ceasefire. The aim was to create a break in violence to allow vulnerable populations living in conflict-affected countries to prepare for and manage the threat posed by the pandemic. Regrettably, the best available data shows that this call has failed to produce any significant shift in global levels of violence. In most cases, unilateral ceasefires have not been reciprocated, and ceasefire initiatives are diminishing. Notably, the UN Security Council has been unable to agree on a resolution, and an attempt drafted by France and Tunisia was shut down by the US on 8 May. Thus, the UN is not able to provide any significant support to help preserve or extend the short-term lulls in violence that have emerged. In this paper, we take a look at developments in Colombia, Yemen and Sudan.

Brief Points

- Coronavirus ceasefires have been declared in 9 countries, in which 3 have been broken, and 2 have ended. In addition, there are 9 countries with ceasefire initiatives.
- There has been no reduction in violence at a global level.
- In some countries, coronavirus ceasefires have led to short-term breaks in violence.
- In Colombia, the ELN declared a month-long ceasefire on 1 April, but this was not extended beyond 30 April.
- In Yemen, both sides have agreed to multiple ceasefires after 25 March, but the violence has continued at the same level.
- In Sudan, the ceasefires seem to be a continuation of the current peace process, but the level of violence has not diminished.

Siri Aas Rustad

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Fredrik Methi

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Håvard Mogleiv Nygård

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Govinda Clayton

Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich

Update on Global Response

At present, we have seen coronavirus ceasefire initiatives in a total of 18 countries. Of these 18, 9 countries have seen calls for ceasefires, but no declarations; 4 countries currently have a ceasefire in place; in 3 countries ceasefires were declared but have already been breached; and in 2 countries the ceasefires have ended and not been extended. Despite the numerous initiatives and ceasefires that have taken place, as Figure 1 shows, there does not appear to have been any significant effect on the global level of violence.

The Strategic Use of Ceasefires

The global call for a ceasefire is premised on the unprecedented humanitarian challenge posed by the coronavirus pandemic. The stated purpose of the coronavirus ceasefires is then humanitarian: the break in fighting is intended to enable lifesaving or relief-distributing activities such as aid delivery or disaster management. In this way, they are distinct from other ceasefires that are more directly related to a new or ongoing peace process. The hope is that conflict parties are able to agree to cooperate on an immediate humanitarian challenge, even when broader cooperation or negotiations are not possible.

Nevertheless, the international community and various peacemaking organisations have been quick to seize this opportunity, in the hope that the humanitarian ceasefires might provide a platform to kick-start or develop a broader peace process in the future. Indeed, ceasefires are often a vital first step in a peace process, and can perform a number of useful functions.

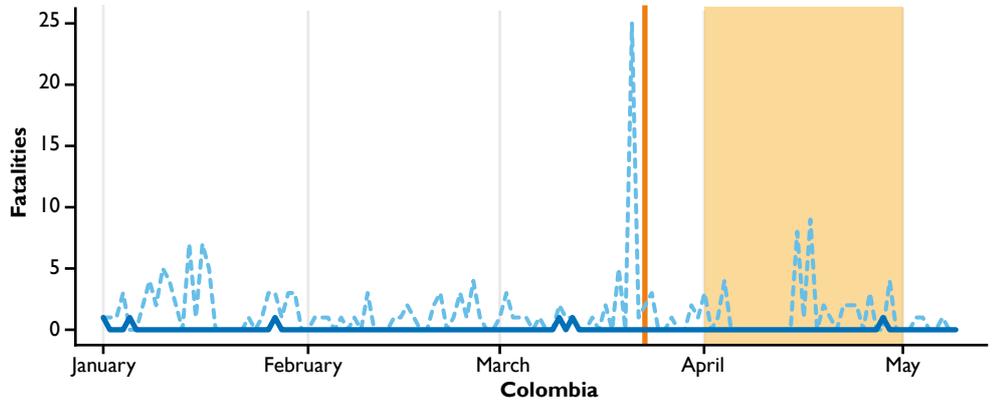


Figure 2: Conflict-related fatalities in Colombia, 1 January–9 May, 2020

Firstly, a ceasefire is often a tool through which conflict parties can signal a new intention to consider moving towards peace. Secondly, through observing a ceasefire, a conflict party can demonstrate their control and command over their military forces. For example, as we discuss below, the recent ELN ceasefire in Colombia has shown that they have the capacity to collectively cease hostilities when required. Thirdly, ceasefires, particularly in crisis situations, can demonstrate a conflict party's role as de facto government in the region they control by providing for the population in this area. For example, the Taliban stated that they would declare a ceasefire if areas in Afghanistan under *their* control were hit by the coronavirus. This hearts-and-minds strategy is important for the local support that a rebel group needs in order to sustain their fight.

