On 23 March, UN Secretary General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire to combat the coronavirus pandemic. The appeal quickly gathered widespread support. Armed groups and governments in over 14 countries have initiated ceasefires in response to the call. This includes Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria, three countries that have recently experienced some of the world’s bloodiest conflicts. Have these ceasefires affected the level of violence? In this policy brief, we examine recent developments in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Philippines. Using current data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) project, we investigate whether the ceasefires are indeed leading to a reduction in violence.

**Brief Points**

- Ceasefires have been declared in 7 countries due to the coronavirus.
- In 2 countries, the ceasefires have already clearly been breached.
- Another 7 countries have seen calls for ceasefires, but no formal declarations.
- The level of violence in the world does not appear to have gone down.
- But, the 18 March ceasefire in the Philippines seems to have reduced the level of violence.
- The 21 March humanitarian ceasefires in Libya were breached after only a few days, and the level of violence is higher now than before the ceasefire.
- In Afghanistan and Syria there have only been calls for ceasefires, but the level of violence appears to have dropped to its lowest level in 5 weeks.

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Ceasefires can perform a variety of functions, ranging from meeting short-term and immediate humanitarian objectives to ushering in a broader peace process. They can occur early in a peace process, with the goal of fostering trust, demonstrating control over the parties’ respective military forces, and protecting civilians. Over the last year, PRIO and ETH Zürich have collated the first ever comprehensive database on ceasefires. We record a total of 2,300 ceasefires in civil wars in the 1989–2018 period.

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, we have observed a number of humanitarian ceasefires. According to the ETH/PRIO Ceasefire dataset, approximately 10% of all ceasefires are related to humanitarian objectives. About 20 of these historical ceasefires have been related to infectious diseases, mostly dealing with polio vaccination programmes. Even before Guterres’ call for a worldwide ceasefire, several rebel groups and governments had entered into ceasefires on their own initiative. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a unilateral ceasefire in the conflict with the CPP; the warring parties in Libya agreed on a humanitarian ceasefire; and in Afghanistan the Taliban have agreed to allow health workers safe conduct.

Following Guterres’ call, we have also seen ceasefires in Yemen, Colombia, and Cameroon. These ceasefires are linked to the coronavirus pandemic and are not intended to result in lasting peace. But there have been cases of initially humanitarian ceasefire laying the groundwork for a more sustained peace. For example, following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) entered into a ceasefire with Indonesian authorities. Six months later, this process led to a peace agreement that ended the 30-year insurgency.

Humanitarian ceasefire like the coronavirus ceasefires tend to be most successful when they remain distinct from the conflict dynamics. Consequently, for the current ceasefires to hold, it is important that any attempts to build a broader peace do not undercut the clear and pressing humanitarian function of the coronavirus ceasefire in place. That said, the arrangements do offer a window of opportunity for the parties to work together to manage the current crisis, and this might yet lead to more significant progress towards peace in the future.

### Coronavirus Ceasefires

PRIO has collected data on coronavirus ceasefire initiatives. At present, we have seen coronavirus ceasefire initiatives in a total of 14 countries. These are shown in the map in Figure 1. Of these 14, 7 countries have seen calls for ceasefires, but no declarations, 5 countries currently have a ceasefire in place, and in 2 countries ceasefires were declared but have already been breached. The timeline in Figure 2 indicates when and where the various ceasefires have been implemented.

#### What Does It Take for a Ceasefire to Work?

We lack a robust body of research on ceasefires that allows to understand what makes a ceasefire successful. We do know, however, that detailed and comprehensive ceasefires tend to last longer. The immediate success of a humanitarian ceasefire would be a reduction in violence. Despite the call for a global ceasefire, we are yet to see a general worldwide reduction in violence. Therefore, we need to look more specifically at the countries where ceasefires have been declared to see if they are affecting the conflict in those countries. To that end, we have looked at the trajectory from January 2020 up until 18 April for ceasefire initiatives and the development in the level of violence in four countries: Afghanistan, the Philippines, Syria and Libya. We use data from

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**Figure 1: Map of countries with coronavirus-related ceasefire initiatives**

**Figure 2: Timeline over coronavirus-related ceasefires initiatives**
the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) project, which codes conflict events and fatalities in real time, allowing us to analyze the current situation.

**Afghanistan**

The blue line in Figure 3 shows a seven-day reduction of violence. The US and the Taliban signed an ‘agreement for bringing peace’ to Afghanistan on 29 February, well before the call for global ceasefire. According to the agreement, the US would withdraw its troops, the Taliban would not allow terrorists to operate within their controlled areas, and the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan would swap prisoners. While Figure 3 shows that there was a clear reduction of violence during this period, the level of violence has since increased again.

With regards to the coronavirus, the Taliban promised safe passage for health workers on 18 March. One day later, the Afghan government called for a nationwide ceasefire in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic in the country. On 1 April, Taliban announced that it was ready to declare ceasefires in their controlled areas if they were ‘hit by a coronavirus outbreak’. Since then, nothing tangible has happened. Figure 3 indicates a downward trend since the call for a global ceasefire, particularly after 1 April. While this is not an actual ceasefire, it does signal cooperation and willingness, which might affect the level of violence.

