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## Research Report

# Implications of COVID-19 for conflict in Africa

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## Implications of COVID-19 for Conflict in Africa

### Summary

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected armed conflict and political violence within countries? Focusing on Africa, a continent with a particularly high number of ongoing conflicts, this policy brief analyses the immediate and long-term implications of the pandemic on conflict and reflects on its implications for international peacebuilding efforts.

In the short term, conflict patterns on the continent are marked more by a continuation of previous trends than by a strong direct impact of COVID-19. Regarding armed confrontations, there was a rise in conflict intensity in some countries and one new war erupted in the Tigray region of Ethiopia in November 2020. As to lower-scale political violence, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, many states used excessive state violence against civilians when enforcing Corona measures.

Perhaps more important than the immediate effect of the pandemic, the consequences of the pandemic are very likely to accelerate violent conflict in the medium to long term. This is firstly because the pandemic exacerbates structural weaknesses, including the sharpening of societal divisions, severe disruptions in the education sector and deteriorating socio-economic circumstances. Secondly, the pandemic has curtailed actors and institutions that might be able to reduce the risk of violent escalation. Trust in the state and security institutions has suffered in many countries due to dissatisfaction with the handling of the pandemic. Moreover, democratic processes are hampered by the postponement of elections and increasing levels of government repression. At the same time, international peace support is negatively

affected by social distancing and further threatened by looming cuts of commitments in official development assistance.

Bringing together both the short-term and longer-term effects of the pandemic on conflict clearly shows the risk that the pandemic poses to peace in Africa. It is therefore vital for the international community to:

1. *Stay engaged and stay alert.* If the international community continues to focus on handling the domestic consequences of the pandemic rather than international challenges, conflict will further increase in intensity and spread geographically. COVID-19 has already led to a reduction in international peace support, including peacebuilding initiatives and mediation. However, these instruments are vital to foster peace and prevent emerging and renewed conflict.
2. *Invest in conflict prevention.* The adverse effects of COVID-19 on economic, social and political structures can, and very likely will, provide the breeding ground for larger-scale conflicts, both in least developed countries (LDCs) and middle-income countries. Thus, conflict prevention must be taken seriously, including the strengthening of open and participatory (democratic) processes that enable societies to deal with societal conflicts peacefully.
3. *Pay special attention to post-conflict countries.* Many African countries have experienced large-scale civil wars in their history and continue to be LDCs struggling with societal tensions. The risk of renewed conflict in these places is particularly high.

## Introduction

In March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 an international pandemic. Since then, combating COVID-19 has become centre stage around the world. One year into the pandemic, there is still no end in sight: Despite the speedy development of vaccines, these are not equally available around the world, and positive advances are in many places overshadowed by the spread of mutations. Although the African continent was not as badly hit by the pandemic as many initially expected, the pandemic does have massive consequences for economic, political and social dynamics. Therefore, this policy brief – developed in the context of a larger study on the impact of COVID-19 in Africa (Fiedler, Mross, & Adeto, 2021) – analyses what direct effects the pandemic has on political violence and armed conflict while also reflecting on the longer-term implications it might have for conflict on the continent.

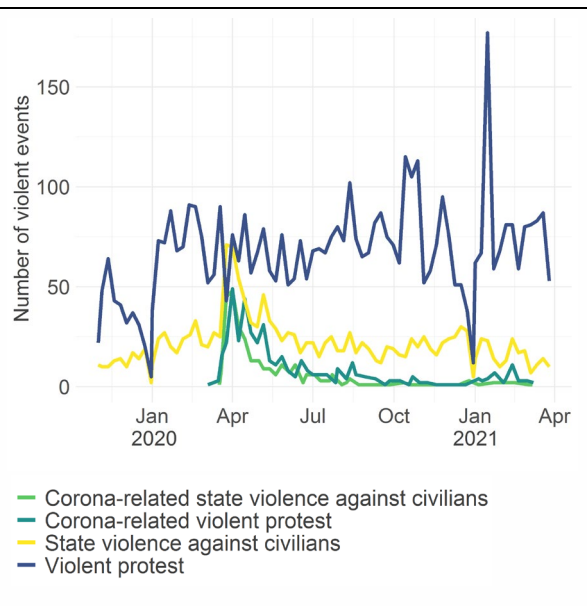
### How has the pandemic affected levels of lower-scale political violence?

