



# Watch List 2020

Spring Edition | 27 May 2020

Every year Crisis Group publishes two additional Watch List editions that complement its annual Watch List for the EU, most recently published in January 2020. These publications identify major crises and conflict situations where the European Union and its member states can generate stronger prospects for peace. The two additional editions include an overview of the policy environment and main challenges for the European Union and five crises and conflict situations, which can update those identified in the annual Watch List or present a new focus of concern. For each of the five cases included in this edition, Crisis Group provides field-based analysis and specific policy advice to the European Union and its member states, with the aim to guide and improve their efforts to prevent, mitigate or end conflicts.

## CONTENT

Introduction

Côte d'Ivoire: Defusing Electoral Tensions Amid Polarised Politics

Myanmar: Rakhine State Faces a Third Crisis

The Fragility of Northern Syria

From Bad to Worse in Yemen

Hunger Looms in Venezuela's Standoff

Headquarters

**International Crisis Group**

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

[brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

# Introduction

This is the first of two updates to Crisis Group's 2020 EU Watch List. It identifies conflicts or crises where stronger European engagement could help prevent, mitigate or end violent conflict and strengthen prospects for peace.

We published January's EU Watch List in what in many ways seems like another world. In early 2020, few imagined that only weeks later a pandemic would force many leaders to impose lockdowns, throw lives and livelihoods into turmoil, and leave people the world over anxiously eyeing a looming economic storm. Our January Watch List portrayed a continent struggling to find its voice and buffeted by jostling among major powers, with the U.S., China and Russia all prone to ignore, bypass, divide or strongarm Europe for their own ends. Yet it also illustrated the significant role that European diplomacy, aid and advice can play in calming or averting conflicts across the globe and the urgency of Europe's efforts to assert itself – diplomatically, financially and even militarily – independent of other powers.

That was then. Today, Europe is among the regions hardest hit by COVID-19. Even the largest disruptions of the past few decades – 9/11, the Iraq war, the financial and Eurozone crises, chaos across parts of the Middle East, spates of terrorist attacks and the migration crisis – pale alongside the pandemic, at least in their immediate and global impact. But while the virus itself represents a massive transformation, its implications may well [accelerate and deepen](#) more than dramatically shift pre-existing trends.

That is true for the challenges the EU is facing. Anger at Brussels that predated the coronavirus has been mounting among people in states worst affected by it, as they call for greater financial burden sharing. It is unclear how far the Franco-German compromise recovery deal will go to mollify such sentiment. Although the pandemic – global by its very nature – ought to summon a collective response and bolster pan-European solidarity, it risks prompting more nationalistic, nativist reflexes as countries face sharp economic downturns. With fewer resources to go around, migration debates could get still bitterer. Abroad, the crisis has reinforced President Donald Trump's hostility to multilateralism and multilateral institutions – instincts that almost certainly will sharpen as U.S. elections come closer. It also has sent U.S.-China relations into an even sharper downward spin, complicating Europe's efforts to navigate a rivalry between a historical ally and a rising power the continent cannot afford to alienate. Thus far, the pandemic has forced the EU to look mostly inward in an attempt to coordinate among European capitals. It may well downsize the new Commission's ambition to take on a more forceful geopolitical role.

Yet, even as internationalism faces adverse winds, Europe has sought to put up a fight. Several European leaders are striving to help poor and conflict-affected states shield themselves from the pandemic's worst ravages. European foreign ministers unanimously endorsed the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire. In the UN Security Council, Europeans have tried, albeit in vain, to work around U.S.-China tensions to push through a resolution backing the Secretary-General's initiative and engineer some sort of multilateral response to the pandemic. EU High Representative Josep Borrell has called for an international effort to increase humanitarian aid to fight the virus. The Commission launched a humanitarian air bridge to

deliver urgent aid, starting with a first flight to the Central African Republic. Perhaps most significantly, on 8 April Brussels launched Team Europe, an initiative aimed at combating the pandemic worldwide. Though it does not commit new resources, it redirects some 20 billion euros from member states, the EU and its agencies to tackle the pandemic's impact. Such support could prove a lifeline to developing countries trying to stave off public health emergencies or mitigate what is likely to be brutal economic downturn.

As the crises in the five countries featured in this month's Watch List illustrate, more will be needed. Thus far, much of the global south has avoided outbreaks on the scale that overwhelmed parts of Europe. Why that is the case – and for how long – remain unanswered questions. Younger populations seem to be less vulnerable to COVID-19; some believe that warmer climates might hinder its transmission; and many governments, particularly in Africa, informed by their experience with past epidemics, acted quickly to stem the virus's spread. But any complacency would be misplaced. Data remains unreliable, and the toll could be higher than reported; too, more and more countries – from Mexico to Pakistan, Yemen to South Sudan – show worrying rises in infection rates. Should the pandemic hit hard, these and other middle- and low-income countries will be particularly poorly equipped to cope.

Worldwide, leaders already face hard choices in how to ease lockdowns and get the economy moving without provoking further spikes. Those dilemmas are even more acute across parts of the global south, where many people survive on a day-to-day basis, food security is precarious and cities are overcrowded. In reality, many poor countries' health systems can never keep pace, however much governments flatten the curve.

All these dangers are magnified in conflict-afflicted countries. The disease may prey on the vulnerable, the displaced or those whose lives have otherwise been torn apart by war or crises. Yemen, in the throes of the world's worst humanitarian disaster, is cause for particular concern, as are parts of Syria, notably rebel-held areas and camps for the displaced, overcrowded camps housing displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh, where cases are already reported, and Venezuelans sheltering from their country's humanitarian disaster across the border in Colombia. Maintaining European aid to these areas is critical.

At the same time, many leaders confront what are certain to be contentious decisions: how and when to impose lockdowns, lift or reimpose them, declare states of emergency, curtail travel to some areas or amend election timelines or procedures. The potential for some to seek to exploit the situation is clear. But in reality, few options are good and even sensible or well-meaning decisions could provoke political or popular fury and widen fault lines between leaders and opposition, civilians and military, elites and the street. Europe can usefully encourage leaders to take such decisions only after as broad consultation with their rivals as is feasible.

Amid a broadly gloomy picture, the pandemic may present opportunities to diminish violence or dampen conflict; the EU and European leaders should help seize any that arise. True, despite the UN Secretary-General's global ceasefire call, no major war has seen a lull in fighting due to the virus; some, such as Libya and Afghanistan, have suffered upticks in violence (notwithstanding, in the latter, the Taliban's and government's announcement of a ceasefire over the three-day Eid al-Fitr holiday).

But as fear mounts of a major health crisis, as conflict parties need humanitarian or medical workers to enjoy safe access to areas under their control, or as rival political actors need to reach compromise to persuade international donors to lend their country a hand, they may come to see changing behaviour as serving their interests. Europe should be ready to support UN or other efforts to take advantage of opportunities as they appear.

Most importantly, Europe should balance the imperative of caring for its own citizens and economies with remaining engaged abroad. The world requires a strong global response in its search for a vaccine but also in efforts to protect the most vulnerable and prevent the pandemic from upsetting fragile politics and provoking further instability and suffering. Europe's voice in support for such a global response is as vital as ever.

**Robert Malley**

President & CEO of Crisis Group

May 2020

# Côte d'Ivoire: Defusing Electoral Tensions Amid Polarised Politics

As a presidential election scheduled for October draws closer, tensions in Côte d'Ivoire are building along longstanding political and ethnic fault lines.

