

Urgent appeal for the implementation of the UN calls for global ceasefire and the release of political prisoners

On 23 March 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued an appeal for a global ceasefire. On 25 March 2020, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called for governments to reduce the number of people in detention and release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners and others detained for expressing critical or dissenting views. On 3 April 2020, Secretary-General Guterres reiterated his call for an immediate global ceasefire.

We the signatories of this appeal welcome the United Nations calls for an immediate global ceasefire and the release of political prisoners as important steps in the global battle against COVID-19. To date, no UN member state has released political prisoners, though some, such as Turkey, Colombia, Spain, Myanmar and Iran have released criminals sentenced for even severe crimes. Moreover, despite the pandemic, members of civil society and humanitarian aid workers continue to be detained in often overcrowded and unhygienic detention centres.

Unfortunately, many governments do not abide by the UN calls, and some are now using the current global health crisis as an opportunity to intensify their repressive policies. Despite the UN's repeated calls for a global ceasefire, military clashes continue worldwide. In various zones of armed conflict, state forces are opening new fronts and broadening their campaigns of military aggression. The activities of paramilitary forces have also increased exponentially, threatening social harmony and security. It is with concern that we observe a number of UN member states with internal conflicts using COVID-19 as a quasi-biological weapon, sending persons infected with the deadly virus to areas inhabited by their opponents or opposition sympathisers.

Already vulnerable civilian populations are facing injury, death, or displacement from military assaults on top of the continued spread of COVID-19 as it kills thousands each day. The COVID-19 containment strategies fail the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized communities. These populations, already contending with inadequate health services and poverty, have almost no prospect of receiving additional humanitarian aid to help cope with the threat of COVID-19.

We, the undersigned organisations, therefore call for:

1. The implementation of the UN call for a global (bilateral) ceasefire. To bring about tangible effects on the ground, governments must respond positively to unilateral ceasefires enacted by opposition forces and turn these into bilateral ceasefires or at minimum reciprocal unilateral ceasefires.
2. The resolution of political conflicts through meaningful negotiations addressing the roots of the conflict.
3. The immediate release of all political prisoners.
4. An end to military escalation and the opening up of new military fronts. The de-militarisation and de-securitisation of humanitarian affairs during this time of crisis and intense humanitarian need.

5. The urgent provision of COVID-19 pandemic assistance and humanitarian aid through UN institutions directly to local civil society organisations for poor and vulnerable populations in zones of armed conflict.
6. The protection of human rights activists, human rights defenders, and members of social justice movements through legal, political, and diplomatic means.

Sincerely,

Member organisations of the RLM (Resistance and Liberation Movements) Network

Supported by inter alia

The Basque Movement

The Peace Dialogue Delegation - National Liberation Army - Colombia

The Kurdistan National Congress

Some Ethnic Armed Organisations from Myanmar

The Euro-Burma Office

Fidel Agcaoili, Chairperson of, and signing for, the Negotiation Panel of National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP)

Dr. Sai Oo, member of the Ethnic Armed Organizations' political negotiation committee, member of the Union Peace and Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) and Pyidaungsu Institute for Peace and Dialogue, Myanmar

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Those undersigning this declaration have different experiences in conflict resolution. The signatories are part of a peer-to-peer reflection and strategy-building group on negotiations consisting of armed and non-armed political opposition movements. The RLM group has been established to explore political options for conflict transformation, enhance the participating movement's capacities to enter into meaningful negotiations, and as a platform for sharing and learning from the negotiation experiences of other movements and from other peace processes. The Network offers their knowledge and experience to assist, if necessary, those movements that have decided to follow UNSG global call to declare a ceasefire.