

# U.N. Peacekeeping in a Time of Pandemic: Reconciling Armed Conflict Management While Helping to Fight COVID-19

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Following China's report regarding the outbreak of the coronavirus in that country at the end of December 2019, the World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) at the end of January 2020.<sup>1</sup> On March 11, 2020, after the virus had spread to more than 100 countries, the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

More than five million people worldwide are confirmed to have contracted the virus, with more than 300,000 deaths attributed to the virus (as of May 19, 2020). Most of these cases and deaths are reported in the United States and Western Europe, with the virus having only recently reached Africa, South America, and other areas.

The United Nations has responded to the pandemic in a variety of ways. The WHO issued general guidance for states, while President Trump, upon the recommendation of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, set forth separate guidance for the United States. The Governor of New York in mid-March ordered strict sheltering in place and social distancing, then mandated wearing of face masks in public. Similar directives were issued by Swiss authorities. The result in New York, where the U.N. Headquarters is located, and Geneva, where the European headquarters for the United Nations and most U.N. specialized agencies, including WHO, are based, has been that all U.N. staff were told to work from home. In New York, in-person meetings of the U.N. Security Council and the General Assembly were cancelled and replaced by virtual electronic meetings. All in-person U.N. conferences and general meetings in both New York and Geneva were cancelled and replaced by some form of video conferencing where possible. Indeed, the United Nations has canceled the traditional annual in-person statements by world leaders at the opening of the General Assembly in September 2020, to be replaced by virtual or recorded statements from those leaders before a limited live audience in the General Assembly, generally consisting of only one person from each nation's Permanent Mission.

The WHO has been working with global experts, governments, and partners to understand the new virus, track its spread, and provide assistance to countries on measures to protect health and prevent the further spread of the outbreak.

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1. *What Does the World Health Organization Do?*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (June 1, 2020), <https://perma.cc/KT8N-EXQ3>.

2. *Id.*

Very early on, on March 23, 2020, the U.N. Secretary General responded to the pandemic by issuing an appeal for an immediate ceasefire in all corners of the globe. He sought to reinforce diplomatic action, help create conditions for delivery of life-saving aid, and bring hope to places that are among the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The appeal drew widespread expressions of support from Member States and others, including warring factions in a number of countries.<sup>4</sup> Efforts for the Security Council to endorse the appeal went unheeded for several months, however, as the United States and China, which are permanent members of the Security Council, failed to agree on language in a cease-fire resolution that would refer to WHO's role in combating the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> The Security Council finally adopted a resolution on July 1, 2020, that "[d]emands" an end to hostilities everywhere and "[c]alls upon" belligerents to observe a "durable humanitarian pause" for at least 90 days to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup> The resolution does not refer to the WHO.

Putting aside the Secretary General's initiative to pause hostilities around the world—and the dangers that such hostilities inherently pose for U.N. peacekeeping operations—COVID-19 is having a significant impact on how those operations are being conducted. The pandemic has presented new challenges for U.N. peacekeeping forces to keep themselves safe from the coronavirus, while also seeking to facilitate peace in troubled areas. Working with the WHO and others, the United Nations has developed extensive guidelines for dealing with the pandemic not only in its headquarters in New York, Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi, but throughout the world, including its 13 current peacekeeping missions. These missions currently involve 95,000 military and police personnel from some 34 countries wearing Blue Helmets, mostly in Africa.

In mid-March 2020, the United Nations began issuing guidance to its staff and personnel on how to respond to the pandemic, both at headquarters and in the

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3. See Press Release, Secretary-General Calls for Global Ceasefire, Citing War-Ravaged Health Systems, Populations Most Vulnerable to Novel Coronavirus, U.N. Press Release SG/SM/20018 (Mar. 23, 2020), <https://perma.cc/UF9H-NHRU>.

4. Warring factions in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Columbia, Libya, Myanmar, Philippines, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen initially expressed support for the ceasefire, although, as the Secretary General added, "We know that any initial gains are fragile and easily reversible. And in many of the most critical situations, we have seen no letup in fighting, and some conflicts have even intensified." Press Release, Secretary General Reiterates Appeal for Global Ceasefire, Warns "Worst Is Yet to Come" as Covid 19 Threatens Conflict Zones, U.N. Press Release SG/SM/20032 (Apr. 3, 2020); see also *How Covid 19 Gave Peace a Chance, and Nobody Took It*, ECONOMIST (May 5, 2020), <https://perma.cc/J52J-X77J>.