Although President Alassane Ouattara helped defuse a potential crisis when he formally withdrew from the presidential race in March, avoiding a major dispute over the constitutionality of his running for a third term, opposition politicians now accuse his government of hampering them from competing against the new ruling-party candidate, Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly. They complain of a climate of harassment and intimidation, and that the authorities are working through the courts to put them and their supporters behind bars on spurious grounds. The Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI), the main opposition party, has meanwhile been boycotting participation in the Independent Electoral Commission – the body responsible for administering the polls – which it says is too heavily dominated by individuals politically close to the president. Tensions are heightening further as government and opposition politicians debate whether the election should be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the quarrelling escalates, political leaders (including PDCI members and others who split from Ouattara's former ruling coalition after he collapsed it into a single party at the beginning of 2019) are likely to rely further on firing up their ethnic and regional bases, a tactic to which Ivorian politicians have resorted since the death of Felix Houphouët-Boigny, founder of the nation, 27 years ago. Violent clashes in the centre of the country in 2019 between two ethnic communities with different political allegiances point to possible renewed troubles ahead. Particularly concerning is that ethnic and social tensions could upend the delicate equilibrium within the factionalised national army, where different cohorts owe loyalty to the various leaders who placed them in their positions over the two past decades. Only three years ago, former rebels integrated in the army mutinied, exposing the institution's fragility.

Resolving Côte d'Ivoire's deep-seated political rifts, which flared into open violence during the post-electoral crisis of 2010 and 2011 and have never fully healed, will take years and certainly cannot be achieved in advance of the election scheduled for October. The immediate challenge for the nation and its external supporters is to navigate the current period without inflaming combustible ethnic and political dynamics.

*To this end, the EU and its member states should focus their efforts on maximising chances of a credible election conducted on terms acceptable to all parties, and on defusing disputes as they arise, including by:*

- ❑ Pushing for dialogue between the government and political opposition with the aim of convincing the latter to cease its boycott of the Independent Electoral Commission, and reaching agreement on whether the election should be postponed if preparations are further delayed due to COVID-19. The EU should coordinate its efforts with the Economic Community of West African States and UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel;

- ❑ To the extent feasible during the pandemic, mounting a strong electoral observation mission, which matches as closely as possible the level of resources and staffing for the mission that monitored the 2010 presidential polls;
- ❑ Investing in the training of electoral agents to help avoid technical irregularities such as unsealed ballot boxes or poorly drafted records of official proceedings at polling stations, which have sparked disputes in previous elections;
- ❑ Supporting the April 2020 decision of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which recommended the release of nineteen individuals close to the former prime minister and opposition figure, Guillaume Soro, who have been in detention since December 2019.
- ❑ Working within the EU and with African states and other countries with strong ties to Côte d'Ivoire to emphasise the importance of credible and transparent elections, underscore the importance of resolving political disputes peacefully, and apply concerted pressure to dissuade potential spoilers from fomenting unrest.

### *Key Figures Sidelined*

Presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire are regarded as having particularly high stakes because of the Ivorian constitution, which gives the head of state and his inner circle an enormous share of executive and economic power. Political parties have accordingly come to equate electoral defeat with economic and political marginalisation, for both their leaders and the ethnic groups they represent.

Starting in 2018, in preparation for the forthcoming election cycle, the cadre of senior officials and supporters closest to incumbent President Ouattara tried to secure near certain victory for him by forcing a merger between his Rally of Republicans party and five other parties that together with it formed an umbrella coalition called the Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP). Had they succeeded, the emergent party would have been well positioned to gain an outright majority in the first round of presidential voting. Not all the partners of the coalition agreed to this merger, however – with some arguing that it had twice delivered power into Ouattara's hands in 2010 and 2015, and that it was time for another party's leader to take its helm. When Ouattara nevertheless pressed forward with the merger, his main coalition partner, the PDCI, run by former President Henri Konan Bédié, seceded in August 2018.

The merger went ahead and resulted in the creation of a new party in January 2019, which like the coalition it succeeded is called the RHDP, that is much less strong electorally than Ouattara's entourage had hoped. Its weakness can be attributed in part to the PDCI's opt-out and in part to Ouattara's March 2020 decision to withdraw from the race. While the latter step eventually helped mitigate tensions between the ruling party and the opposition, it accentuated divisions within the new ruling party.

The 12 March designation of Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly to be the ruling party's candidate has not put a lid on these divisions. Many of his party members doubt he has either the political clout or sufficient popularity to lead the party to vic-

tory. Another reason concerns Gon Coulibaly's health; he was evacuated to Paris on 2 May for undisclosed medical reasons. Moreover, as part of the coalition merger's continuing fallout, another RHDP component, the Union for Democracy and Peace in Côte d'Ivoire, a small regional party with a strong electoral footprint in the country's mountainous west, is now split between pro- and anti-RHDP factions.

Opposition groups say Ouattara's government is looking to the courts to help it quash the party's rivals, which include former President Laurent Gbagbo's party, the Ivorian Popular Front, which has allied with Bédié's PDCI. This new alliance poses a significant political threat to the RHDP's chance for victory. Although Gbagbo has been acquitted of charges brought by the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor in connection with 2010-2011 election-related violence – an acquittal that the ICC prosecutor has appealed – he remains subject to a [2018 conviction](#) in absentia and a twenty-year sentence issued by an Ivorian national court for “robbery” of the central bank following his electoral defeat in 2010. Former minister and Gbagbo ally Charles Blé Goudé, who was also acquitted at the ICC pending appeal, was [similarly convicted in absentia](#) by an Ivorian court, in his case for “acts of torture, homicide and rape”.

While Gbagbo and Blé Goudé are required by the court to remain, respectively, in Belgium and the Netherlands pending resolution of their ICC cases, some opposition leaders argue that the Ivorian sentences were politically motivated and intended to deter [them](#) from returning home before the election, however their cases are resolved in The Hague. Gbagbo and Blé Goudé maintain their innocence.

Ivorian criminal proceedings have also sidelined Guillaume Soro, a former Ouattara ally, who like Bédié had refused to support the merger of the RHDP coalition parties, and who had announced his intention to run for president in October. In late 2019, Ivorian authorities issued a warrant for Soro's arrest on suspicion of coup plotting, money laundering and embezzlement just as he was wrapping up a lengthy visit to Europe, causing him to defer his trip home. In April, a domestic court [sentenced him to twenty years](#) in prison for embezzlement. In December 2019, the authorities also jailed nineteen of Soro's collaborators, including several parliamentarians and family members.

Soro's situation came before the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. Just days before the Ivorian court convicted him, the human rights court [requested](#) suspension of his arrest warrant, arguing that it risked “seriously compromising” his “political rights and freedoms”. The latter court also asked for the release of his nineteen collaborators held since December. In reaction, Côte d'Ivoire withdrew from the court. Then, on 5 May, Public Prosecutor Richard Adou announced that fourteen members of the military, including two senior officers, had been arrested in April as part of an ongoing investigation into Soro's alleged coup attempt.

Meanwhile, PDCI officials have told Crisis Group that they are also subjected to regular harassment, from high-level arrest to petty interference in party operations. In December 2019, a court jailed the PDCI's vice president, Jacques Mangoua, for weapons possession, releasing him three months later.

