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CONFLICT ZONES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Abstract:

One of the problems that are present not only on the international arena, but also on the work table, in the laboratories of virologists, in the scientific discourse of polymologists, political scientists, economists and specialists in other fields refers to the problem of the impact of COVID-19 virus on conflict zones. Although in the first three months of 2020 all the attention of the international community was focused on the emergence of COVID-19 virus and its impact on citizens, society and interpersonal relationships, it is worth paying attention to the conflict zones present in the world. At the end of the virus emergence, the international community's attention to conflict zones seems to be redirected to the issue of COVID-19. The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of COVID-19 virus on conflict zones that are present on the international arena, such as those on the African continent, the Middle East, the Latin American continent and Europe.

Keywords:

international community, international relations, virus, conflict zones, Middle East, Africa, Latin America, European continent

One of the problems present on the work table and in the laboratories of virologists and biogenetists, but also in the scientific discourse of polymolo-

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gists, political scientists, economists and specialists in other fields refers to the problem of the impact of COVID-19 virus on conflict zones. Although in the first three months of 2020 all the attention of the international community was focused on the emergence of the COVID-19 virus and its impact on citizens, society and interpersonal relationships, it is worth paying attention to conflict zones around the world. Following the emergence of the virus, the international community's attention to conflict zones seems to have been abandoned. All attention was shifted to the issue of COVID-19. Although the emergence of COVID-19 virus is the main global problem, the presence of conflict zones in the international arena deserves special attention. In epidemics, especially in the case of viruses, the greatest disasters with local, regional and global impact appear.

Given the emergence of the virus, special attention should be paid to conflict zones. Namely, the population of the countries affected by the conflict – regardless of the war or its consequences, they are more vulnerable to the spread of the virus. In many cases, prolonged war or unrest, exacerbated by crisis management, the presence of corruption, and international sanctions, have weakened national health systems, demonstrating to the world the inability to cope with the COVID-19 virus. Thus, for a better understanding of the repercussions conditioned by the presence of the COVID-19 virus on conflict zones, there is a need to highlight the specific situation in these areas³. Starting with the reasoning and the situation prior to the emergence of COVID-19 virus, the Ebola epidemic in Guinea in 2014, Liberia and Sierra Leone, had a devastating impact on these states⁴. According to the Crisis Group, “at first, the virus spread uncontrollably, not only because of limited epidemiological monitoring and the lack of capacity and responsiveness of the health system, but also because people remained sceptical of government statements and its directives”⁵.

In the case of conflicts, it is difficult for humanitarian, national and international actors to obtain help from the population in conflict zones. In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) and international NGO's fought the Ebola epidemic in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In some cases, the fighters targeted doctors and medical institutions themselves. Although the Congolese authorities and the WHO apparently managed to end the epidemic, it lasted and claimed many victims (a total of 2,264 confirmed deaths).

In many cases the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and displaced persons will continue to affect women, who are the majority of the displaced population in conflict regions. Stigmatized because of the real or presumed connection

³ *La vulnérabilité des populations vivant dans des situations de conflit*, <<https://www.icrc.org/fr/nos-activites/coronavirus-pandemie-de-COVID-19>> (04.05.2020).

⁴ *Deportation and Disease: Central America's COVID-19 Dilemmas*, <<https://www.crisis-group.org/fr/global/sb4-COVID-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>> (04.05.2020).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

they had with the armed groups, these women face huge difficulties in accessing services and feeding their families. Displaced women and children, exposed to sexual exploitation or violence and whose reintegration into communities is not a priority of the weak or indifferent governments, will be the first to be affected by the economic crises that will accompany the spread of the virus.

The vulnerability to COVID-19 of the refugees and displaced persons is partly explained by the fact that the virus could seriously weaken the capacity of international institutions to act in conflict areas. WHO and representatives of other international agencies are concerned that virus will disrupt humanitarian supply chains. But humanitarian organizations are not the only actors in the multilateral system that can be affected. The potential effects of COVID-19 on specific stress points are amplified by the fact that the global system has already been redirected. Thus, the current period differs from other international crises. When the financial crisis caused a global economic slowdown in 2008, the United States still had enough effect to shape the international response through the G20 even though Washington was careful to involve Beijing in the process. In 2014, the United States took responsibility, albeit belatedly, for the West African Ebola crisis, with the help of countries such as the United Kingdom, France, China and Cuba. Today, the United States - whose international influence has already weakened considerably - simultaneously managed the national response to COVID-19, failed to unite other nations, conditioning international resentment. President Donald Trump not only insisted on the Chinese origin of the disease, but also criticized the EU's restraint⁶.