One clear short-term effect of the pandemic has been excessive violence against civilians in relation to enforcing Corona measures (see Figure 1). This has occurred most often in Uganda, Kenya and Zimbabwe, followed by South Africa and Nigeria, and it has caused severe fatalities (9-22) in all of these cases, except in Zimbabwe. Notably, this type of violence has mostly occurred in countries with comparatively high state capacity and levels of development. The very clear spike in state violence in April 2020, depicted in Figure 1, indicates that this was an exceptional, direct reaction to the pandemic. These incidents were short-lived, yet they negatively affect the relationship between the population and the state – especially the levels of trust in security forces and governments. What is particularly worrying is that the excessive enforcement of lockdown provisions has often been used as a cover to target minorities and political opponents, which has triggered violent clashes between citizens and state forces, for example in Uganda. Also, the COVID-19-related postponement of elections (in eight African countries on the national and five on the sub-national level) has caused friction in a number of cases, and commentators fear a potential escalation of violence.

Although the pandemic did not strongly affect violent protest patterns more generally, it did accentuate existing structural problems, which can become sources of conflict. In the beginning, protests against Corona measures often turned violent – most frequently in South Africa, Uganda, Tunisia and Nigeria, and with more than 10 fatalities in Nigeria, Madagascar and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In most cases where such violence occurred, it seems to have been a reaction to violently enforced Corona measures. At the same time, countries with notable Corona-related violent protests already had a significant number of similar events before the outbreak of the pandemic. Thus, these dynamics point instead to underlying structural problems in these societies that the governments are not

able to address and which the existing political systems are not able to channel peacefully. Structural problems are also the explanation for the massive spike in violent protests in early 2021 (Figure 1), which was mostly driven by Tunisia, where economic frustration escalated into violent, yet non-fatal protests. Notably, except for Tunisia, all of the countries with prominent violent protests have a history of violent conflict (or ongoing conflict, as in Nigeria and DRC), and thus a higher risk of renewed major violence.

**Figure 1: Political violence in all African countries (November 2019 – March 2021)**



Source: Authors, based on ACLED data (2021). The category “violent protest” includes the ACLED categories “violent demonstrations” and “mob violence”.

### How has the pandemic affected conflict levels in Africa?

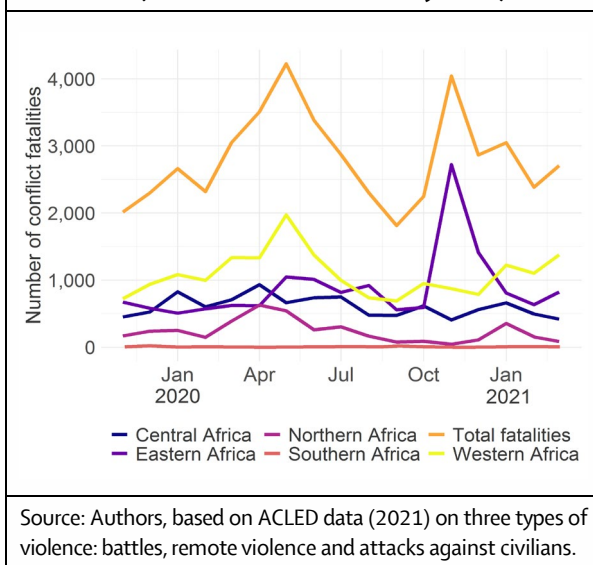
The levels of violence within existing conflicts have partially increased during the pandemic, and one new armed conflict broke out in Ethiopia. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2021) reveal a clear spike in both armed confrontations and the number of resulting fatalities in March, April and May 2020 (see Figure 2), which mainly stemmed from northern, eastern and western Africa. Furthermore, there is a second spike in November 2020, which mostly originated from armed clashes in Ethiopia between the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and military forces in the emerging Tigray War.

The clear spike around May 2020 does seem to suggest that the outbreak of the pandemic exerted a certain effect on conflict. This increase in violence can be attributed to countries with ongoing conflict, mostly Libya, the Central African Republic (CAR), DRC, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria and South Sudan. It could be explained by the fact that, as the world was occupied with the pandemic, both armed groups and governments became more active in trying to

cement their power and target opponents. However, violence was already clearly on the rise before the pandemic, suggesting that a similar trend might have occurred also in the absence of COVID-19.

A reduction in violence could have resulted from the United Nations Secretary-General's call in 2020 for a global ceasefire to combat the virus. However, the call has had limited impact. It resulted in unilateral ceasefires in conflicts in Angola, Cameroon, Libya, CAR, South Sudan and Sudan. Overall, however, a clear reduction in violence due to the ceasefires cannot be traced. The "Corona ceasefires" are mostly unilateral, for humanitarian purposes and have partially already been broken again or only constitute a small portion of fighting factions (e.g. Cameroon). Although ceasefires can become the starting point for more serious peace negotiations, the pandemic has so far not substantially altered the power relationship between conflict parties, and thus has not helped pave the way to peace.