The developments are reminiscent of politics in Côte d'Ivoire in 1999, during Bédié's presidency, when authorities issued an arrest warrant against Ouattara, then an opposition politician, for “forgery and use of forgery” just weeks before Bédié was

ousted by military officers who supported Ouattara. In 2000, Bédié and Ouattara were both excluded from the presidential race, which proved to be the first step in a rapidly escalating crisis that culminated in the country's partition two years later.

### *Fault Lines*

In a country where efforts at reconciliation between sometimes warring ethnic groups and political factions have failed, antagonisms among political parties remain powerful. Insofar as the parties are more representatives of regional or ethnic interests than vectors for manifestos or ideologies, their opposition to each other tends to translate quickly into intercommunal violence.

The last two years have seen a worrying uptick in intercommunal violence related to political contestation, reflecting ethnic and political tensions that almost certainly could be exacerbated by the election. Following municipal polls in late 2018, violence erupted in multiple locations across the country, leaving at least five dead. Months later, in May 2019, clashes in the town of Béoumi, in the country's centre, left fourteen people dead and more than a hundred wounded. The violence involved two ethnic groups – the Malinké, a northern group that tends to vote for the RHDP, and the Baoulé, a subgroup of the Akan with roots in the centre that is more aligned with the PDCI. They were vying for control of the town's government.

Other fault lines are also primed to open up. The exclusion of Gbagbo and Blé Goudé, whose Ivorian Popular Front supporters normally hail from the country's west and some parts of the south, will likely put those supporters at odds with northerners and parties most closely associated with them. Meanwhile, the exclusion of Soro, who backed Ouattara against Gbagbo in the 2010-2011 post-electoral crisis, risks rekindling the rift in the north of the country that mirrors friction between the now defunct Forces Nouvelles rebels, once led by Soro, and several pro-Ouattara mayors who occupied posts during the period of the country's partition (2002-2012) and who had to compete with rebel administrators for shares of local taxation and resources.

The country's security apparatus has yet to be drawn into this year's electoral politics, but that might change. The army is essentially a patchwork of cohorts recruited by successive regimes, which at different times have favoured different ethnic groups. These cohorts lack cohesion and owe their allegiance to various political operators, creating a high risk that the military could fragment along partisan lines if there is a prolonged political crisis. Among political figures who enjoy a measure of loyalty from within the armed forces is Soro, who held the post of prime minister from 2007 to 2012 and still benefits from some residual allegiance of army commanders. As part of its own separate campaign, the PDCI appointed retired general Michel Gueu, who directed Soro's military cabinet when he was prime minister and still enjoys ties to the armed forces, as its new vice president.

### *Contestation Risks*

With political tensions simmering, disputed management of the election could serve as the spark that ignites a sustained conflict. Under current circumstances it is very difficult to envisage a peaceful election and a result that would be accepted by all if,

from the start, the two sides do not agree on certain fundamental matters relating to the election. A delay in the election due to COVID-19, which at the time of writing had resulted in over 2,150 reported cases and 28 deaths, could also spark disagreements if not managed carefully.

The Independent Electoral Commission, which is responsible for organising and supervising the election, could be an important forum for defusing tensions, but only if the parties agree to stand by their positions on it. Three of the commission's seats are allocated to political parties close to President Ouattara, one is appointed by the president and another by the minister of interior, six go to members of civil society who are meant to be independent (though opposition politicians have doubts as to their independence) and four are apportioned to opposition parties. The government granted an additional opposition seat on 4 March to address the opposition's complaints of commission bias. This gesture has, however, still not persuaded the PDCI to join. The appointment of a commission president from the north of the country, the ruling party's stronghold, is also perceived by the opposition as a further sign of the institution's bias.

The COVID-19 crisis also risks derailing preparations. Initially scheduled between 18 April and 2 May, the revision of the voter list by the electoral commission has been postponed and is now intended to take place between 10 and 22 June, with the list to be posted by the end of July as required by law. In its current form, the voter list counts roughly the same number as in 2010, even though the country's population has since that time grown by an estimated 30 per cent. The commission must also provide a complete map of the polling stations and create a comprehensive plan for distribution of electoral materials and centralisation of the results. A consensus must also be found among political parties to choose the company that will transmit and process the voting data and tally results. The new electoral code, adopted by decree on 8 April due to the impossibility of assembling parliament for a debate in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, is still not accepted by the PDCI, which on 18 May said it refuses "to ratify laws that generate conflict".

While an eventual postponement of the vote might help with completion of electoral preparations and create additional room for the government and opposition parties to iron out any disagreements, the authorities' unilateral decision to delay could be seen by the opposition as an effort for the president to stay in charge and would risk a violent reaction. It will therefore be important that any such decision be reached mutually through negotiations among the ruling and opposition parties.

### *What Role for the EU and Member States?*

The European Union and its member states, working closely with the Economic Community of West African States and the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, should encourage dialogue among Côte d'Ivoire's political parties. In the same vein, they should underscore the importance of forging a broad political consensus around the details of any postponement of the October election.

Another objective should be to persuade the PDCI to start actively participating in the electoral commission, which is important both for purposes of giving them and their constituents a say in how the election is conducted, and of establishing a

check on the commission's activities. While the PDCI's participation in the commission is no guarantee against opposition parties contesting the election's final results, the risks of a dispute would be considerably higher if the PDCI continues to boycott the commission, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of its actions before voters even go to the polls.

The EU can also help mitigate risks of a disputed election by deploying, to the extent feasible in light of the pandemic, a strong electoral observation system to the country. Given the importance of this election and the possibility that its results will be contested, the mission should be at least as big in terms of staffing and resources as the one the EU deployed during the 2010 election, which took place under similarly tense conditions. As soon as the COVID-19 crisis will allow, the EU and its member states should also invest in training voting agents. Such agents can help minimise the number of possible irregularities, such as failure to properly seal ballot boxes or improperly drafted minutes that record whether a given polling station followed correct electoral procedures. Such irregularities can raise suspicions of foul play and spark potentially violent local disputes.

The EU and its member states should also support the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights in calling for the release of the nineteen Soro collaborators who have been in detention since December. Their release would be an important gesture that might help reduce growing friction between Ouattara and Soro supporters, particularly in the north of the country.

Finally, the EU should encourage its member states, African partners and other countries with ties to Côte d'Ivoire to first, deliver a common message about the need for antagonistic political forces to sort out their disputes peacefully and cooperate in conducting a credible and transparent election, and second, apply concerted pressure on individuals and groups who might spoil these efforts.

As the 2010 election cycle demonstrated, neither a transparent election nor international pressure is guaranteed to protect Côte d'Ivoire from a new cycle of political violence. But without them, risks of a resumption of conflict, already considerable, will be higher still.

# Myanmar: Rakhine State Faces a Third Crisis

Myanmar has made no meaningful progress since 2017 in addressing the Rohingya crisis, with no organised return of refugees from Bangladesh, and no improvement in the lives of those Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State. Prospects for progress have been further undermined by the dramatic escalation in armed conflict in the state between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine insurgency, which has led to some of the fiercest fighting Myanmar has witnessed in many years. Civilians are regularly caught in the crossfire, at least 60,000 people are presently living in displacement camps as a result of the conflict, and de-escalation appears unlikely in the near future. The novel coronavirus now looms as a third crisis. Rakhine State has extremely weak health infrastructure, and its capacity is already overwhelmed by the rising conflict casualties. The April killing of the driver of a UN vehicle, who was transporting COVID-19 swabs for testing, underlines the dangers the conflict poses to an effective pandemic response. Across the border in Bangladesh, the disease is starting to spread in Cox's Bazar district, with the first cases now detected in the Rohingya camps, where crowded conditions make social distancing impossible and poor sanitation is likely to accelerate any spread. Rohingya refugees are becoming more desperate. With no hope of a safe and dignified return home, many are once again choosing to put their fate in the hands of people smugglers as they seek to reach Malaysia by boat – an increasingly perilous journey as Malaysia and other countries in the region are tightening border controls and blocking their entry due to COVID-19 concerns.

