

BRIEFING | JULY 2020

The role of the security sector in COVID-19 response

An opportunity to ‘build back better’?

From Kenya to the Philippines to the Isle of Man,¹ the role of the security sector² has been in the spotlight – for repressive and sometimes violent behaviour to enforce lockdowns intended to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).³ This has been magnified by the recent exposure of police brutality in the US and consequent protests against systemic racial injustice. But the security sector is also an essential part of an effective and comprehensive pandemic response, and has played an important role in supporting public compliance with lockdown restrictions in many parts of the world.

As the world begins to reflect on the secondary impacts of COVID-19 and the longer-term implications for peace and stability, this briefing looks at the role of the security sector in COVID-19 responses in conflict-affected and fragile states. It is based on Saferworld’s 30 years of experience of working on security and peacebuilding in these contexts. It draws particularly on research into the inclusiveness, legitimacy and accountability of security and justice institutions, conducted as part of the UK-funded Peace Research Partnership,⁴ as well as on concerns surrounding security sector responses in some of the contexts where we work, including Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nepal, Tajikistan and Uganda.

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Implications for international support

Saferworld is supporting security agencies to adopt a community-centred COVID-19 response in these and other contexts as part of our long-term strategy to contribute to inclusive and effective security and justice provision. The purpose of this briefing is to highlight concerns and risks associated with securitised approaches to COVID-19, and to offer guidance for the police and other security actors involved in responding to the pandemic. It also identifies longer-term implications for international partners, such as donors and policymakers, who provide security sector assistance in conflict-affected and fragile states. We consider whether this really is an opportunity for governments and security actors to 'build back better' after COVID-19.

The risks of security sector overreach in response to pandemics are particularly acute in conflict-affected and fragile states. Governments in these contexts may see political advantage in using the pandemic to stifle opposition and shut down popular dissent. Equally, they may use it to manipulate the electoral process: either delaying elections citing public health reasons, or accelerating them under restricted campaigning conditions. When combined with a heavy-handed security response, this has the potential to undermine an already fragile citizen-state relationship and to compound the pressures caused by economic hardship. The impacts are particularly felt by those already oppressed or

excluded on account of their gender, race, religion or other factors. This risks exposing inequalities, fuelling grievances and identity-based violence, and increasing the prospect of instability and conflict in the longer term.

The security sector does not operate in a vacuum and, when it comes to responding to COVID-19, its role should support and enhance a civilian-led, inter-agency response that puts people's health and safety first. So the urgent question – for governments, security agencies and civil society as well as international partners – is how to deploy security actors as part of an effective pandemic response, within the rule of law and in a way that contributes to public health and public confidence.

The longer-term question is whether these extraordinary circumstances, and the response to them, will further undermine public trust and expose poor security sector governance – or present an opportunity to 'build back better'. More specifically, will the actions of security actors in response to the pandemic reinforce existing inequalities and grievances – setting back hard-won progress on trust and accountability – or can they strengthen confidence in state-society relations and revive flagging security sector reform processes, so that they are more people-centred, inclusive and accountable?

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A woman reacts as her goods are confiscated by police on a street in Kampala, Uganda, on 26 March 2020.

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Responses to COVID-19

The role of the security sector in pandemic response

The security sector has a number of critical duties during a pandemic, most importantly to assist the implementation of public health policies. As has been the case during COVID-19, the police, army and other security agencies may be needed to support public compliance with laws or regulations regarding physical distancing, closing of businesses, bans on mass gatherings, lockdowns and stay-at-home measures or quarantines. Other aspects of pandemic response are also natural responsibilities of the security sector, such as restrictions on international travel by border forces, immigration and port authorities.

The nature of crime also changes during pandemics, especially as a consequence of social restrictions that may be imposed to halt the spread of infection. While there tends to be less burglary, car crime and street violence, research into the impacts of previous pandemics, and initial reports from COVID-19, show an increase in violence against women, children and minority groups.⁵ In particular, lockdowns and other restrictions give rise to increased domestic violence. Other types of crime may also rise, including looting, cyber-fraud and online scams. This can put additional pressure on security services at a time when they are occupied with supporting a public health response.

