



Sparks on the Horizon: COVID-19 and Fragility

Thursday, 9 December 2021 | 11:45am-12:45pm EST

Virtual Session - [Register Here](#)

Overview:

In 2021, countries with humanitarian crises have suffered far more COVID-19 infections and deaths than in 2020. The lack of vaccine availability, the rapid spread of the delta variant, and the necessary relaxation of lockdowns have all contributed to this. However, the devastation wrought by the pandemic for the poorest people in the world has been much more profound than simply the impact on health. It has stalled economies, created unprecedented unemployment, and disrupted education. Governments' ability to provide basic services have been further weakened. The pandemic has fuelled deeply held grievances and opened political vacuums, presenting opportunities for armed groups to capitalize.

Latest forecasts using the University of Denver's International Futures model, show COVID-19 could either spark new or restart up to 15 armed conflicts before 2023, an increase from previous projections earlier in the pandemic. The model indicates that COVID-19 has exacerbated the social, political and economic conditions that make increased conflict far more likely. Without the international community making different choices and rapidly scaling up support to the most vulnerable people, our world is likely to become more violent and dangerous escalating suffering and humanitarian need.

Slow economic growth in poor countries will likely be a primary driving force behind these new conflicts. In October, the IMF further downgraded its growth forecast for low-income countries, pointing to slow rollout of vaccines as the main factor dragging down their recovery. Two-thirds of countries with humanitarian emergencies do not have enough vaccines for even 10 per cent of their population. As a result, in half of countries with humanitarian emergencies, per capita income is not expected to return to pre-pandemic levels until at least 2024 and for many beyond 2026.

In 2021, the World Bank estimates that 97 million additional people will live in poverty due to the pandemic. Without income and food, people are put into desperate situations, forced to look to whatever source of income or support they can find, including joining armed groups. A UNDP study found over half of people voluntarily joining armed groups express frustration at their economic conditions, with employment cited as the most frequent need at the time of joining. Unemployment is also pushing people to work in and purchase from illicit economies. In 2020, there were record levels of coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia and Peru.

Government mistrust, no income, limited access to services and burgeoning food insecurity are all triggers for social unrest. In 2020, civil unrest rose by 10 per cent and has continued to increase this year and will likely get worse. Research by the IMF on past pandemics shows civil unrest peaks two years from initial outbreaks. This will compound with other triggers of civil unrest. Between October and end of 2022, almost a quarter of countries with humanitarian emergencies will hold elections - often a flash point for violence and instability.



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The pandemic has escalated an education crisis creating opportunities for armed groups. In a third of countries with humanitarian emergencies, schools have been closed for more weeks this past academic year than in the first six months of the pandemic. Even where schools have re-opened, not all children have returned. Children out of school are more likely to be exploited, lured into or forced by necessity to join gangs and armed groups. Economies and whole societies for decades to come as lack of education turns into fewer opportunities and income.

While the pandemic has raged, existing conflicts and violence has not stood still. Armed groups have used the opportunity to seize more power, to attack citizens or a weakened state, or to gain legitimacy with populations.

So far, the global response to the pandemic has been inadequate and short-sighted. There is still time, but 2022 will be a critical year to shift the trajectory. The international community must focus political attention, cooperation and ambition around three objectives:

1. Getting vaccines into the arms of the most vulnerable. We need more than 1.4 billion doses to vaccinate 70 per cent of the population in countries with humanitarian crises.
2. Ambitious and coordinated international effort to stabilize the economies of the poorest countries, including through a reallocation of Special Drawing Rights and sustainable debt restructuring.
3. Sustain and increase basic service delivery in humanitarian settings.

Guiding Questions:

- How has COVID-19 exacerbated the geopolitical, socio-economic and political conditions that make increased conflict and humanitarian need more likely in the coming years?
- Will reaching the WHO goal of 70 per cent of populations vaccinated in humanitarian emergencies in 2022 mitigate conflict risks? And where are the dangers – how could vaccines be politicized and potentially further fuel instability?
- Beside vaccines, what are the other options for improving economic recovery in countries with humanitarian emergencies?
- In the current geopolitical context, how do we lift ambition to support vulnerable countries?

Moderator:

Raj Kumar, President and Editor in Chief, DEVEX

Panellists:

- **Thomas Wright**, author of “Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the International Order”, Brookings Institute
- **Vera Songwe**, Under-Secretary-General, Economic Commission for Africa
- **Mireia Villar Forner**, UN Resident Coordinator, Colombia



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- **Sarah Charles**, Assistant to the Administrator of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)