

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN THE TIME OF NOVEL CORONAVIRUS: When the Silence Becomes Deafening

*"Human life and dignity cannot be the price of inertia"¹.
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Introduction

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), currently, there are approximately 100 armed conflicts around the world that involve 60 states and more than 100 non-state actors.² Today, as the world goes through a grim period, with detected COVID-19 cases reaching around 14 million³, the state of the protection of civilian populations across the war-torn zones leaves little room for optimism. It is an obvious fact that protracted conflicts make communities more vulnerable to various crises and shocks. Therefore, fragile and conflict-affected countries could become breeding grounds for epidemics⁴, and the populations in such countries are accordingly more vulnerable to the impacts thereof⁵.

The other alarming fact is that the novel coronavirus forces the major donor countries to concentrate their attention on the internal emergency response in order to properly combat COVID-19 outbreaks in their own countries. This in turn determines a situation, where the current acute humanitarian crises remain underfunded, neglected, and forgotten.

The above-mentioned indicators suggest that we live through a complex and arduous period of time and we must strictly reaffirm the main guiding principles of humanitarian assistance, namely humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. In the following lines building on the peculiarities of forgotten humanitarian crises, protracted armed conflicts, and the 'new normal' imposed by the pandemic, I will discuss the impact of the COVID-19 on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The essay is guided by the following research question: *To what extent and under what conditions the humanitarian crisis impairs COVID-19 combat in the war-affected country.*

¹Peter Maurer, "Statement to UN Security Council Open debate: Protection of civilians in armed conflict", ICRC, 27 May 2020, retrieved 11 July, 2020, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/amid-covid-we-must-not-lose-focus-violations-and-abuses-war>.

²Peter Maurer, statement to the UN Security Council open debate, "Six essential lessons for a pandemic response in humanitarian settings", ICRC, 12 July, 2020, retrieved 18 July, 2020, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/six-essential-lessons-pandemic-response-humanitarian-settings>.

³COVID-19 situation update worldwide, as of 19 July, 2020, *European Centre for Disease Prevention and control*, retrieved 19 July, 2020, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>.

⁴Colin Walch, "COVID-19, Armed Conflict, and the Wildlife Trade", *IPI Global Observatory*, 14 May, 2020, retrieved 12 July, 2020, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/05/covid-19-armed-conflict-wildlife-trade/>.

⁵ Ibid.

The essay is structured in two main parts. The first part delves into the main hurdles stemming from the global pandemic and protracted armed conflicts. The second parts discuss the humanitarian needs landscape in Yemen.

For the purpose of the research question the definition of the concept of 'forgotten humanitarian crisis' is due. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines a forgotten humanitarian crisis as a severe and long-standing crisis situation in which the population receives little to no international aid. In addition, a lack of political will to end the crisis can be identified.⁶

1. A global pandemic in the context of acute humanitarian crises and protracted armed conflicts: Whether is it sufficient to make a global ceasefire appeal?

In March amidst the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, the UN Secretary-General made a call for the global ceasefire that would eventually facilitate the smooth delivery of critical humanitarian assistance to those people who are under horrible humanitarian conditions⁷. While this genuinely compelling statement sparked several important commitments throughout the world, nevertheless, the expressions of support from warring parties obviously did not translate into concrete actions⁸, and still, more compliance and accountability is required. Ceasefire violations news headlines are wake-up calls in this sense.

The complex and protracted character of various forgotten crises in the world determines a necessity to strengthen the coherence between peace-building efforts and humanitarian assistance in order to reduce human suffering and deal with the fragile situation. Nevertheless, this is a very challenging period of time for the international peace architecture efforts and mediations⁹ given the various restrictions and newly emerged global priorities.

At its very onset, the novel coronavirus has affected the lives of many people worldwide. Even though there have been calls coming from various international organizations to tackle the virus in the spirit of solidarity and cooperation, the majority of the countries are doing their utmost to firstly tackle the pandemic at home.

⁶“Suffering in silence: The 10 most under-reported humanitarian crises of 2019”, *CARE International*, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/01202020_Report_Suffering%20In%20Silence%202019_web%20version.pdf.

⁷ "Secretary-General's appeal for global ceasefire", *United Nations*, 23 March, 2020, retrieved 11 July, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-03-23/secretary-generals-appeal-for-global-ceasefire>.

⁸ “COVID-19 Pandemic Amplifying, Exploiting World’s Fragilities, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Debate on Protecting Civilians in Armed Conflict”, *United Nations Press release*, retrieved 12 July, 2020, 27 May, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14196.doc.htm>.

⁹Richard Govan, "What's Happened to the UN Secretary-General's COVID-19 Ceasefire Call?", *International Crisis Group*, 16 June, 2020, retrieved 12 July, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/whats-happened-un-secretary-generals-covid-19-ceasefire-call>.

In such an opaque context humanitarian assistance remains the only channel to mitigate the suffering of many people living in the zones of forgotten crises. While dealing with this form of actorness in global affairs, it is imperative to set aside the calculus of achieving various objectives, forging the possible political and geopolitical gains, but instead concentrate the efforts on delivering assistance purely based on the humanitarian principles. The current humanitarian system, which is intrinsically a heterogeneous structure with various actors and solutions, is under strict constraints. Globally humanitarian appeals are underfunded¹⁰ and donors quite often prioritize where to put their limited funding.

The essential part of the world's vulnerable population lives under impoverished conditions, in an unsafe and densely populated areas and camps. Protracted armed conflicts and forgotten crises ultimately condition a very damaging situation, when the basic services that are the essential part of ensuring people's livelihoods, health, and dignity are under severe damage¹¹.