Security agency personnel are often physically on the front line of pandemic response and unable to work from home, making them vulnerable to contracting the virus and potentially to spreading it. They need to be trained to interact with the public safely and be adequately equipped with protective uniforms, masks and equipment. This is also necessary to avoid depleting agency capacity, which would undermine their service delivery role and have an adverse effect on public security.

Concerns and risks of state security sector response to pandemics

As well as the unparalleled threats to public health arising from COVID-19, all governments around the world are having to contend with extraordinary challenges for the security sector. Some governments appear to have responded effectively and sensitively to the COVID-19 crisis and security agencies have played a key role in this. Other governments have pursued a heavily securitised approach in which security agencies have abused their position of authority and acted outside the rule of law, which risks aggravating existing conflict dynamics. In most cases, the response has included both good and bad practice, as governments and security actors seek to navigate a rapidly changing context under intense pressure.

An over-securitised response to pandemics can both violate people's rights and be manipulated to serve political agendas. There is also the risk that health experts are marginalised in favour of government bodies led by military figures or others claiming to act in the interest of 'national security'. When a response

is framed as an issue of national security it is more likely that military leaders and 'strongmen' politicians will monopolise decision-making. In **Indonesia**, for instance, the government is full of retired generals – so it is unsurprising that the government's initial approach to COVID-19 was based on military strategy, and particularly on counter-insurgency operations.⁶ This domination by security personnel generally means a response that is led by and focused on men, in which women are not just excluded from decision-making spaces and processes but which also ignores women's specific needs in relation to the pandemic, as well as those of sexual and gender minorities. This is reinforced by narratives associated with masculinity, and by referring to the pandemic response as a 'fight'.

While militaries can undoubtedly provide valuable assets to support the state in responding to pandemics – especially in terms of logistics, supply and transport – responses must prioritise human security rather than state security. If the health agenda is brought under the control of the military, a state security perspective is likely to prevail over a health one.⁷

In the case of COVID-19, there is also a risk that, having used the pandemic response to tighten their grip on power, the military or other security actors will hold onto additional powers granted during the crisis – for example, extended powers of arrest or surveillance – and will be unwilling to give them back to civilians. This may also include making permanent 'states of emergency' that give security agencies a direct role in national or local governance. Across the globe, national crises – whether health-related or otherwise – have historically often been used to curtail democratic norms and to entrench authoritarian ones, sometimes justified on the basis of flawed calculations of 'security versus liberty'.

Emerging signs of securitised responses to COVID-19

The following examples highlight some of the risks and challenges of over-securitised responses to COVID-19. These do not reflect the full scope of each government's response to the pandemic, but are intended to help illustrate challenges that have arisen in relation to the security sector's role and that are likely to arise in other contexts.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said on television that his instructions to the military and police enforcing quarantines were that "If they become unruly and they fight you and your lives are endangered, shoot them dead";⁸ Philippine security agencies have been accused of beating up curfew violators and putting them in dog cages.⁹ In **West Africa**, conflict data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project showed an increase in COVID-19-related violence, much of it carried out by state security agencies against civilians. By May 2020, half of all violent incidents in West African countries currently not in conflict were related to the pandemic, either as government forces harshly enforced new regulations or as people rioted and protested against these very measures.¹⁰ By mid-April in **Nigeria**, more people had died from repressive policing in place to restrict the spread of COVID-19 than from the disease itself.

While these may be extreme cases, a pattern of politicised and securitised responses to the pandemic can be seen in several contexts where Saferworld works. In **Kenya**, the government's Independent Policing Oversight Authority received numerous complaints of police violence since a curfew was imposed in late March 2020, including shootings, assault, general harassment and sexual assault. It described 35 of these as 'watertight' cases of police brutality related to curfew enforcement, 15¹¹ of which resulted in death.¹²