However, ceasefires, including humanitarian arrangements, can also be used for other purposes beyond their stated intentions. Past research suggests that warring parties can enter

into ceasefires with more devious tactical intentions, such as buying time to regroup and re-arm, improve their military position, move and re-deploy troops, and rebuild logistical routes. In the previous peace process in Colombia (1999–2002), the FARC used the cessation of hostilities to rearm and regroup, leading to increased distrust between the parties, and eventually contributing to the downfall of the peace process.

It is too early to evaluate the 'real' motivation underlying the various coronavirus ceasefires, in particular the extent to which the humanitarian objective might hide either more peaceful or more devious intentions. In the coming weeks, as we monitor these ceasefires, we expect that conflict parties' behaviour will help to reveal their preferences.

In any case, the international community has an important role to play going forward. If the coronavirus ceasefires are to fulfil their primary humanitarian function – or if they perhaps even prove to be a catalyst for a peace process – they will require help and support to navigate the challenges that are likely to surround these very basic agreements. To facilitate this process, detailed monitoring of the arrangements is required.

To that end, we will look closer at recent developments in Colombia, Yemen and Sudan, using up-to-date data on violence from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) database.

Colombia

On 23 March, the same day that UN Secretary General António Guterres made his call for a global ceasefire, civil organisations called for

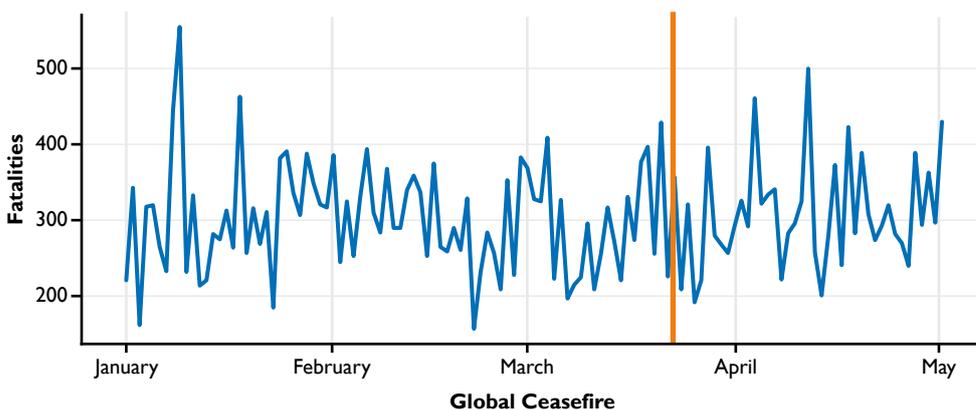


Figure 1: Global level of violence in armed conflicts, 1 January–2 May, 2020. Source: ACLED

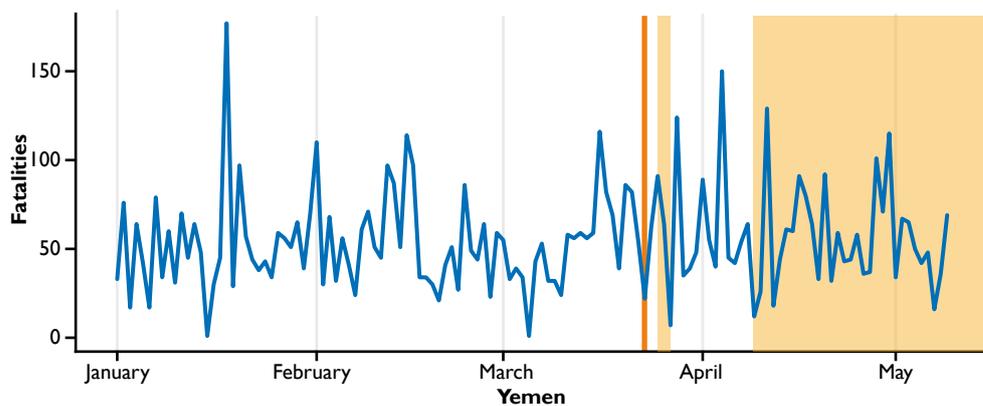


Figure 3: Conflict-related fatalities in Yemen, 1 January–9 May, 2020

Colombia's armed groups, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), to lay down their arms and support efforts to combat the pandemic. A week later, the ELN responded to these calls and declared a month-long unilateral ceasefire starting on 1 April. The guerrilla group called it a 'humanitarian gesture' to the Colombian people suffering from the pandemic.