Most of the time, military aggressions have been conducted without any particular respect for the basic thresholds of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Continuous respect for the IHL and IHRL (International Human Rights Law) are the essential elements in the process of protection of the civilian populations living in the conflict-affected countries, as well as ultimately fostering stability and ceasefire. In conflict zones quite often healthcare facilities have been targeted and used as a weapon to conduct the war. Accordingly, the destructed facilities do not have enough equipment and medicine to provide people with basic healthcare. As a result, in this testing time in war-torn counties, it is quite challenging to ramp up emergency health services to respond to COVID-19.

2. Zemblanity or installing armed conflict, humanitarian crisis and pandemic in the same room: Yemen

In Yemen, there has been armed conflict and humanitarian crisis since 2011 that led to the destruction of basis civilian infrastructures. Over 24 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance.¹² Over the past years, the blatant violations of the main principles of the IHL and the IHRL in Yemen have been reported by various international agencies.

¹⁰ "Looking at the coronavirus crisis through the nexus lens – what needs to be done", *Inter-Agency Standing Committee*, 29 April, 2020, retrieved 19 July, 2020, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/looking-coronavirus-crisis-through-nexus-lens-what-needs-be-done>.

¹¹ Rachel Banfield & Hugo Slim, "Armed conflicts and the new urban agenda", *ICRC Recommendations for Habitat III*, Policy Paper_ June 2016.

¹² "Yemen crisis: The facts: What you need to know about the crisis in Yemen", *Reliefweb.int*, 17 July, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20Crisis%20-%20What%20is%20Happening%20in%20Yemen_%20-%20Mercy%20Corps.pdf.

"Article 14 of Additional Protocol (AP) II of the Geneva Conventions prohibits the parties to the armed conflicts from employing starvation as a military tactic and characterizes the targeting of objects that are indispensable for human life, [...] as a war crime and a crime against humanity. Denying access to food, water, and health care also violates human rights laws".¹³

Several issues related to malnourishment, unavailability of safe drinking water, lack of access to the healthcare system, are among the causes of starvation and outbreak of various diseases that have rapidly expanded throughout the country over the past years. Currently, the country faces one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Another concerning fact of this crisis is related to its protracted and neglected character. The humanitarian programs face huge shortfalls of cache injections. Following the official press release, only \$558 million had been funded by the international donors so far out of the \$3.2 billion that the OCHA estimated important to run humanitarian operations in 2020 in Yemen.¹⁴ Meanwhile, despite the calls for the global truce, airstrikes and other hostilities continue. Even though Yemeni President, the Huthis, and several other Yemeni combatant groups made supportive public statements to the global ceasefire calls, nevertheless, fighting has continued¹⁵.

Thus, amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, Yemen lacks almost totally the means to respond to this pandemic¹⁶. The confirmed number of COVID-19 cases in Yemen is small, yet it is more likely that there is a lack of testing capacities than the absence of virus¹⁷. As it is predicted in one of the Médecins Sans Frontière (MSF) press releases, obviously, the virus is widely circulating across the country.¹⁸ On a more pessimistic note, the arduous condition on the ground is conducive to the spread of the virus. The official response plan that the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests requires strict social distancing, which obviously is impossible in many areas. In fact, the main problem for those leaving in war-torn countries is that they cannot respect the physical distance or self-isolation. Likewise, the facilities for washing, healthcare infrastructures are not developed or are totally wrecked.

Overall, the violations of the international calls for the ceasefire, destructed civilian infrastructures and healthcare facilities, the lack of testing and treatment capacities are alarming

¹³ Waseem Ahmad Qureshi, "The Crisis in Yemen: Armed Conflict and International Law", *UNC Law School, Volume 45*, No-1, January 2020, <https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2073&context=ncilj>.

¹⁴ "Yemen Humanitarian Update", *ReliefWeb.int*, Issue 6 (June 2020), retrieved 18 July, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-6-june-2020-enar>.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ "COVID-19 has made the health system's collapse complete in Yemen", *Médecins Sans Frontières*, 10 June, 2020, retrieved 13 July, 2020, <https://www.msf.org/covid-19-has-made-yemen-health-system-collapse-complete>.

¹⁷ Jacob Kurtzer, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Humanitarian Crises", *Center for strategic & International Studies*, March 19, 2020, retrieved 10 July, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/impact-covid-19-humanitarian-crises>.

¹⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières, *op. cit.*

calls and predict that the consequences of the spread of the novel coronavirus could be extremely perilous.

Conclusion

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus adds another layer on the patchwork texture of humanitarian crises in Yemen. Communities that are hit by the triple burden of poverty, armed conflict, and novel coronavirus, obviously have little room to effectively contain or combat the COVID-19.

This pandemic reveals a well-noted fact that in the context of armed conflicts IHL must be better respected in order to protect civilians and their infrastructures from other shocks. Currently, the destructed cities, civilian infrastructures, mass displacement, etc. further worsen the effective response to the pandemic in conflict-affected communities. Any response must go beyond the health needs and deal with other secondary consequences of the crises.

Additionally, COVID-19 is forcing the donor governments to divert their attention and concentrate their efforts on internal health and emergency responses. Furthermore, international appeals for the global pandemic did not serve as a catalyst for the cessation of armed hostilities.

All the above-mentioned trends are well ‘mirrored’ in Yemen. For the people living in Yemen every single day is a crisis. Even before the virus emerged, the overwhelming majority of its population required some form of humanitarian assistance. Notedly, after years of conflict, the major part of health facilities is not operational anymore; there are huge shortages in medicine and equipment.

In this respect, short-term and patchwork responses will not be enough to address the multi-layered humanitarian crisis. An effective response demands a genuinely holistic and joined-up approach now and in the future.

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"Yemen Humanitarian Update", *ReliefWeb.int*, Issue 6 (June 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-6-june-2020-enar/>.