*The EU and its member states can help address these evolving crises in the following ways:*

- ❑ Seize opportunities for incremental change. Prospects for a ceasefire or major positive developments in Rakhine State appear slim, and the leverage of the EU and other Western powers constrained. Nevertheless, it remains possible to achieve more limited change in respecting Rohingya rights and addressing the armed conflict's impact on both Rakhine and Rohingya civilians.
- ❑ Cooperate with like-minded donors to pursue concerted diplomatic action. In a context of limited leverage, coordination among international actors is all the more important in order to defend principles, maximise advocacy opportunities for humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas of Rakhine and Chin States, and push for changes in government policy toward the Rohingya.
- ❑ Stay engaged and maintain current levels of humanitarian and development funding for Myanmar. Whatever the frustrations with the lack of progress in steering the government toward accountability and rights for the Rohingya and a political solution to Rakhine grievances, lifesaving needs of conflict-affected populations and developmental challenges remain high and must continue to be addressed. Disengagement would risk exacerbating structural factors underlying Myanmar's multiple crises.

- ❑ Continue to support the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh. The humanitarian response should continue to be adequately funded. The risks of failing to do so – in both human and security terms – are considerable. The EU should also better integrate its humanitarian and development funding streams for a more effective aid response targeting both refugees and local communities in Cox’s Bazar district.

### *Worrying Developments*

Myanmar’s Rakhine State now faces three overlapping crises. The Rohingya crisis remains unresolved, with no sign of refugee repatriation through official channels almost three years after the mass exodus. Those Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State have seen no meaningful improvement in living conditions: many remain corralled in squalid displacement camps; the rest are confined to isolated villages. All face apartheid-like bans on access to most hospitals, schools are mostly segregated and freedom of movement remains curtailed. Restrictions on humanitarian access further compound their plight.

In parallel, fighting has escalated dramatically since late 2018 between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group fighting for greater Rakhine autonomy. There are regular, often intense clashes across central and northern parts of the state – including many areas from which Rohingya fled or in which they remain – as well as in Paletwa township in neighbouring Chin State. There have also been sporadic attacks in the south of Rakhine State, as the Arakan Army attempts to expand its areas of operation. Chances of de-escalation or a ceasefire appear remote as both sides vie for strategic control of key townships and waterways. Civilian casualties have spiked in the first four months of 2020, with disturbing attacks on schools, medical facilities and humanitarian convoys. Young men in Rakhine are particularly exposed to the risk of violence at the hands of the military for being suspected Arakan Army members; women and children are disproportionately affected by conditions in displacement camps, where risks of domestic violence are high and health and education facilities limited or non-existent. The March government designation of the Arakan Army as a terrorist group has scuttled prospects of peace talks and will restrict possibilities for third-party mediation. The armed conflict has diverted what little attention the government was devoting to the Rohingya crisis, making significant policy steps even less likely.

In the Bangladesh camps, desperation is growing. Living conditions are dire, and with no prospect of returning home and no real future in Bangladesh, increasing numbers of refugees are taking extreme risks to escape the situation by any means possible. As in 2015, smuggling boats packed with human cargo are adrift in the Bay of Bengal, blocked from reaching Malaysia or landing elsewhere. The EU has urged regional maritime states to conduct search-and-rescue operations, but little has been done to save these people, many of whom are women and children.

The coronavirus adds a worrying new dimension to the situation in both Rakhine State and the Bangladesh refugee camps. Although Myanmar has so far avoided a major epidemic, with fewer than 200 reported COVID-19 cases and six reported deaths as of mid-May, it remains vulnerable to an outbreak. Conflict in Rakhine State is a

significant impediment to disease preparedness and response, with little hope of cooperation between the government and the Arakan Army, which controls large swathes of the countryside. Many of the most vulnerable do not even have access to the health system – the Rohingya, due to movement restrictions and discrimination in access to health care; and ethnic Rakhine people living in conflict areas, many of whom now reside in crowded displacement camps, due to their inability to cross checkpoints. The April killing by unknown gunmen of a World Health Organization staff member transporting COVID-19 testing swabs highlights the direct impact that conflict can have on the response. The government's internet ban in eight townships is also an obstacle to disease surveillance and public health messaging. In Bangladesh, COVID-19 has reached Cox's Bazar district, and the first case was reported in the camps on 14 May. If the disease is not contained, it would likely have devastating consequences given the extreme population density, unsanitary living conditions and the internet ban in the camps, which limits refugees' access to information about the disease.

### *What the EU Can Do*

The likelihood of any major positive developments in Rakhine State is slim, and the EU, like other Western powers, has had diminished leverage over Myanmar since the Rohingya crisis began. The EU should continue pushing for accountability for the Rohingya displacement and for review of Myanmar's policies on freedom of movement, access to non-segregated services and respect for fundamental human rights – also preconditions for any refugee repatriation. It needs to be realistic, however, about the impact it might have with this advocacy, which it should combine with efforts to achieve more limited, incremental changes to improve the lives of the Rohingya and mitigate the impact of armed conflict on civilians. Working with national and regional officials more open to engagement and reform is one such approach, although it is important not to overexpose such individuals.

In order to be effective, it is critical that the EU work closely with other donors. While international assistance constitutes only a small proportion of Myanmar's GDP, it still provides opportunities to influence policy – not enough to prompt policy U-turns by the government, but sufficient to generate meaningful openings for dialogue and engagement and influence outcomes for the most vulnerable, including Rohingya and conflict-displaced people. This can be achieved through negotiating better humanitarian access to Rakhine internally displaced person (IDP) camps or advocating for local policy changes – for example, allowing Rohingya greater access to medical facilities and reducing the cost of and time for referrals. Coordinated and unified approaches among donors will be important to defend humanitarian principles, ensuring that international aid is channelled to all communities in a neutral and impartial manner. Working closely with other donors will also allow the EU to maximise chances of achieving the incremental steps described above.

Frustration with lack of progress on policy objectives in Myanmar ought not to translate into either political disengagement by the EU or its member states, or cuts to humanitarian and development support. Isolating Myanmar is unlikely to produce positive change and could instead exacerbate the structural factors underlying

the country's multiple crises: a poorer and more insular country will struggle even more to develop tolerance for diversity and the political imagination required for a more inclusive and peaceful future. Lifesaving needs of conflict-affected populations still need to be addressed, and development aid has a key role to play. An impoverished and less educated Myanmar is a recipe for further bigotry, social division and armed conflict. But the EU should implement development projects in a way that is sensitive to local contexts – particularly in conflict zones and areas in the throes of human rights crises – and gendered analysis. This means, in particular, recognising the challenges of providing development assistance in a context where one community, the Rohingya, is segregated and cannot benefit equally or at all from public goods, and designing programming accordingly.