The ceasefire declaration was treated with suspicion by the government. It has been speculated that the ELN wanted to resume the peace talks that ended after the purportedly ELN-led attack in January 2019. However, peace talks have been difficult to re-start as the ELN has demanded that President Duque release prisoners before peace talks start. The Duque government, in turn, has stated that they will only reopen talks if the ELN releases all its hostages and ceases its 'criminal activity'.

On 1 May the initial ceasefire reached its deadline. ELN announced in a statement on 27 April

that they would not extend the ceasefire, but would instead resume their guerrilla war on 1 May, despite calls for an extension from the UN Verification Mission in Colombia. The ELN said they would be resuming military operations due to the lack of response to its initial ceasefire announcement by the government. The ELN has alleged that instead of being interested in peace or in combating the virus, the Duque government has taken advantage of the ceasefire to conduct joint operations with paramilitaries in order to gain greater territorial control and continue its plans to assassinate social leaders. Figure 2 shows that no fatalities were caused by the ELN (dark blue line) during the period in which the ceasefire was in place, up until 28 April, nor has there been any attacks after the ceasefires ended. On the other hand, the general level of violence in Colombia (dashed pale blue line) has not been affected by the coronavirus ceasefires.

The discussion around the ceasefire in Colombia is marked by both sides claiming that the

other has devious intentions and would rather strengthen their position in the conflict than promote a peace process. That said, the ELN has – through this relatively well-observed ceasefire – shown a certain capacity to control its forces, which may be useful in future discussions. Unfortunately, the end of the ceasefire comes as the number of new COVID-19 cases continues to increase day by day in Colombia, and mere weeks before the government expects the pandemic to put the country's fragile healthcare system under severe stress.

Yemen

Two days after Guterres' call, on 25 March, the two opposing Yemeni sides – the internationally-recognised government of ousted President Hadi and the Iran-backed Houthi militia – called a ceasefire and announced a halt to all military operations in the country. The ceasefire had only been in effect for a few days when violence again broke out. The Saudi-led coalition shot down Houthi drones and the Houthis fired missiles at Saudi cities, including the capital Riyadh.

As the virus entered neighbouring countries, the Saudi-led coalition declared a new two-week long ceasefire on 9 April, in a bid to stem the spread of the virus. This announcement was quickly supported by both the Yemeni president Hadi and other NGOs. However, less than a week later fighting again escalated in Yemen. Despite numerous violations of the ceasefire, the Saudi-led coalition decided to extend the unilateral ceasefire by a month on 23 April, until 23 May.

Sudan: 3 Feb–22 March

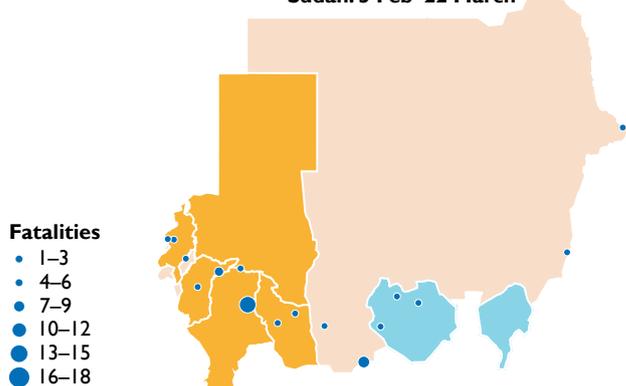


Figure 4: Conflict-related fatalities in Sudan, 3 Feb–22 March 2020

Sudan: 23 March–9 May

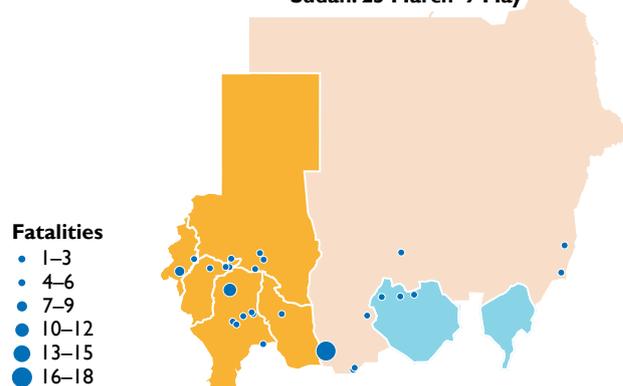


Figure 5: Conflict-related fatalities in Sudan, 23 March–9 May

Figure 3 shows that the level of violence has not been reduced by the ceasefire. There is a sharp decrease in violence right after the ceasefire was declared, but this is immediately followed by an increase in violence. Continuous efforts by both sides to renew the ceasefire despite the lack of reduction in violence could, however, signal that there is a genuine will to work towards a peace process. On 30 April, Yemen reported its first two deaths due to the virus.