In **Kyrgyzstan**, the government responded swiftly to the impending crisis in March by shutting down the country's borders and imposing a strict lockdown, enacted through a 'state of emergency', as well as a separate 'emergency situation' for specific cities. The rapid response (which stood in contrast to some in the Central Asia region) was generally seen as necessary, and the widely shared information from government channels helped inform people of the various restrictions and sanitary measures they needed to follow. However, this was also seen by some as convenient for authorities wishing to crack down on political opposition, social movements and other forms of dissent. For example, International Women's Day rallies were met with violence (as was also the case in Pakistan, while marchers in Turkey and Chile were confronted by the police).¹³ Many were concerned that the movement restrictions between and within cities and regions would exacerbate corrupt practices by security agencies, with 60 per cent of respondents of a recent survey in Bishkek reporting cases of aggression, extortion or bribes or other unlawful requests at checkpoints around the city.¹⁴ There are further concerns that contact tracing technology, which stores citizen data, might be exploited by authorities, with breaches of data being reported for phone applications meant to monitor the virus.¹⁵ There is also uneasiness that some of these measures may stay in place beyond what is necessary to contain the pandemic.

In **Nepal**, the government imposed a strict lockdown in March, shutting borders with India and China and closing down all airports, as well as travel between different provinces within the country. Security agencies have been heavily involved, including a precipitate decision to involve the Nepal army in procuring emergency medical supplies.¹⁶ This was seen as a means of quashing political controversy about corruption linked to the procurement, while there were also reported attempts by the government to remove news coverage exposing the corruption, by hacking into newspaper internet servers.¹⁷ This reflects a worrying pre-COVID-19 trend of the increasing use of Nepal's state security agencies to curb freedom of speech and expression, either through surveillance of journalists and activists or by removing news content critical of government decisions.¹⁸

In **Uganda**, the government was similarly swift to impose a stringent lockdown, with the police, army and Local Defence Units responsible for enforcing restrictions and carrying out patrols. Security agencies have been accused of heavy-handed enforcement, including shooting and beating people.¹⁹ There have also been reports of sexual harassment of women by officials taking advantage of food distribution.²⁰ In addition, there are concerns the government will use the crisis to press ahead with scheduled elections despite the restricted electioneering conditions, as curfews and other restrictions will limit the ability of opposition candidates to campaign.

In **Myanmar**, while the government has had some success in developing a contact tracing system and sharing information publicly, it has become increasingly reliant on the police and criminal courts to implement lockdown measures. Between March and May, over 4,000 people were convicted on charges related to COVID-19.²¹ The majority of these convictions were for not wearing masks in public, while others were related to crackdowns on

labour actions connected to the economic slowdown or for COVID-19 artwork deemed offensive to religion. A number of cases were linked to issues arising at quarantine centres that hold migrant workers returning from abroad.²² By early June, over 10,000 quarantine centres had been established across the country, at some points housing over 60,000 people.²³ This heavy use of law enforcement to implement lockdowns has led to overcrowding in already full prisons, with many people facing sentences of three months or more for relatively minor offences.

In March, 67 websites – including prominent sites representing ethnic minorities, which often report human rights violations – were blocked by internet providers at the behest of the Myanmar government, citing misinformation and 'fake news' about COVID-19 as a justification.²⁴ Muslims and Christians have been disproportionately targeted and have been arrested for attending religious ceremonies,²⁵ despite senior government officials and military commanders attending mass Buddhist ceremonies openly and without reprimand.²⁶

The Myanmar military has been inconsistent in its approach, announcing temporary ceasefires and providing protective equipment to ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) in some areas – but in other cases closing down health screening facilities, attacking EAO medics and threatening people to stop them receiving support from EAOs. Conflict-affected communities in Rakhine State have struggled to obtain reliable information about the virus due to an internet blackout imposed to support the military's operations.²⁷

The role of non-state security providers in pandemic response

Security sector responses to pandemics may be complicated by the fact that in some cases the primary providers of security and justice are non-state actors. In many conflict-affected and fragile contexts, non-state armed groups control large territories with significant populations. These groups, along with unarmed informal structures, such as customary courts and traditional dispute resolution institutions, are often the main security and justice providers. In **sub-Saharan Africa**, for instance, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that 'at least 80% of justice services are delivered by non-state providers'.²⁸ Saferworld research shows that non-state security and justice providers may be viewed as more legitimate by local populations than the state.²⁹ Security and justice provision in such contexts is often 'hybrid' in nature, with statutory and customary structures and laws intertwined. In some cases, there is informal but effective cooperation at the local level between non-state security providers and state forces.³⁰