5. *How Covid 19 Gave Peace a Chance*, *supra* note 4. While the proposed Security Council resolution reportedly was regarded as not legally binding, Member States welcomed such a gesture as an effort to encourage the warring factions to pause hostilities and deal with the pandemic that threatened all. The United States insisted that if the work of the WHO were mentioned, it would also have to include language asserting that China and the WHO had mishandled the pandemic. Efforts at compromise language failed. See also Julian Borger, *US Blocks Vote on UN's Bid for Global Ceasefire over Reference to WHO*, THE GUARDIAN (May 8, 2020), <https://perma.cc/77RP-2LQF> (noting that the "force of the resolution would be primarily symbolic").

6. S.C. Res. 2532, U.N. Doc. S/Res/2532 (July 1, 2020).

field. For example, a note on April 7, 2020 concerns the rights of U.N. personnel in the field to rest and recreation as it relates to the coronavirus.<sup>7</sup> Another example is *Administrative Guidelines for Offices on the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic*, issued on April 14, 2020.<sup>8</sup> Other guidance addresses such matters as alternative working arrangements, telecommuting, reimbursement of expenses for cancellation/disruption of official travel due to COVID-19, danger pay, Medevac in the context of COVID-19, the use of face masks, routine pre- and post-deployment quarantine of uniformed personnel, and quarantine of non-sick U.N. personnel.<sup>9</sup> Some are specific to U.N. Police (UNPOL), others to particular U.N. peacekeeping missions.<sup>10</sup>

More specifically, with respect to peacekeeping operations, new U.N. policy and guidance address administrative and logistical issues relating to the protection of mission personnel, and offer advice to Member States hosting the missions in meeting the challenges of the pandemic.

Very early in the pandemic, on March 6, 2020, the United Nations asked nine countries, including China, South Korea, and France, to delay by three months the rotation of their U.N. peacekeeping forces due to the coronavirus outbreak. At the same time, it requested those countries to maintain operational strength and execute their mandated tasks.<sup>11</sup>

In early April, Under Secretary General Jean-Pierre Lacroix of the Department of Peace Operations noted that U.N. peacekeeping forces have begun fighting on a second front in host nations.<sup>12</sup> While stressing the inherently greater vulnerability of civilian populations to the coronavirus in areas where peacekeeping missions operate, Lacroix emphasized that although U.N. peacekeepers are not the remedy for COVID-19, they are in many places part of the treatment plan.<sup>13</sup> He described the steps that U.N. peacekeeping missions are taking to help host countries counter the pandemic:

Following World Health Organization guidance, we continue to patrol while applying social distancing rules and we have stepped up our use of online resources.

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7. See U.N. Secretary-General, Guidance Note, Options for R&R Duty Stations with COVID-19 Travel Restrictions, ver. 4.0 (June 1, 2020), <https://perma.cc/N8L8-NLWD>.

8. See U.N. CEB Human Res. Network, *Administrative Guidelines for Offices on the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic*, ver. 4.0 (Apr. 14, 2020), <https://perma.cc/WQT7-BVQ6>.

9. See United Nations, COVID-19 Response, *Administrative Guidelines and FAQs*, etc. (n.d.), <https://perma.cc/9UPA-267D>.

10. *Id.* For a detailed index of U.N. administrative issuances for peacekeepers, see United Nations Peacekeeping, *IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON UN PEACEKEEPING*, <https://perma.cc/2JFU-KFFD>.

11. *Coronavirus: UN Asks 9 Countries to Delay Peacekeeper Rotations*, MILITARY.COM (Mar. 8, 2020), <https://perma.cc/9RDB-LEMA>. The other countries were Cambodia, Thailand, Nepal, India, Italy, and Germany; see also Cedric de Coning, *Examining the Longer-Term Effects of Covid-19 on UN Peacekeeping Operations*, IPI GLOBAL OBSERVATORY (May 13, 2020), <https://perma.cc/LZ7E-H7S6>.

12. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, *Opinion, Of Peacekeepers and Pandemics*, AFRICA RENEWAL (Apr. 2, 2020), <https://perma.cc/YC2R-NMY9>.