It is also critical for the EU to remain fully engaged in the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh through adequate development and humanitarian funding, especially given the uncertainties and risks engendered by COVID-19. Donor fatigue is a real threat. The European Commission has already mobilised critical aid for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Much more support is needed, but the pandemic's impact on the EU's overall financial capacity could well reduce the Commission's spending power in the coming years. For a more effective response, the EU should aim to achieve better complementarity between its humanitarian and development funding in Cox's Bazar district, which remains one of the country's poorest. This implies engaging with the government of Bangladesh both to address the growing restrictions on providing immediate assistance to refugees and vulnerable local communities, and to discuss longer-term policy changes that would allow the active participation of refugees in the local economy and community. Should the European Commission choose to deprioritise Rohingya support in Bangladesh due to lack of meaningful progress, consequences could be dire. With no sign of refugees returning to Myanmar in the near future, failure to provide needed support could lead Bangladesh to adopt a more uncompromising stand toward the Rohingya and push more desperate refugees into people smugglers' hands.

# The Fragility of Northern Syria

With global attention focused on fighting a deadly pandemic, the security situation in northern Syria remains fragile and could break down at any time. In the north east, erratic U.S. decision-making in 2019 enabled a Turkish incursion that in turn put local anti-ISIS efforts in jeopardy. The arrival of COVID-19 is further threatening the precarious status quo. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella group of Kurdish, Arab and Syriac militias under the leadership of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), exercises tenuous control over the area. Between leading operations to smash ISIS cells, holding off pro-Turkish forces and guarding prisons housing ISIS fighters, it is already stretched thin. The SDF's capacities may crumble if the pandemic hits the north east in full force. On 30 March, and again on 2 May, ISIS detainees overpowered guards and took over an entire floor of a prison compound in the provincial capital Hassakeh before SDF personnel were able to quell the uprising.

In the north west, Idlib presents another conundrum. The last stronghold of Syrian rebels and jihadists, the province is densely populated with civilians living in abject conditions. And it could soon see a far greater human tragedy. A Russian-backed regime offensive has squeezed the rebels and displaced hundreds of thousands of terrified civilians, many crowding at the Turkish border. Turkish-Russian ceasefires in Idlib have broken down time and again. The latest one, concluded in March, is holding thus far, but it bears all its predecessors' flaws and is therefore also prone to erode. The spectre of COVID-19 makes a more permanent ceasefire in Idlib all the more urgent, since only concerted international action at a time of relative calm can contain the contagion. The offensive has all but destroyed Idlib's health care sector, and an outbreak could prove disastrous.

*European capitals have a strong interest in helping mitigate Syria's humanitarian disaster, while keeping ISIS at bay. As such, the EU and its member states should consider the following steps:*

- ❑ Contribute additional funding and protection for SDF detention centres holding foreign fighters. The EU and member states should also offer the SDF technical and financial assistance to enhance its capacity to prosecute Syrian ISIS members in its custody or under its control. In addition, they should aid SDF efforts to reintegrate released and former ISIS members into their communities in Syria.
- ❑ Revitalise its approach to stabilising the north east by supporting civilian-military governance structures in which local Arab authorities play a central role in predominantly Arab areas. Establishing such structures would require giving the SDF incentives to devolve authority to local governing bodies, including their security services, to avoid an anti-SDF and anti-Kurdish backlash from which ISIS would benefit.
- ❑ Maintain diplomatic pressure on the SDF and Turkey to commit to a humanitarian truce in north-eastern Syria. While the SDF has publicly endorsed the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire in the face of the pandemic, there has been intermittent fighting between the SDF and Turkey (and Turkish proxies) along the front lines, diverting resources from the campaign against ISIS and causing civilian casualties.

- ❑ Continue humanitarian preparations in the event of a regime attack on Idlib and/or the full outbreak of COVID-19. Plan and build aid infrastructure; pre-position assistance; and materially support Turkey in these efforts.
- ❑ Support the COVID-19 response in both the north east and north west, including by increasing humanitarian aid and delivering personal protective equipment, testing kits and ventilators.

### *The North East*

In March, [ISIS called on its members](#) to take advantage of COVID-19's spread to intensify their global war. While there have been no major security breakdowns in north-eastern Syria to date, sporadic incidents of violence raise concerns about the jihadist group's remaining presence. ISIS has maintained a drumbeat of low-level attacks across the region, despite being geographically and organisationally fractured. It has shown a certain resilience, notwithstanding its territorial defeat and the loss of its top leadership. Its fighters have carried out roadside bombings, drive-by shootings and assassinations targeting local Arab SDF elements, in particular. Its cells have also coalesced to set up checkpoints and extort money from traders crossing Syria's eastern desert.

Such attacks aim to weaken the SDF and to terrorise the local population into non-cooperation with the authorities. Fear of ISIS retribution has harmed the SDF's ability to gather intelligence necessary for effective counter-insurgency measures. Residents attribute the persistence of ISIS activities partly to lack of popular confidence in a sustained U.S. troop presence in eastern Syria. ISIS cells have also benefited from mistrust between locals and the SDF – exacerbated by the exclusion of local Arab leaders from decision-making – which gives the militants room to operate among the population. It remains unclear whether ISIS will be able to further reconstitute its local support at a time when the SDF's focus is elsewhere.

The SDF's reduced military capacity as a result of the Turkish offensive raises questions about whether it can keep guarding ISIS detainees. In an audio recording released in September 2019, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi exhorted his followers to free ISIS detainees and their families from prisons and camps. The group lately renewed this call, arguing that the coronavirus is diverting the attention of governments or groups holding them. On 30 March, ISIS detainees rioted in a prison in Hassakeh city, wresting control of a whole floor from the facility's guards. It took nearly a day for the SDF to regain the upper hand and determine that no prisoners had escaped. SDF authorities later explained that inmates had revolted partly because they feared contracting the illness in such cramped quarters. On 2 May, ISIS prisoners took control of another SDF-run detention facility in Hassakeh; the SDF and detainees negotiated an end to the standoff a day later.

Following these events, the SDF is rightly concerned that ISIS could raid its makeshift jails in conjunction with prisoner riots to enable mass escapes. This threat will become all the more serious if COVID-19 starts to spread rapidly and uncontrollably. The prospect that something similar could happen in al-Hol detention camp, which holds over 60,000 ISIS-related women and children and where tensions

flared regularly between militant women and guards even before the pandemic outbreak, is extremely worrying. Renewed fighting between Turkey and the SDF on Syria's northern border would only worsen these problems.

### *The North West*

Backed by Russian airpower, the Syrian regime has pursued an incremental military strategy for reclaiming the rebel-held north west. Its campaign escalated in April 2019; by March 2020, it had left over a million Syrians displaced. Russian warplanes have compensated for the regime's weaknesses in ground warfare, driving the human toll way up. The combined air and artillery attacks ravaged towns and villages, sending tens of thousands of civilians fleeing to the province's northern reaches. At least 1,700 civilians were reportedly killed in these strikes. With over a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) on its border with Syria, Turkey followed through on a threat to open its European frontiers, allowing migrants and refugees to pass into Greece, and thus sending the message that it would not shoulder a new refugee burden on its own.

On 5 March, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey and Vladimir Putin of Russia agreed on a new cessation of hostilities in Idlib, establishing a "security corridor" extending 6km on each side of the M4 Aleppo-Latakia highway, an area under rebel control, to be patrolled jointly by Russian and Turkish soldiers. The agreement froze the conflict along the new front line, letting the regime hold onto many areas it had retaken in the latest offensive, and leaving civilians who fled the conflict with no prospect of returning to their towns and villages. Since key divergences between Ankara and Moscow are unaddressed, Idlib's new ceasefire, like those that came before it, remains at great risk of falling apart.