Abdelaziz al-Hilu (SPLM-N al-Hilu), a rebel group fighting in the states of Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile, announced that it would extend its already ongoing ceasefire by three months. Similarly, the holdout Sudan Liberation Movement/Army of Abdel Wahid al-Nur (SLM/A-AW) fighting in Darfur also accepted Guterres' call for a ceasefire, but reiterated its refusal to join the peace process in Juba.

Nevertheless, the fighting in Sudan has not decreased substantially since the ceasefire; but rather increased (see Figure 6). The maps in Figures 4 and 5 compare a 7-week period before and after the global call for a ceasefire. This indicates that the main share of the violence has happened in Darfur and that it has increased after 23 March. This is the home base for SLM/A-AW, who has not joined the peace process. Thus, in Sudan, it seems that the coronavirus ceasefires are reinforcing strong signals in terms of the ongoing process.

discussed developments in the Philippines, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria up until 18 April. At that time, the Philippines appeared to be an example of a successful case. Since then, however, violence has increased, also beyond the pre-coronavirus level of violence, particularly in the conflict between the government and the Communist Party. The ceasefires have not been extended beyond 30 April. Similarly, in Afghanistan we saw a reduction in violence after the initial calls for a ceasefire, but over the past two weeks the level of violence has increased to pre-ceasefire levels. In Syria, there has been a slight increase in violence, but the Idlib ceasefires – which are not related to the coronavirus – seem to hold and continue to keep Syria at a record low in levels of violence since the beginning of the conflict. In Libya, after a failed coronavirus ceasefire, the level of violence has decreased as a new ceasefire related to Ramadan was declared, but in the past week violence has moved back to pre-coronavirus levels.

Sudan

Prolonged and complicated peace negotiations have been ongoing in Sudan since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan in April 2019. The country is still ravaged by two active armed conflicts: one in the Darfur region and another in the southern states of Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile. In support of the peace process, the head of Sudan's sovereign council, Abd al-Fattah al-Burhan, declared a nationwide ceasefire on 16 October, 2019. This was again extended in December.

After Guterres' call for a global ceasefire on 23 March, rebel groups from both conflicts answered the call. On 1 April, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North faction led by

The Philippines, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria

In the PRIO Conflict Trends policy brief 'Are the Coronavirus Ceasefires Working?', we

Conclusion

Guterres' call for a global ceasefire has been met with support and applause from governments, NGOs, and belligerent parties alike. Yet, it has still not substantially changed the situation on the ground. People living in conflict-affected areas still have to grapple with ongoing active conflict at the same time as they prepare for or try to cope with the coronavirus pandemic. Global levels of conflict violence remain unchanged, and in specific cases we do not see signs of more than short-lived lulls in fighting. While the members of the UN Security Council were not able to agree on a resolution, people in conflict areas are now suffering a double crisis. It is past time that the international community and individual governments announce stronger measures to ensure that the global call does not become a wasted opportunity. ■

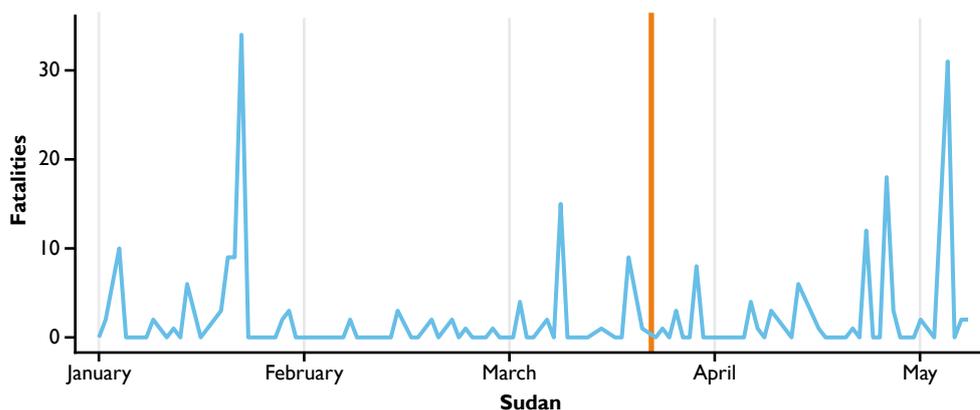


Figure 6: Conflict-related fatalities in Sudan, 1 January–9 May

THE AUTHORS

Siri Aas Rustad is a Senior Researcher at PRIO.

Fredrik Methi is a Master's Student at PRIO.

Håvard Mokleiv Nygård is a Research Director at PRIO.

Govinda Clayton is Senior Researcher in the CSS at ETH Zürich.

THE PROJECT

The *Conflict Trends* project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.