Thus, for a better understanding of the problem, there is a need to develop an analysis of the situation in conflict areas. According to the position put forward by Catherine Chatignoux, the COVID-19 virus can eliminate, but can also intensify the dynamics and energy of wars⁷.

The first area, characterized as one of the most conflict-ridden, is the Middle East. The Middle East is currently facing a convulsion that will have cross-border implications and will destabilize countries that managed to keep conflicts out of their borders. In countries where state capacity has become either severely diminished or non-existent, the consequences of COVID-19 could be transformative, extending the reports of gendarmes, terrorists and other armed substate actors who have filled government gaps by providing community services, in some cases combining this work with brutal subjugation. Hundreds of thousands of citizens were killed and millions displaced. Currently, the question arises, the COVID-19 virus that has affected

⁶ *Conflicts, pollution, délinquance... les bonnes surprises du coronavirus*, <<https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/enjeux-internationaux/conflicts-pollution-delinquance-les-bonnes-surprises-du-coronavirus-1190152>> (04.05.2020).

⁷*Ibidem*.

the entire world will diminish or intensify the dynamics and evolutions of conflicts in the world⁸.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Syria conditioned the ceasefire between the two main actors – the Russian Federation and the United States. The three million people living in the ceasefire area in the north-western region of the country, Idlib, had little hope that the agreement between the major geopolitical actors would be respected. However, both the United States and the Russian Federation, for fear of spreading the coronavirus throughout the devastated country, during the virus period seem to have accepted an armistice.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the month of March recorded the lowest number of civilian deaths since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 (103 deaths). Also, the multiple administrations in Syria – the government in Damascus, the Kurdish autonomous administration in the northeast of the country and the alliance led by jihadists in Idlib, in order to manage the coronavirus have reached a common denominator. “This epidemic is a way for Damascus to show that the Syrian state is effective and that all territories should be returned under its governance”⁹, said the analyst F. Balanche. However, the pandemic and global mobilization could precipitate the departure of US-led troops from Syria and neighbouring Iraq, which could create a vacuum in which the Islamic State jihadist group, which still withdrew from the disappearance of its ‘caliphate’ a year ago, could seek to intensify their attacks. For various actors on the ground – the regime, the Kurdish forces in the northeast and the anti-Damascus factions in Idlib – proper management of the epidemic would strengthen their credibility, but this would contribute to a security vacuum that would encourage a revival of the ISI (IS) group, whose ‘caliphate’ in Syria collapsed in March 2019. In nine years, the Syrian conflict has killed more than 380,000 people, and contributed to the displacement of millions of people who are vulnerable to the effects of virus¹⁰.

Data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2019 indicates that more than 70 million people worldwide fell into the category of internally displaced persons, and this figure has certainly increased since then, especially as a result of events in Syria. History has shown that the effect of contamination is often exacerbated among people not only in ordinary places, but also in refugee camps. This risk exists for the COVID-19 pandemic, although in some regions the medical services in the camps are sometimes better than those in the surrounding region. UN officials are particularly concerned about the al-Hol camp in north-eastern Syria, which is home to more than 70.000 people, including women and children who fled the Islamic State's

⁸ R. Alaadin, *COVID-19 will prolong conflict in the Middle East*, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/24/COVID-19-will-prolong-conflict-in-the-middle-east/>> (04.05.2020).

⁹ D. Lauras, *Virus 'disaster in the making' in war-torn Syria*, <<https://tiny.pl/71k35>> (30.06.2020).