In contexts like this, pandemic response becomes more complicated as coordination, service provision and other public health measures have to be negotiated between different security actors, some of whom may be deemed illegitimate by the state and who may be in active conflict with it. But if pandemic responses are to reach all communities in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, non-state security providers have to be taken into account and, where possible, engaged in the response. Public health measures, such as bans of mass gatherings or stay-at-home orders, will only be effective in these areas if they are implemented by – or in cooperation with – non-state authorities and have the support of community leaders. In particular, management of cross-border travel often depends on the cooperation of non-state actors who control territory that includes informal border crossings.



Police stand guard during a prisoner release in front of Insein Prison in Yangon on 17 April 2020, as part of an annual amnesty to thousands of prisoners to mark Myanmar's April New Year holiday.

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Public health measures also need to be coordinated between security providers of different kinds (even across conflict lines), with security actors guided by relevant health officials. Some non-state armed actors, including certain EAOs in **Myanmar**, have well-established parallel administrations with their own police forces, border agencies and prison systems, and some have their own health departments too. In Myanmar, most EAOs have set up COVID-19 committee structures, which are responsible for leading public health responses in their areas of influence, and they have strengthened border security as a way to control the spread of the disease.³¹ In other cases, notably in **Brazil** and **Mexico**, criminal gangs have reportedly been responding to the pandemic in communities that have received little help from the state.³²

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that some non-state armed groups have capitalised on the COVID-19 crisis for propaganda and coercive purposes.³³ Furthermore, while non-state security and justice systems may be perceived as more legitimate by local communities, they are rarely fully inclusive or accountable. Saferworld's research highlights non-state security providers' lack of gender sensitivity, including in relation to gender-based violence (GBV).³⁴ Survivors of GBV should be supported to access life-saving services (such as medical care and psychosocial support) as well as the formal legal system. This requires engagement with non-state security actors to ensure a more gender-sensitive response to GBV and to women's safety and security concerns. Therefore much of the guidance in this briefing also applies to non-state security providers. However, these groups are often not formally recognised by national governments and international partners, meaning they are harder to reach and engage in a coordinated public health response.

In other cases, such as in parts of **Somalia** and **South Sudan**, non-state security providers are less structured and have little capacity to support the implementation of public health

policy. In these cases, civil society organisations or faith-based groups may be able to play a key role in negotiating ways of cooperating to promote public health measures. Where this is the case for COVID-19, it is important that civil society groups also have access to guidance to ensure they are prioritising public health, as well as taking the necessary precautions to prevent spreading the virus themselves. For example, in Somalia, the Somali Women Development Centre (SWDC) is mobilising community action forums set up to address security concerns in their neighbourhoods and to inform women about their rights, to respond to the increase in GBV during the pandemic. SWDC is also running three 24-hour toll-free telephone hotlines for GBV survivors to report cases and seek support.

Conflict-affected areas with multiple security actors are also at risk of increased tensions and armed clashes related to new infrastructure established as part of the COVID-19 response. New border checkpoints or road blockades could cause conflict with informal territorial arrangements and aggravate centre-periphery conflicts, or be manipulated for local private-sector interests.

Where mechanisms for security coordination can be established, joint action against pandemics – a common enemy – can potentially help build confidence between state and non-state security actors, as well as with other stakeholders, such as community-based organisations. However, this will depend on all sides recognising the scale of the threat and realising that cooperation is a practical necessity. In some circumstances, such cooperation might pave the way for state and non-state actors to cooperate in addressing other health or social challenges in the future. And – with the right kind of support from civil society and international partners – it is possible that COVID-19 may present an opportunity to establish trust that lasts beyond the pandemic period.