### *A Role for the EU and Its Member States*

The entirety of northern Syria remains vulnerable to renewed conflict. In the north east, the EU and its member states should continue to offer much needed support to the SDF to allow it to weather the crisis and remain an effective anti-ISIS force. Building on EU High Representative Josep Borrell's call for an immediate and nationwide ceasefire across Syria, the EU and its member states should put diplomatic pressure on their Turkish allies and Kurdish partners to commit to a truce that could allow all parties to focus on fighting the pandemic. They should accompany this request with humanitarian aid to help the SDF respond to a coronavirus outbreak if and when it accelerates.

The EU will also need to do more to share the burden with Turkey in north-western Syria.

The EU is one of the largest humanitarian donors in the Middle East. Support for Syrian refugees in the region is one of the short-term priorities in the EU's Team Europe program responding to COVID-19. On 30 March, it [committed](#) support to countries hosting Syrian refugees – Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan – to help them fight the pandemic. While this step is welcome, they should equally make sure to provide assistance inside Syria, particularly in Idlib, including support directed toward health

and education. The Brussels Conference scheduled for the end of June, “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”, will be an opportunity to mobilise European and other donors to pledge further aid to civilians in Idlib, especially in light of the coronavirus threat. The EU and its member states could also offer direct support to grassroots organisations working in Idlib and encourage EU-funded organisations to focus their efforts on that area. While EU-Turkey relations are strained, Ankara and Brussels should use their renewed diplomatic engagement – triggered by the regime offensive – [to preserve and strengthen the ceasefire in Idlib](#) as an immediate priority. European states should continue to back Turkish efforts to maintain a ceasefire in Idlib, both publicly and in direct contacts with Russia. They should emphasise that an all-out assault on Idlib and a humanitarian disaster there would substantially impair their future cooperation with Russia on Syria-related matters.

# From Bad to Worse in Yemen

Things have been terrible in Yemen for the past five years, but they could still get worse. If COVID-19, escalating fighting and an accelerating economic crisis are not contained, the world's biggest humanitarian disaster will grow just as local and international actors' capacity to mitigate its worst effects contracts. Local authorities reported the first case of the novel coronavirus in April 2020. The virus has since spread, with more than 100 cases reported in ten of Yemen's 21 governorates. It now threatens to overwhelm a health care system already collapsing under the weight of war damage and a lack of funds, while humanitarian aid dries up. Fighting is also on the rise after a lull in late 2019, while national and subnational mediation efforts led by the UN and regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, are largely frozen because of the stubbornness of the conflict parties and a surfeit of interdependent but uncoordinated diplomatic initiatives. The economic crisis is also worsening as hard currency supplies run critically low and the cost of imports continues to outstrip Yemen's declining oil income. The UN and other international partners need to keep their eyes trained on peacemaking efforts even as they help blunt the pandemic's impact on this embattled country.

*The EU and its member states should:*

- ❑ Make Yemen a priority of the EU's global response to COVID-19, including in funds the EU, its member states and agencies have pooled under the Team Europe program, and increase overall humanitarian aid to the country.
- ❑ Advocate and express willingness for the EU's diplomatic service to participate in a UN-led international contact group to help coordinate mediation tracks under a UN umbrella and to more effectively deploy diplomatic efforts in support of a ceasefire and the peace process.
- ❑ Call for a broadening of UN-led efforts to secure a ceasefire and a restart of a more inclusive peace process, encompassing Yemeni actors beyond the Huthis and the internationally recognised government, particularly the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which has declared "self-administration" in formerly independent provinces in the south of Yemen. Encourage the STC to table its demands for autonomy/independence for the south during national political talks, and to reverse its self-administration declaration while UN-led mediation is ongoing.
- ❑ Step up direct diplomacy with the Huthis in Sanaa and the STC in Aden, possibly by establishing a permanent delegation in both locations.
- ❑ Reinvigorate efforts to lay the technical groundwork for Sanaa International Airport to reopen for commercial flights.

## *A Perfect Storm*

The spread of COVID-19 to Yemen threatens to ravage what is already one of the world's most vulnerable populations. The UN's humanitarian chief, Mark Lowcock, has warned that "nowhere else on earth will COVID-19 spread faster, more widely, with deadlier consequences". So far, numbers appear modest: as of mid-May 2020, of the 134 people diagnosed with the illness, 21 are reported to have died. But both the number of cases and the death toll are likely far higher. The World Health Organi-

zation believes that the coronavirus is “actively circulating” throughout Yemen. It says the country’s fragile health system faces “catastrophic shortages” of test kits and other key supplies. Yemen has access to about 6,700 tests but it needs around 9.3 million. Making matters worse, even before the outbreak, UN humanitarian programming faced huge funding shortfalls. Of the \$3.4 billion the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) says it needs to run humanitarian operations in 2020, less than 15 per cent had been funded by international donors by mid-May. OCHA has said it will have to shutter up to three quarters of humanitarian operations in Yemen absent a large cash injection.

The UN had initially hoped to turn the pandemic’s threat into a conflict resolution opportunity. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a nationwide ceasefire on 25 March to allow for a coordinated COVID-19 response. The government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the Huthis and several other Yemeni combatant groups made supportive public statements, and UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths subsequently announced an initiative that included a nationwide ceasefire, economic and humanitarian confidence-building measures, and revived UN-sponsored peace talks. But thus far the warring parties appear to calculate that the virus poses less of a danger to their positions than would political compromise. Fighting has continued, and both the government and the Huthis have yet to take part in a crisis meeting to discuss Griffiths’ proposal. Saudi Arabia has announced, and extended, what it calls a unilateral ceasefire in support of the UN initiative. But in practice Riyadh has continued to back the government’s military campaign and launch airstrikes against the Huthis. The Huthis have labelled the Saudi ceasefire announcement a media ploy and have likewise continued their war effort unabated.

Trend lines point to more, not less, fighting. Armed conflict and political feuding escalated over the first four months of 2020 after a respite in 2019 due to Saudi-Huthi de-escalation talks. The Huthis made major territorial gains in al-Jawf governorate during intense battles between January and March and are threatening an offensive on Marib city and governorate, the government’s last stronghold in the north. Combat has also intensified on almost all of Yemen’s other major fronts, most recently in Huthi-held parts of al-Bayda governorate.

Collapsing truces elsewhere could trigger additional violence. The government has temporarily withdrawn from the UN-led ceasefire monitoring mission in Hodeida, on the country’s Red Sea coast, and threatened to overturn the UN-brokered truce there. On 25 April, the STC, which pushed forces loyal to Hadi out of Aden in August 2019, broke the terms of the Saudi-brokered Riyadh Agreement by announcing “self-administration” in the territories of the formerly independent state of South Yemen. Since then, the STC has begun to take over state institutions in Aden and attempted to seize control of Hadibo, the capital of Soqatra island in the Arabian Sea, which is still secured by government forces. On 11 May, the government responded by initiating an offensive in the southern Abyan governorate aimed at pushing STC forces out of the provincial capital, Zinjibar. The fighting there is ongoing.