¹⁰ R. Alaadin, *op. cit.*

last stronghold at the time of its fall, including Syrian, and Iraqi citizens and about 10,000 citizens of other countries¹¹. The number of those who were forced to live a life of destitution and misery is much higher. The war in Syria has displaced more than 12 million people (half its population) both internally and externally. A total of 6.5 million people have been displaced in Iraq and Yemen. In Libya, more than 435,000 people have been displaced. The astonishing statistics continue: About 11 million people need humanitarian aid in Syria; in Yemen – 24 million; in Libya – 2.4 million; and in Iraq – 4.1 million¹². Many of the refugees sleep in fields or under trees, and the lack of running water and soap, as well as crowded homes or shelters, makes it impossible to apply basic hygiene and social distancing. Tests delivery was delayed by several weeks. Aid fears that a virus outbreak in Idlib will completely exceed the province's medical capacity, which would prevent the treatment of war victims. Syria's territory is currently divided into three areas: regime-controlled territories, north-eastern Kurdish territory and Idlib. COVID-19 raises the prospects for another wave of refugees that extends the capacity of neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon to respond to the humanitarian needs of these refugees. It also puts increasing pressure on the Western groups, such as the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), on which the West depends to maintain operations against ISIS and manage prison cells for detained ISIS fighters. The SDF also supports refugee camps such as Al-Hor, which host 70,000 refugees, including ISIS fighters and their families. Humanitarian development in Syria will worsen if these enclaves do not adopt a collective response to the pandemic. Field actors need to refrain from targeting supply lines and allow space for external assistance. Pro-Turkish forces have disrupted water supplies in Kurdish-owned areas in the northeast, compromising the ability of humanitarian agencies to protect vulnerable communities during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the Assad regime has refused to extend the support it receives from the WHO to areas outside its regime. This implicitly becomes a WHO indictment, which refuses to operate beyond Damascus. Such institutions are paralyzed and inadequate to conflict zones by design because of international norms that limit them from working under the limits of sovereignty, even though the Assad regime should certainly no longer enjoy the benefits of state sovereignty, having in view its irregular behaviour¹³.

Also, the security barriers in areas currently affected by the conflict may impede the measures to combat COVID-19. Thus, Syria and Yemen have already suffered a health crises during the civil wars. The case of the polio epidemic in Syria in 2013-2014 and the cholera epidemic in Yemen in 2016 slowed down the violence in the area.

¹¹ *Conflicts, pollution, délinquance...*

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ R. Alaadin, *op. cit.*

The war that has been going on since 2015 brought an already very weak health system to Yemen. More than 24 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. The COVID-19 epidemic could quickly overwhelm relief efforts and could cause one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. In Yemen and beyond, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees due to their precarious living conditions and limited access to healthcare are particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Saudi-led military coalition, which operates in Yemen in support of the governmental forces has announced a ceasefire saying that the unilateral decision is to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The Huthi rebels, backed by Iran, have not yet responded. “We are preparing the ground to fight COVID-19 disease”, said Saudi officials. Despite the UN ceasefire in March 2020 violence has risen in the country, which has been led by a five-year armed conflict. In recent years, negotiations have stalled in Yemen, which has suffered the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, according to the UN. Yemen also has a poor health care system while 24 million people, more than two-thirds of the population, need humanitarian assistance, according to the UN¹⁴.

The Yemeni government and Hutus rebels initially responded to the UN call for a ceasefire, as neighbouring Saudi Arabia did, this time leading a military coalition in support of the government. That rare glimmer of hope in the five-year conflict was short-lived. The Saudi air defence intercepted ballistic missiles over Riyadh and a border town ceded to Iran-backed rebels. The Saudi-led coalition retaliated by hitting rebel-held Huthi targets in the Sanaa capital. Repeated discussions have failed. However, under the created conditions, the UN representative, M. Griffiths, organizes daily consultations in an attempt to cease fire at national level. As the world fights the pandemic, according to the Griffiths position, the parties must focus on mutual confrontation to ensure that the population does not face even greater risks. More violent outbreaks in Yemen could generate a humanitarian crisis and cause a coronavirus outbreak of a catastrophic proportions. In a country where health infrastructure has collapsed, where water is a scarce commodity and where 24 million people need humanitarian assistance, the population is afraid of being destroyed if it does not stop the fire and will not receive adequate help. “People will die on the streets, corpses will rot in the open air”, said Mohammed Omar, a taxi driver in the port city of Hodeida from the Red Sea¹⁵.

