

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Humanitarian Pause: Urgent Need for Global Leadership

By Noeleen Heyzer

SYNOPSIS

As the international community grapples with its most serious public health crisis, there is urgent need for a humanitarian pause in superpower rivalry to enable collective interventions to deal with the threat from the COVID-19 pandemic.

COMMENTARY

AS THE world battles with the coronavirus pandemic, the United Nations Security Council has not been able to reach agreement on a draft resolution put before it on COVID-19, after nearly two months of difficult negotiations.

This draft resolution called for an end to hostilities worldwide so that there could be a full focus on fighting COVID-19, a once-in-a-century pandemic. If passed, it would have given powerful backing to the call for a global ceasefire made earlier by the Secretary-General, to create a “humanitarian pause” and to allow governments to better address the pandemic among the world’s most vulnerable.

US Stumbling Block

Yet, agreement could not be reached on the resolution in the Security Council because the United States objected the reference to “the urgent need to support... all relevant entities of the United Nations system, including specialised health agencies” in the fight against the pandemic.

Diplomats were hoping for stronger US leadership in global health security at this historical moment as they had seen in prior epidemics discussed by the Security Council like Ebola and HIV/AIDs.

The failure to reach agreement undermines the urgent need for a coordinated global response at a time the world faces an unprecedented crisis and is entering an extremely dangerous period. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about immense human suffering and is having a devastating impact on all our economies, societies and families.

The invisible common enemy has already infected over four million people, killed over 280,000 worldwide and exposed the weakest links and fault lines in all societies. The bottom 40 per cent has been hit the hardest. As working from home and social distancing are being implemented everywhere -- for the daily wage workers, the informal and casual workers, migrant workers in construction sites, in the agricultural and food sectors -- working from home means being out of a job.

The 'New Normal'

Managing COVID-19 has forced borders to close, has disrupted global supply chains, and has destroyed industries and small business that depend on tourism and the movement of people, creating new vulnerability and joblessness on a scale not seen in peace time. In the US alone over 20.6 million people have lost their jobs.

Most have limited or no access to affordable healthcare; many have been thrown out of rented accommodations because they have no savings and social protection; homelessness and hunger have become the 'new normal'.

Many countries and local governments took early and effective action to contain the virus within their own jurisdictions. Some countries and local governments have done better than others in controlling the spread of the COVID-19 and the death rates.

There are many reasons: the quality of the health infrastructure; the organisation of the response using a "whole of government and whole of society approach"; the strengthened outreach of civil society to vulnerable people; the decisiveness and clarity of thinking by leaders based on the evolving scientific knowledge; the social cohesion and level of trust in public institutions and political leadership; the investment in social protection systems and public housing in the society.

And most important, those who have addressed inequalities of gender, ethnic, class and political discrimination, and human rights abuses in societies have built greater trust and social capital that have had an enormous impact on the outcome.

Need for Global Action and Leadership

However national and local actions alone are insufficient. Global action and partnership are vital now to deal with the global pandemic and its aftermath. The world is in need of global leadership and coordinated global responses to an unprecedented global emergency since World War Two.

It is precisely at times like this that the leadership of the Security Council is needed. It should not be silent in the face of the serious threat to global peace and security which COVID-19 represents. This is the time for the premier institution responsible for leading on global security to show strength, not weakness.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called for an immediate global ceasefire, in all corners of the world, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretary-General's appeal is urgent and well-founded:

- The world faces a common enemy, COVID-19. The virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction or faith. It attacks relentlessly and without discrimination. The pandemic it has caused is having wide-ranging negative impacts around the world. Every country and every nationality are affected.
- Meanwhile, armed conflicts still rage in many parts of the world, and the most vulnerable -- women and children, elderly people, people with disabilities, the marginalised, and the displaced -- continue to pay the highest price. They are also among the groups at greatest the risk of suffering the devastating effects of COVID-19.
- In war-ravaged countries, health systems have collapsed. Health professionals, already few in number, have been targeted in many current conflicts. Medical supplies and equipment are often scarce. Refugees and others displaced by violent conflict are doubly vulnerable.

Time for Pause in Superpower Rivalry

A global cessation of hostilities is essential to help create corridors for life-saving humanitarian assistance; to open precious windows for diplomacy, and to bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to COVID-19. It is time to put animosities between superpowers and conflicts on lockdown and to come together to focus on the true fight of our lifetime: the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the UN celebrates its 75th Anniversary, there is overwhelming support for international partnership and cooperation to solve global challenges. But the United Nations Security Council must be allowed to do its job and not be hampered by superpower rivalry and politics.

The world urgently needs the Security Council to show determination, to support those fighting the pandemic and those who can support global economic recovery, social protection, and peacebuilding in the COVID-19 era.

Dr. Noeleen Heyzer is a member of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Advisory Board on Mediation and a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