‘Building back better’: the security sector after COVID-19

It is important to highlight abuses by security agencies in response to COVID-19, and imperative that they be held to account. Equally, it is important to recognise the crucial role that the security sector has played in responding to COVID-19, and especially the benefits when it works together with local communities and civil society. The principles for security sector pandemic response outlined in this briefing are consistent with the broader approach of people-centred community policing (see box below).³⁵ They should inform both short-term crisis response, as in the case of COVID-19, as well as longer-term public security provision.

In **Tajikistan**, for instance – following an initial period of denial of the pandemic and a delayed government response – Saferworld has been supporting five civil society partners, communities, the police and a government task force to identify the needs and resources required to stem the spread of COVID-19. Once these needs were identified, a community policing initiative was launched to provide personal protective equipment, hygiene products and medicine to community members and police authorities, at the same time as conducting outreach campaigns with the public on preventive measures. The initiative is called ‘*Bo Arzi Minatdori az Duston*’ (‘with appreciation from friends’), and is being carried out across the country. Saferworld is supporting similar initiatives in Kyrgyzstan through local crime prevention councils, which bring together communities, civil society and local authorities (including the police) to jointly prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to address community security concerns arising from the pandemic.

These sort of community-based collaborative initiatives can contribute to longer-term relationship-building between security agencies, civil society and communities, and to strengthening state-society relations. It requires security agencies to adhere to the rule of law, and for international partners to support them to respond effectively based on international best practices, community policing and respect for human rights. In **Myanmar**, for example, MYPOL – a European Union-funded project that aims ‘to assist the Myanmar Police Force in becoming a modern police service’ – has responded to a range of requests from the police to help them respond to COVID-19. This has included providing personal protective equipment, which has helped the police work more safely with the public, and guidance on policing during pandemics. The approach is based on INTERPOL’s guidelines to help the police stop the spread of the virus alongside their regular duties; criminal investigation handbooks to help the police address rising crime during the pandemic, specifically GBV; and ‘safe arrest’ guidance to ensure the well-being of the officer and the person being arrested.³⁶

As emphasised earlier, in much of the world security is provided by a variety of non-state institutions and actors. Because these groups are generally not formally recognised by national governments and international partners, it is harder to reach such groups and engage them in a coordinated public health response. Therefore, especially in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, international partners need to engage with the reality of security provision – involving non-state as well as state security actors – to maximise the coverage of, and trust in, pandemic response.

The ‘build back better’ concept is generally understood as when a crisis or disaster triggers the development of more resilient states and societies through post-event recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Central to this is the idea of building resilience, which is underpinned by preparedness – in terms of planning, resources, capacities, relationships and coordination mechanisms between state and society – that will enable more rapid recovery from the next crisis. This includes policies, laws and programmes that promote, guide and support that recovery.³⁷

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‘Build back better’ is normally used in relation to disaster risk reduction and the term has gained currency across different sectors in recent months during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸ It is worth considering whether applying the ‘build back better’ lens to the security sector in the current context offers useful points of analysis and learning to inform future crisis response and longer-term preparedness. Certainly the upheaval of norms and institutions caused by COVID-19 provides an opening to re-appraise and transform security sector approaches, so that they become more responsive, inclusive and accountable as well as more effective.

The community security/ community policing approach

The community security/community policing approach emphasises the need to build trust and relationships between security providers, local authorities, civil society and communities at all levels. It is often characterised by the formation of partnership groups between communities and those tasked with providing security, which identify and address the safety and security priorities that really matter to people, including marginalised groups – ideally supported by a legal and administrative framework, sufficient resources and the political will for institutional change. This approach prioritises human security, while fostering trust and confidence between communities and security providers, and helping to link local security issues to the national level. Saferworld’s work in a range of countries, including Kenya, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Myanmar, demonstrates how such an approach can work effectively with both state and non-state authorities, and offers a means for engagement in contexts where hybrid governance and security arrangements exist.