The economic crisis is also set to worsen. The STC’s self-administration announcement opened a new front in the struggle for control of Yemen’s financial institutions. The group seized physical control of the headquarters of the government-run central bank in Aden, which the government had moved there from Sanaa in September

2016. The secessionists have threatened to start running the bank themselves, a move that would likely lead the government to freeze its access to the international financial system. Until now, Saudi forces located inside the bank have deterred the STC from making good on their threat. As a workaround, on 29 April, the STC reportedly began to divert Aden port revenues, which normally would go to the central bank, to an account it controls at the local al-Ahli bank. Making matters worse, the central bank may have less than a month's worth of hard currency needed to underwrite imports. Dollar income from oil exports is also falling on the back of a sharp decline in global oil prices. The Yemeni riyal dropped by about 9 per cent in value after the STC's self-administration declaration and has since depreciated further, raising living costs for already impoverished Yemenis. Saudi Arabia is unlikely to top up the central bank's dollar accounts, as it has done in the past, if the bank is not under government control.

Meanwhile, a worsening humanitarian and economic situation will disproportionately affect Yemen's women and girls, who bear the brunt of unpaid care work, are the first to feel the effects of the loss of household income, and also are more likely to suffer from domestic violence during periods of social strain. Lockdown measures may also lead to the reimposition of gender barriers that have lowered in some parts of the country over the course of the war.

### *A Way Out*

Preventing further territorial fragmentation, fighting and human suffering will require a shift in key combatants' calculations. No side seems ready to make the compromises necessary to get the UN's ceasefire proposal off the ground. Riyadh believes that its ceasefire announcement should be sufficient to bring the Huthis to the table, but the de facto authorities in Sanaa argue that a truce must include lifting Saudi-imposed restrictions on their territory's land, sea and air borders. The UN ceasefire initiative includes confidence-building measures that would ease – although not end – some of these restrictions. But negotiations have been difficult, and it is not clear that the Huthis, the Yemeni government and the Saudis will be able to reach a mutually acceptable compromise.

Another obstacle is the surplus of disparate and disjointed diplomatic efforts to end the war. By April 2020, mediation tracks included: the UN's ceasefire/confidence-building/peace talks plan; Saudi-Huthi talks focused on border security and the rebels' relationship with Iran; Saudi-overseen efforts to implement the Riyadh Agreement; and the UN's stalled attempts to get the Huthis and the government to carry out the Hodeida Agreement. The tracks are somewhat interdependent – conflict parties have at times made progress on one agreement conditional on moving forward with others – but there is no mechanism to prevent setbacks in one track from disrupting others.

Coordinating mediation and diplomatic efforts under a single UN-led process would improve chances of a COVID-19 ceasefire and a return to the political process. To this end, Crisis Group has recommended the formation of a UN-chaired international contact group made up of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, the EU and Gulf Cooperation Council member states. EU member states

Germany and Sweden, as well as the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS), have signalled support for the initiative. This group could help identify the minimum level of implementation of the Riyadh and Hodeida agreements required to support nationwide talks. It could also establish a division of labour for supporting UN-led negotiations. Riyadh may resist such an initiative on the grounds that it could impinge on the kingdom's efforts to leave the war behind. But it is increasingly clear that the Saudis, while the most important external actor, cannot single-handedly cajole the Yemeni parties to end the conflict. In addition to support for efforts to weave the different diplomatic tracks into a single UN-led effort, UN Envoy Griffiths also needs assistance in addressing a shortcoming of current negotiations, namely that they are limited to the Huthis and the government. The UN and its partners will need to broaden talks to include other major parties to the conflict.

### *A Role for the EU and its Member States*

The EEAS and EU member states are well placed to assist in the coordination and revitalisation of an international diplomatic approach. First, they can advocate for the formation of the new contact group, and secondly, the EEAS can act as the EU's representative at the group.

The EU and member states can also play a critical role in advocating for a more inclusive UN process, which is increasingly important given Yemen's deepening fragmentation. The UN's current mediation plan is built around brokering a political settlement between the Huthis and the Hadi government, with Saudi input. This plan is increasingly unlikely to produce a sustainable peace, as it leaves out armed factions with the ability to upend any settlement as well as a range of political parties, civil society actors, women's groups and youth whose buy-in and support will be important in sustaining any pact. The EEAS and EU member states should encourage greater inclusion in UN-backed ceasefire and settlement talks. As the main funders of Track II initiatives, which have included informal dialogues on everything from post-conflict security arrangements to the role of women and youth in Yemen's future politics, they are also well positioned to ensure that ideas for these efforts are incorporated into any potential settlement. Those ideas are almost certain to include calls for a more representative UN-led peace process, the devolution of governance to local authorities during a transition period, and guarantees of women's participation in UN-led negotiations and any future government.

More direct contact is also needed on the ground. The Huthis and the STC complain of diplomatic isolation. The EEAS and some EU member states have a good working relationship with both and should consider setting up a delegation in the country, potentially inside the UN enclaves in Aden and/or Sanaa. The EU has also been closely involved in efforts to lay the technical groundwork for reopening Sanaa airport, a key confidence-building measure for the Huthis and, given the spread of COVID-19, a humanitarian imperative. This project should continue and, if possible, be accelerated.

Finally, the EU should begin active discussions over how to increase humanitarian funding for Yemen in light of both COVID-19's spread and Washington's decision in April to suspend tens of millions of dollars in assistance in response to allegations

of Huthi aid diversion. Apart from Saudi Arabia's pledge of an additional \$500 million to help humanitarian agencies respond to the outbreak, no further funding offer has been made. Even counting the Saudi pledge, the UN would need to collect more than \$1 billion to fund its pre-coronavirus humanitarian plan. With the EU working to reallocate development and humanitarian funds in response to the virus under its Team Europe program, it should make Yemen a priority, and if possible, augment unrelated aid as well. Yemen will remain a global hotspot for humanitarian needs for the foreseeable future with 24 million war-affected Yemenis requiring assistance, 250,000 of whom are on the brink of starvation. The EU and its member states have been at the forefront of humanitarian support, but the COVID-19 pandemic may constrain spending capacity since European states are facing their own domestic social and economic challenges. As member states renegotiate the EU's overall Multi-annual Financial Framework and its budget for the 2021-2027 period, they should ensure that their humanitarian and development assistance to Yemen will not decrease, while pledging new funds to the UN humanitarian appeal.

# Hunger Looms in Venezuela's Standoff

Venezuela has so far been spared the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the government reporting, by mid-May, only a few hundred cases and a handful of deaths. But the global economic crisis sparked by the coronavirus, on top of the existing humanitarian emergency and the impact of U.S. sanctions, threatens to produce a catastrophe even if the country's threadbare health service is not overwhelmed by the disease itself. Oil is Venezuela's fiscal mainstay, and its price has fallen below the average costs of production. An economy that has already shrunk by over 60 per cent since 2013 is now reeling from the effects of a nationwide quarantine and a critical shortage of fuel. Crops that would have been sown now, to coincide with the onset of the rainy season, will mostly not be planted, and with no money to import food to make up the shortfall, famine is a real possibility.

Prospects for a resolution of the country's protracted political crisis seem remote. Although relations between government and opposition have long been tainted by extreme distrust, prior to the pandemic there remained a glimmer of hope that the two sides could return to the negotiating table, [abandoned in mid-2019](#). Venezuela had been gearing up for legislative elections toward the end of 2020, and moves were afoot between rival forces in parliament to negotiate the appointment of a more balanced electoral authority.

