The Hidden Combatant: COVID Spreads in War Zones

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Dear friends,

COVID-19 has changed the world. We are all feeling its impact. As confirmed cases soar past 18 million globally, there is concern even in the most developed economies, with the best health care systems, that the actual number of cases is much higher. Chronic challenges with testing, shortages of hospital beds, and asymptomatic illness have collided to reduce our clarity of the disease’s true impact. Imagine what the situation might be like in countries that are already ravaged by war, with weak or non-existent health infrastructure. Correctly understanding the pandemic is the first step to implementing an effective response. But in areas of violent conflict, there is little hope to focus on public health while societies are caught up in war.

Last month, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 2532, backing the Secretary General Guterres’ March call for a global cease-fire. With particular attention to Yemen, the March call sought to accelerate humanitarian and economic stability efforts. However, with limited success, questions have arisen about the local impact of these high-level peace efforts. Akin to critiques of the 2013 National Dialogue Conference in Yemen, many practitioners are asking if these resolutions ever make their way to the grassroots and local levels. While high-level commitments to peace are certainly a noteworthy benchmark, how can these commitments better reach local populations?

Since 2017, ICRD has been working to enhance the role of citizens and local religious leaders in Yemen’s political processes. Implementing what Mennonite peacebuilder, John Paul Lederach, might call a “middle-out” approach, ICRD is helping facilitate new relationships and lines of communication between communities, government stakeholders, and higher-level decision makers.

Through a series of local dialogues, focus group discussions, and local trainings, ICRD has supported the development of sustainable mechanisms that bring locally-identified concerns and community needs to the attention of government officials working on Yemen’s political transition. Four of the key community needs raised by religious and community leaders that were addressed in the dialogues are education and women’s empowerment, access to fresh water resources, sewage and sanitation, and additional resources from the community to expand on the work. ICRD-supported trainings focused on avenues for raising these concerns to high-level decision makers. Based on ICRD’s midterm assessment, 85% of participants expressed enhanced involvement in the national political process. Similarly, 73% of participants noted that they now feel personally involved in local decision-making processes.
Complementing our efforts in Yemen, ICRD is working in collaboration with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Inclusive Peace (IP) to advance a multi-year study and a support mechanism for religious actors engaged directly in formal, or Track One, peace processes. Formal peace negotiations are processes typically advanced by diplomats, government officials, and warring parties to secure a peace agreement and a supporting implementation plan.

Studying and highlighting religious leaders’ successful inclusion in formal initiatives, this effort aims to elevate and quantify the value-add that representatives of religious communities can bring to peace negotiations at the intra and inter-country and multi-lateral levels ICRD and USIP are looking at cases like Yemen, Cameroon, Colombia, Central Africa Republic, Ethiopia, Libya, Northern Ireland, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Thailand, and Syria. Furthermore, this program is generating a consortium of policy makers, practitioners, and scholars currently engaged in designing a support mechanism centered around the effective inclusion of religious actors in on-going peace processes.

Reverend Javier Bertucci of Venezuela, shared: “I believe that peacemaking in this country [Venezuela] can only be done with dialogue and negotiation. There is such drama and hate and pain in my country, you see brothers and sisters hating each other over politics. The first thing religious actors, like me, should do is work to dissolve this hate, because hate only destroys society.”

Sister Mary John Mananzan, a Missionary Benedictine Sister from the Philippines, shared: “In the Bangasmooro negotiations we designed a session where all of us women were invited to ensure that the constitution which came out of it would be gender sensitive and we actually played an important role in that constitution.”

These programmatic engagements, working to build mechanisms for civil society and government communication and to analyze the inclusion of religious leaders in formal peace processes, seek ways to integrate multiple layers of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It is not enough to support high-level ceasefire agreements that never reach the local communities. It is not enough to support local peacebuilding efforts that do not address systemic or structural issues. Lasting and sustainable change requires a whole-of-society approach that operates across sectors, tracks, and layers. And religious considerations and communities can and should contribute constructively to these efforts. Thank you for your support as we tackle these extraordinary challenges. Together, we can make faith part of the solution.

Warm regards,
James Patton

Formal peace negotiations have been delayed in Afghanistan. Yemen struggles to establish a ceasefire as its weak health infrastructure is crumbling. Extremist groups in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia are calling on their recruits to capitalize on the destabilized situation. However, as conflict-impacted communities continue to wrestle with the spread of COVID-19, *local faith and community leaders are still striving* to prevent violence and maintain stability.

ICRD has been working hard over these last few weeks to adapt our peacebuilding and conflict mitigation strategies to the evolving situation. Please consider making a contribution to the Center today. While many of our lives have been put on hold, violent conflict persists. *Together, let's make faith part of the solution.*