Unlike China, Europe and the USA, these countries are not affected by COVID-19. A spread in these often poor countries in conflict could have devastating consequences. The pandemic can lead to aggravation of conflicts, the humanitarian situation as well as the migration flow. The disease could also

¹⁴ *COVID-19: quel impact sur les conflits au Moyen-Orient?*, <<https://www.lapresse.ca/international/moyen-orient/202004/09/01-5268664-COVID-19-quel-impact-sur-les-conflits-au-moyen-orient-.php>> (04.05.2020).

¹⁵ *COVID-19, accélérateur ou réducteur de conflits dans le monde?*, <<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1679756/coronavirus-impacts-conflits-planete>> (04.05.2020).

reduce the energy of belligerents who will fight, say some experts. According to Robert Malley, chairman of the Washington-based International Crisis Group, the virus will certainly diminish the capacity and the will of states as well as the international system. These conflicts, brutal and violent as they are, will become imperceptible and inaudible to many states. However, the UN representatives, who are struggling to cope, are monitoring the evolution of conflicts and the situation of countries in crisis¹⁶.

In some sub-regions of the Middle East, there are conflicts with high rates of violence, social instability and fragility in political structures, circumstances that contribute to creating scenarios of misery and devastation, under the control of external actors and institutional vulnerability which are considered an opportunity for terrorism to return to its agenda. The Islamic State can reorganize and take advantage of the situation to resume strategic positions in Iraq and Syria, an opportunity that is combined with the withdrawal of international forces following the resolution of the Iraqi parliament in January 2020 or the unrest in Idlib and Homs in Syria. The outbreak of COVID-19 in the region is a possibility of violence in the future.

Terrorism occurs in the chaos of the world. When history itself inherits war and decay, combined with circumstantial facilitators, regions become areas of risk and threat; they become a fertile ground for the emergence of new violence or the consolidation of old crimes.

There are cases where there is a perception of a cooling in tensions or international conflicts in itself, a secondary effect that is often temporary, because the actors have to return to participate in internal complications. However, when the situation resumes, the initial conflict conditions change also or they can stop, which may have different dimensions of temporality or severity. This makes the conflict not be the same after the conflict, exceeding the variable that interrupted it.

It can be the case of the conflict between the United States and Iran, which reached a critical point in January 2020, with the conduct of several conventional and unconventional military operations. Direct confrontations led to a slight recession, military activities were limited to offending Allied militias on other fronts in the Middle East, expanding to cyber actions, and the point of greatest pressure shifted to diplomatic and economic spheres. Iran faces four sides that add to the severity of the impact of COVID-19: one that comes from economic sanctions and restrictions; the derivative of the volatility of fossil fuel prices; increasing social discontent; and the latent - though seemingly passive - military threat to its regional rivals. On the other hand, the United States has become the most affected country in recent days in terms of the number of infections and deaths on the planet. For these reasons, both countries have taken a mandatory step back to solve their internal problems, creating a temporary relaxation that will present different conditions after its resumption. On the

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

other hand, the temporary elimination of the conflict does not mean the dissolution of military action¹⁷. Western countries have been hit by the pandemic, which could lead them to divert both military resources and the ability to mediate peace. Iraq is no longer in full conflict, but remains vulnerable to the resurgence of Daesh in some regions. With most non-US troops that are formed by the coalition of France and Britain now gone and some bases evacuated, the US personnel is regrouped in some locations in Iraq. Washington has launched Patriot air defence missiles sparking fears of a new escalation with Tehran, whose representatives blame them for rocket attacks on bases housing the American troops.

Similar to the situation in Yemen, the main protagonists of the Libyan conflict initially welcomed the UN call for a ceasefire, but quickly resumed hostilities. Fierce fighting has shaken southern Tripoli's capital suggesting that the risk of a major outbreak of coronavirus is not enough to silence the weapons. Turkey has played a key role in the conflict, throwing its weight behind the government. Thus, according to F. Balanche's position, the accelerated disconnection of the West from the conflicts in the Middle East could limit Turkish support for the GNA. This could ultimately favour forces loyal to the powerful of Eastern origin, Khalifa Haftar, who launched an attack on Tripoli in 2019 and has the support of Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Western countries have been hit by the pandemic, which could lead them to divert both military resources and the ability to mediate peace from external conflicts. A report by the International Crisis Group said that European officials had reported that efforts to ensure a ceasefire in Libya were no longer effective due to the pandemic¹⁸.