The government, however, had given few signs that it was prepared to tolerate a competitive election. Early in January it moved to exert de facto control over the National Assembly, dominated since 2016 by an opposition majority and led by Juan Guaidó, who asserted his claim to the interim presidency last year. The opposition, meanwhile, found itself embroiled in a bizarre and abortive attempt in May to topple President Nicolás Maduro with a ragtag military force. While Guaidó denied responsibility, the government pointed to connections between the plotters and people close to the opposition leader and to the easily foiled attack as yet another example of its adversaries' perfidy and incompetence.

Despite these setbacks, [the solution remains the same](#): only a reduction in political hostilities, a negotiated return to competitive elections and the reestablishment of functioning state institutions can ultimately restore peace and wellbeing for Venezuelans. For now, the priority ought to be an interim accord to permit the provision of humanitarian aid on a sufficiently large scale, without which looms a serious risk of major loss of life both from hunger and, potentially, from disease.

*In these circumstances, the EU and its member states should:*

- ❑ Urge the two sides and their main international allies to seek a temporary halt to their dispute over power, which would permit the unblocking of funds currently held by Guaidó's "interim government", as well as bilateral aid funds and loans from multilateral bodies, so as to attend to the humanitarian emergency under UN supervision and with the Maduro government's cooperation on the ground.
- ❑ Continue to underscore that trade in food, medicines and medical supplies is exempt from U.S. sanctions, and seek ways to reduce the humanitarian cost of restrictions on the sale of transport fuel to Venezuela.

- ❑ Reactivate the International Contact Group, initially through virtual meetings, with a view not only to conducting further humanitarian diplomacy but also to forging an international consensus on the steps needed to restore full-scale talks, bolstered by the presence of key external powers.
- ❑ Explore the prospects, particularly at the UN Security Council, for a broader UN role in facilitating and supervising electoral agreements, beginning with the resumption of talks on a balanced, professional electoral authority that would determine a feasible and appropriate date for parliamentary elections and – if possible – a presidential election in 2021.

### *A Troubled Start to the Year*

The year began on a sour note between the sides and has worsened precipitously since. On 5 January, [the government moved forcibly](#) to take over the National Assembly, controlled by an opposition coalition following its landslide election victory in December 2015. As a result of what the Guaidó camp said was a mixture of bribery and threats, eighteen opposition members were persuaded to change sides and vote for one of their number, Luis Parra, to replace Guaidó as chair of parliament. Since this move still left it short of a majority, the government deployed National Guard troops and civilian colectivo para-police groups around the parliament building to impede the entry of opposition loyalists. In the aftermath, the Assembly – whose powers had in any case been stripped by the government-controlled Supreme Court in a series of post-2015 rulings – has been split in two, with Guaidó’s faction forced to hold improvised sessions away from the main parliament building. A so-called National Constituent Assembly, formally tasked with drafting a new constitution, has been acting since 2017 as the government’s rubber-stamp legislature.

Although Guaidó’s popularity had been waning since mid-2019 (when he registered support levels close to 60 per cent at the peak of his offensive to remove Maduro from power), his fortunes revived somewhat with a three-week international tour beginning in January. He was received by several European heads of government as well as by U.S. President Donald Trump and was given a standing ovation as a guest at the latter’s State of the Union address. Upon his 11 February return, he sought to rekindle the street demonstrations of 2019, but the pandemic and ensuing national lockdown intervened; the opposition has since struggled to remain relevant and visible. It insists that the only way to resolve the country’s problems, including the pandemic, is for Maduro to resign and hand power to a cross-party national emergency government ahead of a fresh presidential election – steps to which the government will not agree.

### *Diminishing Hopes for a Peaceful Settlement*

A transition plan put forward by Washington in March, including a clear framework for the lifting of economic and financial sanctions, echoed Guaidó’s proposal but was also dismissed immediately by the Maduro government. Its chances of being favourably received by Maduro’s supporters – never high – were further diminished as it was preceded by [ill-timed indictments](#) of top government officials, unveiled by the U.S.

Department of Justice, and followed by a massive U.S. naval deployment to the southern Caribbean, which the White House explicitly linked to Maduro's alleged drug trafficking. Nonetheless, the proposal's recognition of the need for a negotiated, inclusive transition, with a central role for the Venezuelan armed forces, marked a more measured approach from the U.S. government.

Prospects for a negotiated settlement, already somewhat remote, receded further after several groups of armed men – mostly deserters from the Venezuelan armed forces, accompanied by two former members of U.S. Special Forces – landed on the coast near Caracas in the first week of May and were swiftly rounded up or killed. It emerged that they had been organised by another retired U.S. Green Beret, at the behest of people working for Guaidó. Since the opposition had pulled out of the deal, it remains unclear exactly why the operation went ahead. There is no doubt, however, that the episode has further tarnished the opposition.

Despite growing calls from civil society, as well as from moderates within the opposition alliance, for a more realistic negotiating strategy, Washington and the Guaidó team continue to insist on what they call “maximum pressure”. The assumption is that this pressure will lead to a collapse of the Maduro government and an opposition-led transition, although there is no guarantee that a putative and potentially violent government breakdown would lead to a democratic transition.

### *Averting Humanitarian Disaster*

The economic, social and humanitarian crisis, meanwhile, threatens to become immeasurably worse. With government income virtually wiped out and large swathes of the economy shut down, poverty and hunger are reaching increasingly alarming levels, while critical shortages of gasoline and diesel – along with restrictions on movements – have crippled the existing mechanisms for a humanitarian response and threaten to unleash famine. Not only is it difficult to transport food and other essential supplies around the country, leaving crops to rot in the fields, but farmers say there will be little if any planting. The worldwide recession is also hitting income, primarily by drastically reducing the volume of remittances on which many families depend. In many ways, the impact of these overlapping humanitarian and political crises will be felt disproportionately by women: from deteriorated sexual and reproductive health to a heightened risk of human trafficking and sexual exploitation for those fleeing the country.

The EU and member states can play an important role in seeking a resolution of the political crisis as well as taking measures to alleviate the humanitarian emergency. The International Contact Group, co-chaired by the EU and Costa Rica, has a part to play in both, but the priority at this stage is to push for a humanitarian truce whereby the National Assembly (under a leadership freely elected by deputies) releases the external resources to address humanitarian needs, while the Maduro government opens the country to international aid and places its distribution networks at the disposal of UN agencies and partnering international NGOs. While U.S. sanctions do not apply to humanitarian relief, over-compliance with these measures hinders trade in food and medical supplies, a risk that EU High Representative [Josep Borrell highlighted](#) at a 23 March press conference. The EU should continue to rein-

force this message and engage with Washington in a bid to reduce the impact of sanctions on the population, while also pressing for a relaxation of U.S. restrictions on the import of transport fuel, an essential requirement for humanitarian operations. The EU should also continue to work with UN agencies to address the humanitarian needs of Venezuelans displaced in the region. The [pledging conference](#) co-hosted by the EU and Spain on 26 May is a positive initiative in that direction.

Building on these steps, the EU and its member states should use their diplomatic influence, both within Venezuela and among key international stakeholders, to obtain an agreement to reopen last year's negotiations, facilitated by Norway, and bolster them with an "outer ring" of participants intended to serve as guarantors of the process. Ideally, the ring would include the primary strategic allies of both sides: the U.S. and Colombia for the opposition, Russia and Cuba for the government. The UN also could play a role, initially through the appointment of a special representative and eventually through a political mission, building toward a free and fair presidential election under international monitoring, which the EU should be ready to support with technical assistance and an observation mission.