

Remarks to the United Nations Security Council: “Pandemics and the Challenges of Sustaining Peace”

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Your Excellency Foreign Minister Ibu Retno Marsudi, Secretary-General Guterres and former Secretary-General Ban, Ambassadors: it is an honor to participate in this meeting.

I will not take up time going over the tragic impacts of COVID-19 in terms of human suffering, or the immediate effects in countries on the agenda of the council, with which I know you are very familiar. Rather, I will focus on two main questions:

- How will the second-generation impacts of the pandemic likely affect conflict?
- What opportunities for peacebuilding may be present?

I will cover five quick points under each question. On the impacts, I think we have to accept that the pandemic has exposed fragility in *all* countries, in our health systems, economic, social, and political fabric. Some of the key dynamics that affect conflict risk are the following.

First, a still-growing economic shock, and rising inequality. This shock is the deepest since World War II and the broadest since 1870. The projections for 2020 are continually worsening, and I think we know now that we will be at not three percent, but at a 5-6 percent global contraction. By coincidence, five percentage points is the level at which we have seen in research major increases, around 50 percent, in conflict risk. The impact is also exacerbating inequality between different groups, a factor that we also know increases conflict.

Second, practical problems in convening peace processes and elections. Physical meetings are important for trust and confidence-building: the intra-Afghan negotiations, for example, have faced difficulties due to COVID-19 conditions. Disputed elections are a trigger for conflict, and the pandemic makes disputes more likely because of difficulties in access and monitoring. Postponing elections is sometimes the only responsible action to take, but this will mean rising pressure for elections in late 2020 or 2021, when we are now likely to see double the number of countries holding elections from what was originally scheduled. In some countries, the pandemic is also seen as acting as a pretext to postpone elections, shrink civic space, and adopt increasingly authoritarian approaches.

Third, food insecurity. We already face a global hunger crisis, but at present, this is because people do not have incomes to buy food, not because they cannot get food. However, we are seeing local spikes in food

prices in conflict zones in many countries, such as Afghanistan, DRC, Syria, and Yemen. Food prices are *the* typical risk to watch, historically, for conflict levels.

Fourth, trends in remittances, trade, and migration. Remittances are projected by the World Bank to decline by 110 billion dollars this year, or equivalent to more than *two-thirds* of the entire global ODA budget. Within the ten countries that depend most on remittance inflows are 8 which are post-conflict or conflict-affected and three which are still on the agenda of the Security Council—Haiti, Somalia, and South Sudan. Trade and migration issues post-COVID-19 also have the potential to create the potential for conflict between countries.

Fifth, inequality in access to public health goods. Developing countries' difficulty in procuring PPE, test kits, medicines, and equipment, has already widened the gap in capacity to suppress COVID-19 and has damaged trust. This gap is set to widen further when vaccines are found. Current dynamics over vaccine development see developed countries outbidding each other in advance orders, with little capacity left for the developing world.

These five major drivers of conflict may all increase in the months to come. Many of them are universal, and indeed we have seen tensions rise in rich countries. But they hit disproportionately on already conflict-affected countries.

Let me turn to positive opportunities for peacebuilding.

My first point is on trust and multilateral action. We are seeing in opinion polls in all regions unprecedented demand for more international collective action. In effect, people have been brutally reminded what we have governments and international cooperation for—that without them there are some forms of crisis that cannot be solved by any one individual or country alone. However, trust bubbles typically last less than a year if no action is taken to sustain them—so this is an opportunity, but it is a time-limited one.

My second is around the call for ceasefires issued by the Secretary-General and supported in Resolution 2532. There is still an opportunity to strengthen implementation, because in many countries COVID-19 is far from being under control, and humanitarian needs are increasing. The Council could engage more closely with regional and sub-regional bodies, such as the AU and the RECs, to amplify the call. The Council could also encourage the Secretary-General to report on ceasefire openings and implementation, in line with 2532.

Third, there is an opportunity to use a sustaining peace lens from early in the COVID-19 response. The initial health crisis is now an economic crisis, and without careful action can become a political and security crisis. The UN can help by linking its responses across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding areas; linking to human rights and issues such as mental health where the impact has been deep; and by building local capacities, state-citizen and state-civil society trust, and a whole-of-society response

to the pandemic. By embracing conflict-sensitive approaches that are sovereignty-supporting, the UN can also help governments address risks before they escalate—for example through subnational monitoring of food prices, serious investment to allow elections to proceed safely, and reducing inequalities or corruption in the COVID-19 response. Nationally-led prevention is also a promising area for greater alignment with the International Financial Institutions.

Fourth, investment in universal health and equal access to vaccines. This is an international, not simply a domestic concern because the pandemic has taught us that no one is safe until everyone is safe. Domestically, we need to embrace the message that even those well-known revolutionaries at the *Financial Times* have been writing, that this needs to be paid for by higher taxes from those who have reaped a larger share of recent gains. Internationally, developed countries need to sustain and increase aid (which is still a drop in the bucket compared to domestic stimulus packages), and ensure global access to vaccine and treatment technology.

Why raise some of these socio-economic issues at the Security Council? This is my fifth and last point: these problems may *become* international threats to peace and security if they are not addressed. The way to get them addressed, to raise their profile, is to raise them in political and security as well as developmental and human terms. The council often refers to issues such as pandemics as “non-traditional” issues; there has of course been well-merited resistance to “securitizing development.” But these issues are not really non-traditional—if you were to ask the world’s military agencies, most of them have planned for years for the impact of pandemics, extreme natural disasters, and so forth, as potential security risks. Analyzing the risk does not, of course, mean that the Council should try to direct health or economic activities. But this is an example of an extreme public health and economic shock, which deserves to qualify as a peace-building risk. Let the SC raise its voice not to “securitize” the issue, but precisely so that it does *not* become an international peace and security disaster.