The protagonists of Libyan conflict welcomed the call of the United Nations for a ceasefire in March 2020. The fight, however, intensified affecting several residential areas in the Capital. The violence has displaced 200.000 people since the beginning of the year, the vast majority in the capital, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Agilities have damaged a hospital in Tripoli where COVID-19-infected patients are being treated. "There is still a huge gap between statements and actions", said Guterres, the UN envoy on the situation in Libya. In this conflict, Turkey supports the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, which has been facing an offensive against Marshal Khalifa Haftar for a year. According to F. Balanche, a Western disengagement from conflicts in the region could favour pro-Haftar forces supported by Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Western countries have been hardly hit by the pandemic, which could push them to divert military resources from external conflicts, but also to weaken the

¹⁷ *El COVID-19 y el estado de los conflictos internacionales*, <<http://revistafal.com/el-COVID-19-y-el-estado-de-los-conflictos-internacionales/>> (04.05.2020).

¹⁸ *What impact is COVID-19 having on Middle East conflicts?*, <<https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1893535/what-impact-is-COVID-19-having-on-middle-east-conflicts->> (04.05.2020).

negotiation process. According to a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG), efforts to ensure a ceasefire in Libya are “no longer receiving attention” from Western states¹⁹.

In Libya, as F. Wehrey pointed out, the pandemic has given the militia a boost giving them an opportunity to channel healthcare to their fighters and to instrument the crisis to reward and strengthen patronage networks and favoured communities. Disturbingly, the hospitals in Libya are threatened by rocket attacks, which are aggravating the situation²⁰.

Iraq is no longer in full conflict, but remains vulnerable to a resurgence of IS in some regions. Iran and the United States are two of the most affected countries by the coronavirus, but there has been no sign of giving up their fight for influence, which has been largely played on Iraqi territory. With most of the non-US coalition troops now missing and some bases evacuated, US personnel are now regrouped in an area of Iraq. Washington has launched Patriot air defence missiles, raising fears of a new escalation with Tehran, whose representatives blame them for launching rocket attacks²¹.

In Iraq, ISIS has stepped up its attacks in northern Iraqi villages and is moving to exploit the growing list of crises in Baghdad - from escalating US-Iran, falling oil prices and nationwide protests. During a public health crisis, ISIS can revive and expand its influence by responding to the needs of local communities in a way that other authorities – such as the Baghdad government – didn’t do. At least, the failures in Baghdad allow ISIS to position itself as a viable alternative²². Even though the war in Iraq has already ended, the country remains threatened by a resurgence of IS in some regions, while tensions between the United States and Iran show no signs of a possible compromise. Washington has just deployed anti-aircraft batteries, raising fears of a new escalation with Iran, whose Iraqi deputies are responsible for the missiles launched on the Green Zone in Baghdad, where the US embassy and bases hosting US soldiers are located²³.

Fear of the pandemic has not stopped ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, and leaders of the extremist group of Islamic State have openly encouraged supporters to launch global attacks. Meanwhile, blockades, quarantine and travel bans can weaken ceasefire monitoring and peacekeeping missions in conflict zones around the world²⁴.

The peace process launched between the Taliban and the government of President Ashraf Ghani on the background of the virus seems to be successful.

¹⁹ *COVID-19: quel impact sur les conflits au Moyen-Orient?, op. cit.*

²⁰ R. Alaadin, *op. cit.*

²¹ *What impact is COVID-19 having on Middle East conflicts?, op. cit.*

²² R. Alaadin, *op. cit.*

²³ *COVID-19: quel impact sur les conflits au Moyen-Orient?, op. cit.*

²⁴ *Peace and the pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on conflict in Asia*, <<https://devpolicy.org/peace-and-the-pandemic-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-conflict-in-asia-20200414/>> (04.05.2020).

There are chances of a ceasefire in Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani is facing an ongoing political crisis, the US anger over a compromised peace process and a growing coronavirus epidemic, which officials fear could upset the country's prisons.

