

**THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**  
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**REMARKS TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**  
**ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**  
**New York, 9 April 2020**

*[As delivered]*

Mr. President,

Thank you for convening this important discussion.

The world faces its gravest test since the founding of this Organization.

Every country is now grappling with or poised to suffer the devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: the tens of thousands of lost lives; the broken families; the overwhelmed hospitals; the overworked essential workers.

We are all struggling to absorb the unfolding shock: the jobs that have disappeared and businesses that have suffered; the fundamental and drastic shift to our daily lives, and the fear that the worst is still yet to come, especially in the developing world and countries already battered by armed conflict.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, its implications are much more far-reaching.

We are already seeing its ruinous social and economic impacts, as governments around the world struggle to find the most effective responses to rising unemployment and the economic downturn.

But the pandemic also poses a significant threat to the maintenance of international peace and security -- potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence that would greatly undermine our ability to fight the disease.

My concerns are many and widespread, but let me identify eight risks that are particularly pressing:

First, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further erode trust in public institutions, particularly if citizens perceive that their authorities mishandled the response or are not transparent on the scope of the crisis.

Second, the economic fallout of this crisis could create major stressors, particularly in fragile societies, less developed countries and those in transition. Economic instability will have particularly devastating impacts for women, who make up the vast majority of those sectors worst affected. The large numbers of female-headed households in conflict-settings are especially vulnerable to economic shocks.

Third, the postponement of elections or referenda, or the decision to proceed with a vote – even with mitigation measures – can create political tensions and undermine legitimacy. Such decisions are best made following broad consultation aimed at consensus. This is not a time for political opportunism.

Fourth, in some conflict settings, the uncertainty created by the pandemic may create incentives for some actors to promote further division and turmoil. This could lead to an escalation of violence and possibly devastating miscalculations, which could further entrench ongoing wars and complicate efforts to fight the pandemic.

Fifth, the threat of terrorism remains alive. Terrorist groups may see a window of opportunity to strike while the attention of most governments is turned towards the pandemic. The situation in the Sahel, where people face the double scourge of the virus and escalating terrorism, is of particular concern.

Sixth, the weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold – and may increase its risks. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe.

Seventh, the crisis has hindered international, regional and national conflict resolution efforts, exactly when they are needed most.

Many peace processes have stalled as the world responds to COVID-19.

Our good offices and mediation engagements have felt the impact.

Restrictions on movement may continue to affect the work of various confidence-based mechanisms, as well as our ability to engage in crisis diplomacy to de-escalate potential conflicts.

Eighth, the pandemic is triggering or exacerbating various human rights challenges.

We are seeing stigma, hate speech, and white supremacists and other extremists seeking to exploit the situation. We are witnessing discrimination in accessing health services. Refugees and internally displaced persons are particularly vulnerable. And there are growing manifestations of authoritarianism, including limits on the media, civic space and freedom of expression.

Mr. President,

Recognizing the unprecedented challenge we face, on 23 March I called for an immediate global ceasefire. I urged all warring parties to silence the guns in order to help create conditions for the delivery of aid, open up space for diplomacy and bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to the pandemic.

I have been encouraged by the support that my call has received around the globe, from Heads of State and Government to regional partners, civil society activists and religious leaders.

From South America to Africa and from the Middle East to Asia we have seen conflict parties take some initial steps to end violence and fight the pandemic.

Still, we must remain cautious, as any gains are fragile and easily reversible, as conflicts have festered for years, distrust is deep, and there are many spoilers. Moving from good intentions to implementation will require a concerted international effort. And in many of the most critical situations, we have seen no let-up in fighting, and some conflicts have even intensified.

My Special Representatives and envoys will continue to engage with conflict actors to help make sure that ceasefires are implemented and that they pave the way towards lasting political solutions. I also welcome efforts being made by other mediation actors.

Despite the difficulties of convening parties for direct talks, we are using digital tools where we can to open and maintain channels of communication and to de-escalate crises.

Our missions also continue to assist host governments in different ways, from distributing medical equipment to facilitating the flow of humanitarian aid to supporting national planning for containment of the coronavirus.

In South Sudan, UNMISS, in cooperation with WHO, OCHA and protection partners, has prioritized mass community sensitization campaigns to enhance hygiene and public health in protection of civilian sites.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MONUSCO has deployed temporary bases to protect vulnerable populations affected by intercommunal violence.

In Mali, MINUSMA supported the first round of elections last week as well as the operations of the Malian armed forces.

In Somalia, medical equipment is being distributed to all states as well as Somaliland, in a positive sign of solidarity.

In Colombia, while the pandemic can carry risks for the peace process, it is prompting cooperation as well, as in the joint efforts by the Government and FARC to prevent contagion in the areas where ex-combatants are reintegrating into society.

And in Yemen, my Special Envoy is engaging with all parties to promote broad support for my ceasefire call, which was welcomed by the Government, Ansar Allah and numerous other groups. Yesterday, in a further encouraging development, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the “Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen”, announced a unilateral ceasefire. I now call on the Government and Ansar Allah to follow through on their commitment to immediately cease hostilities.

Our peacekeeping operations and special political missions will continue to be guided by four key objectives:

First, to support national authorities in their response to COVID-19.

Second, to protect our personnel and their capacity to continue critical operations.

Third, to ensure that our own personnel are not a contagion vector.

And fourth, to help protect vulnerable communities and continue to implement mission mandates.

This past weekend, I notified troop- and police-contributing countries that rotations, repatriations and new deployments of military and police personnel would be suspended until the end of June, with limited exceptions in extenuating circumstances. I thank troop- and police-contributing countries for their commitment and cooperation. And I pay tribute to the dedication of our men and women in uniform, and of our missions' civilian personnel, even more so in the context of this unfolding crisis.

Also this past week, and in furtherance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, I followed up my appeal for ceasefires with an explicit call to end the escalation of violence we are seeing against women and girls as the pandemic spreads.

Mr. President,

The humanitarian community, for its part, has mobilized swiftly in response to the crisis in close cooperation with the World Health Organization.

Two weeks ago, I launched the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, focusing on needs in countries already facing a humanitarian crisis.

The Central Emergency Response Fund has allocated \$75 million, and as of two days ago, the Plan had received \$396.5 million.

I wish to highlight three priority areas where further support and action are needed.

First, ensuring humanitarian access and opening corridors for the safe and timely movement of goods and personnel.

Second, mobilizing strong and flexible funding for the COVID-19 Response Plan and existing humanitarian appeals. Resources for one should not replace or divert from the other.

Third, protecting the most vulnerable populations and those least able to protect themselves. International humanitarian, human rights and refugee law continue to apply, even – and especially – in challenging times like these.

Mr. President,

The engagement of the Security Council will be critical to mitigate the peace and security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, a signal of unity and resolve from the Council would count for a lot at this anxious time.

We all recall the crucial role the Council played in marshalling the international community's response to the security implications of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the Ebola outbreak.

To prevail against the pandemic today, we will need to work together.

That means heightened solidarity.

And it means having the necessary resources. The financial situation of the United Nations remains perilous, and we have only enough cash to fund peacekeeping operations through the end of June and no capacity to pay troop- and police-contributing countries.

Excellencies,

This is the fight of a generation -- and the *raison d'être* of the United Nations itself.

I offer condolences to all countries for their losses from the disease, and reiterate my commitment to working with all of you to meet this all-encompassing test.

Thank you.