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COVID-19 AND PEACE TALKS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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On 16 June 2020, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network hosted a webinar titled “COVID-19 and Peace Talks: Challenges and Opportunities”. The webinar was directed towards the issues diplomacy is currently facing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the global pause in people’s lives, diplomacy is presently limited by pandemic travel restrictions even while conflicts are likely to continue despite the spread of the disease. Consequently, women and children are bearing the brunt of both COVID-19 and these conflicts in war-torn countries. However, while hardships have increased during the last six months, many women have had the ability to take leadership roles in their communities in order to survive. The aim of the webinar was to understand: (i) if the pandemic eased tensions in war-torn countries; (ii) how has COVID challenged mediation efforts in these countries; and (iii) how can women mediators be pivotal actors during these uncertain times.

Richard Gowan (United Nations Director for the International Crisis Group) was first to share his expertise on the topic. Gowan specifically addressed the impact of the United Nations call for a global ceasefire on conflicts during the pandemic. In March, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, called for a global ceasefire. The declaration was met positively by at least 11 established armed groups, however the global ceasefire soon failed when combatants in countries like Libya and Ukraine returned to violent activities. Furthermore, an additional issue was that mediators could not move quickly to access these situations. Gowan shared four main reasons why the global ceasefire failed in his opinion. First, he stated, in most cases the ceasefires were unilateral. For example, the weaker parties in the conflicts, such as rebel groups, often agreed to the ceasefire, but government entities or larger powers did not recognise it. Secondly, there were no global resources implemented to support the ceasefire. Due to the pandemic, it was not possible to have mediators cross borders to support ceasefire operations. Additionally, he noted that the UN Security Council (UNSC) was the main culprit in destroying the process. While the UNSC was working to create a resolution for the ceasefire, the process was stopped because the United States would not sign if the World Health Organisation (WHO) was mentioned in the resolution. China countered the US by stating it would not sign if the WHO was excluded. The ensuing stalemate meant that the resolution for a global ceasefire agreement was never passed. Gowan added that it is now too late

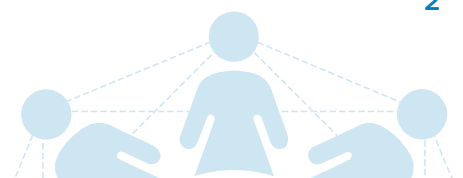


for such a resolution to be made. Lastly, Gowan mentioned that the nature of COVID-19 has affected the opportunities for an effective ceasefire. Originally, Gowan noted, the responses in conflict areas at the beginning of the pandemic recalled patterns of response in the wake of the tsunami in South East Asia or the Ebola outbreak; these sudden and surprising events caused a cessation of conflict in the affected areas due to fear and uncertainty. However, this has not been the case with COVID-19, since it has been a slow growing process and is not surprising enough to make people lay down their arms and stop fighting. Gowan concluded his contribution by acknowledging that the virus will continue to shape conflicts and peace processes for some time to come.

Mauro Garofalo subsequently shared his views on COVID-19's impact on peace negotiations. Garofalo is the Head of International Relations in the Community of Sant'Egidio. In accordance with Gowan, he stated that the nature of the virus is insidious in its approach to societies, especially in societies that are not prepared to respond or understand the gravity of the situation. He explained further that these societies in the Global South are countries that already face diseases like malaria, Ebola, yellow fever, HIV and tuberculosis every day. Consequently, these countries have a more difficult time assessing the real threats and fears of the COVID-19 virus. Garofalo continued by reiterating that the impact of COVID-19 on peace talks is devastating to the world. The virus has halted travel, causing a separation between mediators and individuals facing conflicts. Furthermore, lockdowns may have lessened the flow of the virus, but have not eased tensions between opposing groups or combatants. Garofalo even went so far as to mention that Zoom is not conducive for peace talks since it creates a lack of security during crucial conversations. He stated, "Mediation is a human process", explaining that the healing from war and hatred cannot occur over Zoom, it requires people coming together in person.

Anna Cervi's remarks followed Garofalo's. Cervi is the Syrian country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council based in Damascus, and a member of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network. Cervi spoke about her time in Syria during the civil war, and specifically her experience during both the conflict and the pandemic this year. The Syrian civil war has lasted nine years and has displaced five million people outside of Syria and six million internally. The conflict had not ended when the pandemic arrived in the region and created larger obstacles for many inhabitants of the nation. Cervi called for a serious review of the global peace processes occurring in the world today because they are not succeeding in the ways they should. Moreover, she described how women are currently leading Syria through the crisis and stated, "They want to see an end in sight for themselves and their children". She concluded with a plea for change in the conduct of peace negotiations, and especially how mediators and organisations should be focusing on individuals already inside the country who are now dealing with both the pandemic and the protracted civil war.

Finally, **Muna Luqman** was last to share during the webinar. Luqman is the Chairperson for Food4Humanity Foundation and the co-founder of the Women Solidarity Network. Luqman is currently a women's peace builder in Yemen. The civil war in Yemen has still



aged on despite the pandemic. At first, Luqman noted, everyone welcomed the ceasefire, as Gowan described, but the power struggle and ethnic tensions still continued making peace difficult. However, she believes the pandemic has been a glimmer of hope for resolution in Yemen. She also mentioned how women have been shining throughout the last six months, especially since the government was occupied with killing Yemeni citizens and the rebels were manoeuvring their forces. Women were present the entire time despite the occupation on both sides. Women were the heroes in hospitals, laboratories and humanitarian aid relief; they were the ones making a difference despite disease and conflict. Yet, women are still excluded from peace talks and negotiations in Yemen because of a discriminatory government and the fact that there is no one reaching women at the grassroots level. Luqman called for a greater focus on the local-level utility of women and how they can bring peace. She ended her remarks by stating, “Guns cannot silence the pandemic, only peace can”.

Overall, the webinar presented real issues that are plaguing the world today in many nations. Nations are struggling on two fronts now, both against COVID-19 and against the raging conflicts. From all of the speakers, we can first learn that there needs to be change in how we are managing peace and negotiations in the world currently. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the goal and conduct of peace building needs to become more strategic in these times of global crisis and the unknown.

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