Talks on the exchange of detainees between the Kabul government and the Taliban insurgents hit a roadblock after the insurgents left the dialogue rejecting the release of Kabul as captives 'unacceptable'. The Taliban plan to release 5.000 of its fighters in exchange for 1.000 Afghan soldiers according to the US-Taliban agreement. Kabul wants to release fewer fighters, the release being done in stages. He also wants the intra-Afghan talks to be successful until the release of the last Taliban fighters. The Taliban group is willing to temporarily suspend fighting against Afghan forces in areas hit by the coronavirus, rejecting news reports that the group could declare a ceasefire amid the pandemic²⁵.

Fear of the COVID-19 virus promptly shut down the flow of migration to the Greek-Turkish border. Fear of contamination has convinced Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, to close the border posts with Greece, which have been opened a week earlier on March 18, providing a corridor for tens of thousands of trouble-free migrants and asylum seekers in Turkey to move to Europe. Thus, the Coronavirus defeated one of the most authoritarian leaders in the region – President Erdogan²⁶.

Against the background of the coronavirus, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not bring any respite. Israel continues its attacks on the occupied West Bank villages and towns and calls for the release of about 5,000 Palestinians from Israeli prisons. The requests were rejected by Tel Aviv. Palestinians have launched a plan demanding \$137 million from international donors for their response to COVID-19, but officials say there is little funding available as Western countries tackle their own crises. The Palestinian government could struggle to pay full salaries to its employees, but tens of thousands of Palestinians working in Israel to support their families returned home with no payment during the crisis. Despite the coronavirus, Israelis and Palestinians do not seem to break the ice on difficult issues.

In the context of the analysis of the COVID-19 virus repercussions on the conflictogenic areas, the Kashmir area also deserves attention. Thus, Indian-administered Kashmir is equally affected by the virus. COVID-19 hit the most militarized area in the world. India has not paid attention to the UN's 'ceasefire' call, as its military continues to besiege villages and the state internally. Despite the pandemic and the region's poorest health infrastructure, India has also launched a new 'settlement' plan to allow non-local Indians who meet certain criteria to take up jobs and properties in the disputed region. India also rejected

²⁵ *No Ceasefire For African Conflicts Amidst COVID-19*, <<https://theowp.org/no-ceasefire-for-african-conflicts-amidst-COVID-19/>> (04.05.2020).

²⁶ *Conflicts, pollution, délinquance...*, *op. cit.*

calls for the release of thousands of Kashmiri prisoners in Indian prisons. Meanwhile, the armies of Pakistan and India, *de facto*, have skidded on the border-line of Control that divides Kashmir into administered portions of Pakistan and India²⁷.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads to conflict areas, the impact will be unpredictable and catastrophic. These areas are usually inaccessible, dangerous and politically complex. COVID-19 is already beginning to expose fractures, prejudices and weaknesses among many marginalized or conflict-affected populations. Existing discrimination against minority ethnic or religious groups is intensifying as they are considered to be spreading the virus. In Pakistan, Shiite minority Muslims have been accused of importing the virus from Iran, creating serious implications for community tensions and a challenge for those who organize a comprehensive response²⁸. From urban neighbourhoods in India to rural areas in South-East Asia- advice from the UN and WHO officials on COVID-19 was rejected.

This example shows how sudden crises can break patterns of behaviour, sometimes generating a common interest in ending violence. In other cases, a major crisis such as COVID-19 can lead to more conflicts. Governments are already taking advantage of emergency legislation and a distracted international media to suppress their rivals. In February 2020, the Government of Myanmar carried out air and ground attacks on a group of Arakan's army in a heavily populated area of Rakhine State, which struck hard while the world was distracted²⁹.

No less worrying is the situation in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh: more than a million people live in overcrowded shelters and sanitation services are kept to a minimum. Because the government bans internet access and mobile phone services in camps, residents have limited access to information on disease prevention, which could save lives. At the same time the high rate of malnutrition can increase the risk of contagion between refugees and the local population. If COVID-19 enters the camps, according to humanitarian mission representatives, the virus will spread, which could trigger a hostile reaction from Bangladeshis living in the surrounding areas and already exasperated by the prolonged presence of refugees.