13. *Id.*

We are continuing to provide what direct assistance we can including by protecting humanitarian supplies and depots. Our aircraft are flying at a time when many others are not. As always, this is a partnership. The Member States who provide our police and military personnel are working to suspend or postpone planned deployments and rotations. . . .

On the ground, we quickly added additional precautionary measures including quarantine and containment of incoming personnel in cooperation with host country authorities. Our missions are also working closely with national authorities to support their response. We are providing multifaceted support: we are facilitating remote communications thanks to our technological means, we are helping to ensure critical supply chains are maintained, and our personnel are raising awareness on Coronavirus within communities, through local radio and digital media platforms, as well as during patrols.<sup>14</sup>

Later that month, Under Secretary General Lacroix and Under Secretary General Atul Khare of the U.N. Department of Operational Support emphasized the importance that the United Nations attaches to the role of U.N. peacekeeping operations to continue their missions to prevent hostilities and promote peace, while also seeking to protect their personnel, and to assist host states in combating the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

On April 13, 2020, Under Secretaries General Khare and Lacroix held a joint virtual press conference to discuss how the United Nations was addressing COVID-19 in the context of peacekeeping. Khare set out four priorities of U.N. peacekeeping missions, to make progress on both fronts:

Our priorities are the following. First, we do everything possible to not introduce or not further spread the virus in the country support. Second, we control the spread of the virus among our personnel. Third, we provide necessary treatment to personnel who may contract it. Finally, within our mandates and capacities we try to provide assistance to the countries where our peacekeeping missions are located.<sup>16</sup>

Lacroix stressed that his Department is working in partnership with Operational Support, along with the Department of Peace Building and Political Affairs, on this initiative to combat COVID-19. He identified a number of critical issues they were addressing jointly, including medical support, contingency planning, and rotation communication.<sup>17</sup>

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14. *Id.*; see also de Coning, *supra* note 11.

15. Atul Khare & Jean-Pierre Lacroix, *UN Peacekeepers Must Stay the Course*, MINURSO NEWS (Apr. 26, 2020), <https://perma.cc/VP3K-R7N5>.

16. United Nations Peacekeeping, *Press Conference on COVID-19 Response by UN Peacekeeping* (Apr. 13, 2020), <https://perma.cc/9L78-XSUD>; see also Khare & Lacroix, *supra* note 15.

17. *Press Conference*, *supra* note 16.

Unfortunately, the expanded mission of peacekeeping forces has been and will likely continue to be hampered by the global recession caused by the pandemic, and by the resulting increasing pressures on the United Nations, forcing these missions to do more with less.<sup>18</sup>

On May 29, 2020, in a ceremony marking International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres honored the peacekeepers' service and sacrifice during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>19</sup> He noted that two U.N. military colleagues had passed away due to COVID-19, both members of the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

The Secretary General took the occasion to recognize and applaud the critical role that U.N. peacekeepers are playing in fighting on two fronts to promote peace:

Every day, our peacekeepers continue to protect vulnerable populations, support dialogue and implement mandates while fighting Covid 19. They are doing everything they can to be an integral part of the solution to this crisis while keeping themselves—and the communities they serve—safe. As always, they give the United Nations family many reasons to be proud.<sup>20</sup>

Security Council Resolution 2532, adopted on July 1, 2020, reiterated this commitment to an expanded role for peacekeepers, when it requested the Secretary-General to “instruct peace-keeping operations to provide support, within their mandates and capacities, to host country authorities in their efforts to contain the pandemic.”<sup>21</sup>

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18. See de Coning, *supra* note 11; see also Cedric de Coning, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Peace Operations*, IPI GLOBAL OBSERVATORY (Apr. 2, 2020), <https://perma.cc/G62M-XXY3>.

19. Press Release, *Secretary-General Honours Peacekeepers' Service, Sacrifice Amid COVID-19 Pandemic, at Ceremony for Military Gender Advocate Award, Dag Hammarskjöld Medal*, U.N. Press Release SG/SM/20102 (May 29, 2020), <https://perma.cc/Q57F-MP65>.

20. *Id.*

21. S.C. Res. 2532, U.N. Doc. S/Res/2532 (July 1, 2020).