**Figure 2: Conflict fatalities in all African countries (November 2019 – February 2021)**



Regarding armed groups in ongoing conflicts, especially ISIS has called on its affiliates to take advantage of the situation and increase attacks, which for example one rebel group in DRC responded to. Furthermore, several rebel groups have incorporated COVID-19 into their propaganda. This includes, for example, portraying the virus as punishment of Western non-believers or using it for recruitment slogans. Although outside of Africa, groups such as the Taliban and Hezbollah have begun to increase their health services in an attempt to portray themselves as abler alternatives to the state, this type of dynamic cannot be widely observed in Africa yet. Al-Shabaab in Somalia, for example, puts blame on the central government and the African Union mission for firstly bringing the virus into the country, and secondly reacting poorly to the crisis. The group itself, however, has not increased its provision of health services, except for setting up one treatment centre in one of its strongholds.

Besides the already existing conflicts that have intensified, one new armed conflict between the Ethiopian government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF broke out in November 2020. Although COVID-19 did not cause the conflict, it helped trigger it: Even though the general elections from August 2020 had been postponed by the central government to June 2021 due to the pandemic, the TPLF held their own elections in Tigray, and tensions between the two parties eventually escalated into armed confrontation. So far, nearly half a million people have been displaced and atrocities have been reported, with no de-escalation of violence in sight. Since Ethiopia represents a stabilising factor among East African countries, the conflict could have devastating effects in the region.

### How has the pandemic affected international peace support?

The pandemic has affected peacekeeping operations in two ways. On a structural level, the biggest challenge for peacekeeping is the economic recession resulting from the pandemic. This means that member countries have fewer resources at their disposal, which they are likely to focus on internal rather than external matters. Given the critical importance of peacekeeping in avoiding conflict recurrence, this poses a serious long-term challenge to peace in relation to the pandemic. On an operational level, the continuing pandemic risks making peacekeeping more ineffective: on the one hand because peacekeepers might suffer from higher stress levels and fatigue, and on the other hand because interaction with the local population is now significantly reduced. Contrary to the fears of some that member countries would pull out their troops and leave peacekeeping missions critically understaffed, this does not seem to be a large-scale problem so far.

The pandemic has resulted in a decrease in international mediation, with delays in peace negotiations in Libya, Somalia and the Sahel region. This is partially because international travel to certain countries has become difficult, if not impossible. Although some negotiations have moved to online formats in order to continue negotiations – such as "Zoom diplomacy" in Sudan – diplomatic initiatives and peace talks have also been suspended as international and domestic actors shift their attention away from these processes to the pandemic. Thus, most analysts agree that the pandemic seriously endangers conflict prevention and mediation.

The third area affected by the pandemic relates to peacebuilding projects in conflict-affected countries. Because these types of projects focus, for example, on bringing people together face-to-face and fostering dialogue among and between social groups, they are particularly affected by social distancing measures. Although implementing agencies and non-governmental organisations are adapting by moving to digital formats, it is clear that this poses a massive shift in peacebuilding practice, which comes both with some opportunities (e.g. higher level of youth engagement) and risks (lower level of participation of marginalised groups).

with connectivity problems). Although they are less costly, peacebuilding efforts will also suffer due to the economic downturns in donor countries. This is particularly problematic because conflict-prevention programmes would be key to counter some of the conflict-inducing aspects of the pandemic.

### What are the possible longer-term effects of the pandemic on conflict?

Although the direct effects of the pandemic on violent conflict in African countries are not that pronounced, the pandemic has several indirect effects that are highly worrying from a conflict perspective. Most importantly, the pandemic is creating or increasing sources of conflict through (1) sharpened societal divisions, which endanger social cohesion (e.g. rising xenophobia, hate speech, scapegoating, targeting of marginalised groups), (2) deteriorating socio-economic circumstances (including food insecurity, severe cutbacks in the education sector and rising unemployment as well as a

high likelihood of a debt crisis) and (3) increasing levels of repression and authoritarian backsliding (e.g. in Algeria, Benin, Kenya and Ghana), from which new conflicts can originate. At the same time, the pandemic has curtailed actors and institutions that might be able to deal with societal conflicts peacefully, or at least reduce their violent impacts. Trust in the state and security institutions has suffered in many countries, democratic processes and institutions are being hampered (e.g. elections postponed) or dismantled, and international peacebuilding activities have stalled.

This combination of various risk factors could, firstly, facilitate the spread of extremism, since Islamist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram have been quite successful in exploiting a sense of exclusion and grievances in the past. Secondly, it could lead to an escalation of lower-scale political violence into major violent conflict. Thirdly, these factors could reignite animosities in societies that already have a history of violent conflict, thus presenting a significantly heightened risk of renewed violence.

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