There is a growing concern about a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in Bangladesh-Rohingya's largest refugee camp. Dhaka has detained nearly one million refugees in Myanmar's Rakhine state. According to humanitarian agencies, approximately 350.000 displaced people are vulnerable to the disease. Experts have warned that Cox disease in Bazaar (Bangladesh) could spread rapidly through crowded, sewer-soaked alleys, where the persecuted Muslim minority is housed in canvases and bamboo boats³⁰. The Bangladeshi

²⁷ *What impact is COVID-19 having on Middle East conflicts?*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ *Peace and the pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on conflict in Asia*, *op. cit.*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Deportation and Disease: Central America's COVID-19 Dilemmas*, *op. cit.*

government has also restricted mobile internet access for nearly 900.000 Rohingyas from refugee camps around Bazaar. People suspected of carrying the virus are stigmatized, which leads to underrepresentation of symptoms and failure to seek treatment.

There are precedents for the cooperation of states with the aim of resolving or reducing the intensity of conflicts. International agencies have supported cooperation across the lines of conflict when organizing mass vaccination campaigns. Non-state armed groups have already assumed some responsibility for COVID-19 responses. Myanmar's strongest non-state armed group, the Wa Wa State Army, quickly introduced travel restrictions and launched public health information campaigns³¹.

In Mali, the situation remains also tense. Mali held late parliamentary elections, despite an insurgency in the central and northern regions. Mali's main opposition leader, Soumaila Cisse, was ambushed in March 2020 while campaigning in the northern region of Timbuktu. The attackers killed his bodyguard taking Cisse and six members of his delegation hostage.

Since 2004, southern Thailand has been fighting a bloody confrontation between the local armed cells and the Thai army. Hundreds of shootings, bombings, reprisals and revenge attacks have killed more than 7.000 people. The threat of COVID-19 has led to a minor decrease in the situation, as the main rebel faction has informally decided to postpone hostilities until the pandemic is present³².

In the context of the emergence of the COVID-19 virus, the African continent is now the prelude to a possible tragedy. States on the continent have faced diseases such as Ebola, AIDS or malaria. Government in many cases is unable to help due to internal concerns, the reduction of the COVID-19 outbreak. Although the epidemic could disrupt some of the violence and terrorist insurgencies in the strip stretching from Somalia to Senegal, this is by no means a consolation, because, in a likely emergency, the violence will take on a different dynamic. There are conflicts and violence that are just beginning. The challenges that now threaten global public health as severely as the international economic system will have difficult-to-diagnose implications for the development of pre-existing conflicts. The 'civil' war in Libya, beyond showing signs of distinction, has increased in intensity, despite the growing number of outbreaks in North Africa. Both the UN-recognized Tripoli government - backed mainly by Algeria, Qatar and Turkey – and Khalifa Haftar's national army - backed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, France and Russia – know they can't stop the conflict even in the event of a pandemic. In this case, the emergence of COVID-19 can act as a catalyst for conflict³³.

³¹ *Peace and the pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on conflict in Asia, op. cit.*

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ *El COVID-19 y el estado de los conflictos internacionales, op. cit.*

Somalia, a country in the Horn of Africa, is also affected by the virus. Coronavirus could, in fact, be more widespread and could soon overwhelm the health system of a country that has been in conflict for almost three decades. Somalia was plunged into chaos with the fall of autocrat Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991, and is now facing regular attacks by the al Qaeda-linked militant group Al Shabab.

Defence forces in southern Cameroon (SOCADEF) are noticing a temporary ceasefire due to the coronavirus outbreak. Its leader, Ebenezer Akwanga, said his group would cease fire between March 29 and April 12, 2020 in order to allow humanitarian assistance and testing the people in the area. According to SOCADEF, the majorly French-speaking nation has been marginalized. For three years, Akwanga's group has been fighting the government forces in English-speaking regions trying to create a separate state called 'Ambazonia'. However, there is no indication that the Red Dragon, Tiger and Ambassador Defense Forces – major rebel groups seeking independence in Cameroon's English-speaking areas – will cease fire on the back of the coronavirus³⁴.