Guiding principles for security sector response

Saferworld promotes a community-based approach to security, built on principles of supporting communities, problem-solving, partnership working, civilian oversight and accountability. This approach helps to build trust and confidence in security agencies and government authorities. As experience around the world shows, arguably the most important asset for any government in responding to a national health crisis such as COVID-19 is the trust of its citizens. Outlined below are guiding principles for responding to COVID-19 and future pandemics.

Coordination and leadership

While pandemics are primarily a health issue, security agencies need to be engaged and included in the response strategy for all of the reasons outlined earlier in this briefing. During a pandemic, the security sector should be deployed as part of a coordinated and integrated multi-sector response. This means ensuring that the police or other security agencies act under the close guidance of health officials and adapt their duties to support the public health response. It also allows the authorities to focus on protecting the public from all negative impacts – not just immediate risks to health – and to monitor new public safety issues that may arise as consequences of the pandemic.

Civilian oversight is a key tenet of the community-based policing approach. It becomes all the more important during a pandemic as it underpins trust in the security agencies, which is essential for compliance with government strategy. All security measures taken as part of a pandemic response should be overseen by accountable civilian-led bodies that include, and take the advice of, public health officials and experts. These security oversight bodies should be gender balanced and include all groups in society (such as different ethnicities and religious groups). However, it is not just about quotas; they should also enable the meaningful participation of women, youth and minorities in decision-making and would benefit from gender experts and other specialists who can ensure that policies are responsive to all groups.³⁹ A pandemic response that excludes particular identity groups or segments of the population will fail to instil a nationwide approach and will therefore be ineffective.

Rule of law

The most important safeguard against authoritarian and abusive security practices during a pandemic is to ensure that all new security measures take place within the rule of law. This means that security agencies continue to operate within parameters established by independent legislative bodies and are not simply given free rein to respond as they see fit. Giving security agencies emergency powers requires the establishment of temporary laws with specific expiration dates that can only be extended by representative bodies and in line with expert advice. Such laws should explicitly define the rules and responsibilities of the security agencies during a pandemic and ensure that any special powers are time-bound.

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Special laws must also prioritise the protection of fundamental rights and avoid measures that protect the interests of nationals over migrants or which effectively punish infected people (for example, through unwarranted detention). Temporarily suspending basic liberties in a disproportionate or discriminatory fashion will have lasting impacts on state-society trust and on political and identity conflicts. Such measures are likely to disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, for example those who are reliant on the informal economy for their livelihoods. Stigmatisation of certain groups also risks fuelling inter-communal tensions and creating new conflicts. People infected with COVID-19 or those at high risk of being exposed to it are in need of medical care and support; they are not ‘suspects’ in a crime, as terminology used in some countries would suggest.

Compliance through trust rather than force

There is much debate about whether the model of lockdowns to stem the spread of the virus, as adopted by a number of countries including China and most European countries, is appropriate in all contexts, especially those where social distancing is not possible because of living conditions (for example, in informal settlements or refugee camps) or due to economic necessity. Of particular concern in many contexts where Saferworld works is the balance between restrictions and livelihood support. If restrictive measures are imposed but people have no way of obtaining income or food, rules will inevitably be broken, conflicts may arise, and trust between state and society will be further undermined. Where the public is expected to comply with government restrictions – such as stay-at-home orders or bans of mass gatherings – this should be achieved by engagement, trust-building and consent, rather than by threats, denunciation and force. How pandemic measures are communicated should be determined by the public health authorities. Community policing approaches may be useful alongside wider government efforts to collaborate with community-based groups, religious leaders and other civil society organisations to get key messages across to the public.

The priority for security agencies should be to encourage compliance, ideally through the sort of stepwise approach that has been adopted by the UK police force, which instructs officers to ‘Engage – Explain – Encourage – Enforce’.⁴⁰ Minimum force should only be used as a last resort in cases where people violating the rules cannot be reasoned with and pose a threat to public safety.



A Kenyan Somali woman pleads with a police officer to allow her to go to the hospital at a roadblock on the first day of a lockdown imposed on the Somali neighbourhood of Eastleigh in Nairobi, Kenya, 7 May 2020.