On 15 April, President Ashraf Ghani urged the Taliban to halt the fighting and announce a ceasefire. The Taliban has so far rejected the ceasefire offer on the basis that the Afghan government had not released the prisoners according to the US–Taliban deal from February. The slowing down of violence has continued, but it is too early to say whether this is a trend or just a regular variation in the level of violence.

**Syria**

Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Syria, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire in the Idlib province on 5 March. The Idlib ceasefire has been described as fragile, and although it seemed to be holding for the first few days, there are now almost daily reports of violations. Yet, as Figure 4 indicates, there has been a clear reduction in violence after the Idlib ceasefire.

One day after Guterres’ call for a global ceasefire, both the United Nations Special Envoy to Syria and The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) joined the call. The SDF has indicated that they would put down their weapons and only defend themselves if necessary. So far, this has not led to a nationwide ceasefire in Syria and the UN Special Envoy reiterated their call a week later.

The conflict in Syria is still active and fighting is ongoing as the coronavirus has now officially found its way into the country. Several agencies have stated that a nationwide ceasefire is critical in order to handle the coronavirus.

While we do not see a substantial decrease in violence in Syria after the global call, the level of violence has been noticeably lower since the Idlib ceasefire. The level of violence is also considerably lower than the period before the Idlib offensive in March. It is also worth noting that the past 5 weeks have been the least violent period in Syria since 2011. Thus, while we cannot say that the coronavirus pandemic has decreased violence by itself, the support for the global ceasefires might help keep the level of violence down.

**The Philippines**

Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to a ceasefire in the Mindanao region on 15 March. A few days later, the Philippines government announced that it was ready to declare a nationwide ceasefire if the coronavirus became a major problem. On 14 March, both governments launched ‘no fighting’ campaigns, which led to a reduction in violence. However, this has not led to a nationwide ceasefire and the level of violence remains high in the southern part of the country.

Figure 3: Level of violence and coronavirus-related ceasefire initiatives in Afghanistan, 1 January–18 April 2020. Source: ACLED

Figure 4: Level of violence and coronavirus-related ceasefire initiatives in Syria, 1 January–18 April 2020. Source: ACLED

Figure 5: Level of violence and coronavirus-related ceasefire initiatives in The Philippines, 1 January–18 April 2020. Source: ACLED
The Philippines

On 18 March, President Duterte declared a unilateral ceasefire in the conflict with CPP that would last until 15 April. The day after, the CPP rejected the call by Duterte as they believed his intention was not to fight the virus, but rather to suppress democratic rights and commit human rights violations.

Less than a week later, as a direct result of Guterres’ call for a global ceasefire, on 24 March the Communist Party instructed the CPP to agree to a ceasefire beginning 26 March and ending 15 April. While there have been a few violations, the ceasefire has largely been viewed as a successful.

On 16 April, the NPA/CPP decided to extend its unilateral ceasefire until 30 April. The case of the Philippines stands out as the most successful coronavirus ceasefire. While the conflict between the government and the communists is longstanding, they also have considerable experience with such short unilateral ceasefires. Every Christmas, both the government and the communists declare a ceasefire. This experience might make it easier for the two parties to agree on and trust the other parties in the type of arrangement we see now. On the other hand, it might mean that it will not necessarily affect the long-term trajectory of the conflict.

Libya

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has been split by two factions: the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and General Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). For the last year, LNA has conducted a military offensive to capture the western parts of Libya and eventually Tripoli, which is being held by GNA.

Calls for a coronavirus-related ceasefire in Libya started as early as 18 March. Indeed, Libya seemed to serve as an optimistic example for the world when the parties agreed to a humanitarian ceasefire on 21 March. However, while the graph in Figure 6 indicates a short-term effect on the level of violence, less than a day later, battles continued in Libya and four days later Tripoli experienced intense bombardment. The level of violence in Libya has increased after the call for a global ceasefire.

Today, almost a month later, the country has gone into a ten-day lockdown, but fighting seems to be as intensive as ever before. Of particular concern are reports that the bombardment over the last month has damaged medical facilities and destroyed 400 hospital beds that could have been coronavirus treatment facilities.

Libya represents what might be a worst-case scenario for a humanitarian ceasefire. Instead of giving the cities a break in the conflict to fight the pandemic, the conflict has intensified. This can be very damaging for the peace process in the long run, as it further erodes trust between the parties.

Conclusion

While it is too early to make any conclusions on the long-term effects of the coronavirus ceasefires, we can say something about the short-term effects and how these might affect conflict dynamics. The main aim of a humanitarian ceasefire is to help civilians in an already difficult situation. However, they can also serve as signals for willingness and ability to halt violence. The coronavirus ceasefires can serve as a springboard into a peace process, or, as in Libya, it can move the conflict parties further apart. It is critical that the international community monitor these processes to take advantage of the windows of opportunity for promoting dialogue where possible.

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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.

## Figure 6: Level of violence and coronavirus-related ceasefire initiatives in Libya, 1 January–18 April 2020. Source: ACLED