Northern Mexico is a no less pessimistic picture. It gives the image of a state whose population is economically affected, a circumstance that reflects the strengthening of groups associated with criminal acts against society in regions where there is a lack of governance. Mafias dedicated to the production or distribution of illicit substances in the world, as well as those responsible for the illegal trafficking of goods, have been affected by the sharp drop in demand. The reaction of each organization will depend on their specific circumstances, in some cases they will have to migrate to other illegal activities, such as theft, extortion or cybercrime; in other cases, they will become more violent and try to use the opportunity to expand. Otherwise, in some regions of Latin America or Asia criminal groups will become important allies in monitoring compliance with social isolation³⁵.

In Venezuela, as the Crisis group announced in 2016, the clash between the Chavist government and the opposition has compromised health services. States trying to stop the spread of the virus will certainly be worried about the arrival of new flows of refugees. Colombia and Brazil, for example, which initially welcomed those fleeing the crisis in Venezuela, have closed their borders, but the need to escape the worsening poverty and health risks in Venezuela could lead to the illegal crossing of Venezuela border of an increasing number of migrants.

The COVID-19 crisis could also worsen the humanitarian crisis in Central America, partly linked to the Trump administration's immigration policies and an increase of the already high number of violent crimes. After announcing the

³⁴ *How COVID-19 is impacting major global conflicts*, <<https://www.trtworld.com/life/how-covid-19-is-impacting-major-global-conflicts-35292>> (04.05.2020).

³⁵ *El COVID-19 y el estado de los conflictos internacionales*, *op. cit.*

closure of its southern border for all traffic, starting March 21 2020, the United States is looking for measures to prevent the flow of migrants and refugees from Central America. El Salvador and Guatemala banned all flights of Central American nationals expelled from the United States in mid-March. The ban has been lifted in Guatemala, but it is unclear whether the United States can continue evacuations while the two countries have banned all international passenger flights.

In a context in which Central America's already fragile economies are under strong pressure, expulsions from the United States and Mexico could expose an increasing number of these displaced populations to a cold reception in their country, as national populations can be worried about spreading the virus. Many deportees may have no choice either to return to the border with the United States, using human trafficking networks, or becoming victims or accomplices of criminal groups and gangs that are present throughout the region.

One of the largest centres of virus spread in Europe was Italy. Rome's decision to quarantine the entire country and isolate the population - 60 million people - provoked an immediate reaction from neighbouring states. Austria, Slovenia, Hungary and Switzerland are strengthening control at the Italian borders, checking the health of passengers and requiring medical certificates. Flights and travel are limited. As of March 16, Germany has closed its borders with Austria, Denmark, France and Switzerland. The virus virtually eliminates the European free movement area³⁶.

The coronavirus pandemic did not cause the disappearance of international conflicts, but the intensity of some became lower. Thus, according to the statements made by S. Markedonov, an employee of the Euro-Atlantic Security Centre MGIMO, due to the spread of coronavirus, international conflicts have not disappeared – the conflict continues in Syria, Donbass and Nagorno-Karabakh. For example, in Donbass there was an exchange of prisoners of war, people returned to their families. But many problems remain unresolved. In addition, as Markedonov noted, the COVID-19 virus has not affected the confrontation between the Russian Federation and Western countries, and no one has begun to lift sanctions from Iran in the midst of a pandemic³⁷.

To date, large outbreaks of COVID-19 have occurred in prosperous and relatively stable countries – these are China, Iran, Japan, Italy and South Korea. Each of these states has a strong central government and organized medical services. But in countries with less developed health systems the virus will be harder to fight and detect. This is true for some African states, as well as for the war-torn territories of Syria, Libya or Yemen. Another major problem is the many refugees in the Middle East in Europe. In fact, these people were beyond

³⁶ *Koronawirus wlijaet nie tolko na mirowuju politiku. Objasniajem poczemu*, <<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7968279>> (04.05.2020).

³⁷ *Ekspert ocenil wlijanijekoronawirusa na miezhdunarodnyje konflikty*, <<https://ria.ru/20200420/1570317749.html>> (04.05.2020).

any social guarantees. They live in crowded camps, in poor sanitation. This makes them the most vulnerable target for a pandemic. Millions of immigrants are scattered in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria and Iran. The uncontrolled movement of people without access to basic care will only increase the spread of the disease.

Thus, analyzing the situation in conflict zones, we can conclude that the repercussions of COVID-19 virus can be devastating not only for poorly developed states but also for the developed ones.

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