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Excessive use of force will damage public trust and fuel political factionalism, making it harder for other government departments to do their jobs. If large numbers of people flout restrictions, despite them being clearly communicated, it may well be due to economic insecurity or other factors, which require a different sort of policy intervention to persuade people to remain in lockdown.

Gender-sensitive response

The impacts of pandemics are particularly felt by those already oppressed or excluded on account of their gender, race or other identities. These shape individuals' vulnerabilities to infection, their capacity to cope with restrictions, and their experiences of violence during the restrictions. A widespread increase in domestic violence as a result of COVID-19-related lockdowns was noted earlier in the briefing. In many conflict-affected contexts this risk is compounded by the fact that state and non-state security providers rarely intervene in private spheres to protect women and girls; and when they do, in many instances they perpetuate the gender and social norms that sustain GBV in the first place. This necessitates a flexible approach for people at risk of suffering violence at home, as a strictly imposed lockdown might do more harm than good. Fundamentally, it is important to understand how gender norms, roles and behaviours interact with pandemics if security actors are to respond in a gender-sensitive way.

Effective public compliance requires policymakers and implementing agencies, including security forces, to pay attention to differences between women, men, girls and boys when it comes to the needs and impacts of security policies and measures. This means ensuring not only gender balance in government bodies responsible for pandemic response, but also meaningful participation in decision-making by women in those institutions. If response measures are designed only by men, they are unlikely

to take account of the specific needs of women or sexual and gender minorities, and so will be less effective and potentially harmful. Equally, authorities should engage with organisations working with women and sexual and gender minorities, to ensure their responses are gender sensitive and non-discriminatory. Ideally, operational units engaged in pandemic response, such as units established to provide security at screening checkpoints or quarantine centres, would all include women.

Flexibility and responsiveness

It is important that the police and other security agencies remain flexible and responsive to the changing situation a pandemic brings and the specific needs of individuals or particular communities. Facilitating the flow of food and medicine, and allowing essential workers to undertake necessary travel, is a priority. Local authorities may also need to adapt or allow exceptions to centrally defined measures based on the circumstances and identities of particular communities or individuals. This may relate to the practices of different religions, or recognising that different genders might have different circumstances. This includes transgender people, who in some countries have been marginalised by restrictions that allow men to leave their homes on certain days, and women on others.⁴¹

Preparedness

Responding to a pandemic is likely to put the security sector under enormous additional pressure, while physical distancing requirements will make it harder for security personnel to fulfil their ordinary duties. This will be compounded if they become infected and have to take sick leave or are hospitalised. The

justice system will also likely need to respond to increases in issues such as domestic violence due to lockdown restrictions, as well as to potential surges in unattended deaths, which require investigation.

This means that the security sector needs to adapt to ensure that new threats to public safety and security do not emerge. Firstly, all security personnel must be fully trained and equipped to keep themselves and their families safe. It is important to avoid a culture of 'soldiering on' as this increases risks to public safety and can lead to staff shortages due to illness. Changing the narrative from stereotypes of masculine identity – such as how 'being a man' is associated with recklessness and disregard for precautions – is also important and can be done by ensuring women contribute to the design and implementation of preparedness plans. Guidelines, training, equipment, supervision, peer support and regular screening are all required to minimise health risks.

Security agencies and justice providers should also establish systems for triaging their workload so that they can continue preventing and responding to the most important public safety issues and de-prioritise non-critical duties. For example, it is vital that the police, courts and other services continue to investigate cases of GBV and other major violent crimes as a matter of priority, in order to avoid reinforcing a culture of impunity.

Deployment of military resources

Militaries are rarely the appropriate first responders to health crises, which are generally better handled by civilian agencies trained to deal with the public. However, military resources and logistics capacity can and should be mobilised to support a well-coordinated response. Resources such as supply lines, vehicles, doctors, military laboratories and hospitals should be mobilised for the public good, but only under civilian coordination and according to time-bound mandates. In extreme cases, the military might have to be deployed to support other government departments, resulting in them having direct contact with the public. However, the military should not end up 'running the response'. It is crucial that they are brought in to support the civil power, that civilian oversight is maintained, and that such deployments are understood as temporary emergency measures.

In addition, militaries must do everything in their power to cease conflicts during pandemics so that government agencies can cooperate across conflict lines and redeploy military resources to the response. In some cases, this will be seen as a strategic necessity for armed groups, as inaction will lead to illness and to deaths of their personnel and the populations they govern. Armed actors should halt offensives, pursue temporary ceasefires, and create space for health and humanitarian officials (as well as international agencies) to access communities in conflict areas. Where non-state armed groups fail to respond to pandemics and instead double-down on offensives to take advantage of the government's distraction, militaries may have to maintain defensive capacities and will have fewer resources to commit to pandemic response. In all scenarios, special measures may be needed to maintain the flow of food, medicine, other essential items and key workers into conflict areas despite travel restrictions.

Public oversight

The security sector should in principle be subject to public oversight as a key guarantor of accountability. This applies especially during a pandemic when issues of trust and confidence are more critical. 'Security' is often presented as the responsibility of the military or other specific agencies, which excludes wider voices from civil society (and particularly women) from having a say. Civil society organisations, the media, academics and independent lawyers, among others, should all play a role in demanding that security agencies serve the public and take the needs of everyone in society into account. This may include advocating for public disclosure of pandemic response strategies, transparent use of legislation, and open-source information on policing tactics and impacts. In contexts where there has been a lack of transparency, such as Tajikistan, civil society has even set up its own unofficial oversight mechanisms.

Effective oversight also means enabling citizens to report transgressions by security agencies. This may entail specific mechanisms during the pandemic period that are accessible even while movement is restricted, and which monitor government measures that carry risk of abuse, such as quarantining and bans on mass gatherings. Particular care is needed to ensure such mechanisms are gender sensitive and accessible to women. There should also be a safeguarding mechanism, so that people can report any abuse of power by security agencies in the enforcement of pandemic restrictions. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, there is an unofficial public list of incidents of corruption and abuse by patrol police who are enforcing lockdown.

The role of civil society

Civil society organisations play an important role in pandemic response, not just in providing practical assistance and humanitarian relief, but also by consulting the public and making sure their needs are heard. In addition, they can monitor government and security sector activities to highlight flaws in policy or implementation, and to document cases of abuse. Engaging with women-led and women's rights organisations in pandemic preparedness and response is key to ensuring gender-sensitive responses. Legal specialists may be particularly needed to analyse and critique legal measures and ensure that additional surveillance or other powers are not establishing new harmful norms. In conflict-affected contexts, achieving temporary ceasefires will often depend on mediation by civil society organisations to gain buy-in and trust from all sides of the conflict.

Active and independent media reporting is also crucial for effective oversight of the security sector, and for government accountability more generally. An independent media helps to ensure that the public knows what the government, and security agencies in particular, are doing. Equally, it provides a platform for expressing a variety of political opinions and perspectives. The media may face particular challenges during pandemics due to restrictions on travel, with access to political leaders for interviews limited and visits to quarantine centres or medical facilities blocked.



Engaging with women-led and women's rights organisations in pandemic preparedness and response is key to ensuring gender-sensitive responses.



Implications for international support

'Building back better'

COVID-19 has challenged the systems and capacities of all states around the world, and there is no doubt that many states in the global North can learn from the pandemic responses of those in the South. Nevertheless, donors and other international development partners can play an important role in helping to sustain positive and effective responses, while supporting the improvement of ineffective and repressive ones.

In recent decades, national governments and international donors have invested considerable financial and human resources in reforming and strengthening the security sector in conflict-affected and fragile states. The international community is currently reorienting much of its aid towards supporting the public health response to COVID-19, as well as to mitigating the longer-term economic and social impacts. In some conflict-affected contexts where Saferworld operates, international aid that is indiscriminately given to address the impacts of COVID-19 can intensify distrust in the government – and may even result in distrust towards aid organisations – if the spending is not transparent or if it is delivered in a conflict-insensitive way.⁴² Given the challenges associated with the role of the security sector described in this briefing, it is particularly important that policymakers and development partners take into account both the risks and opportunities for the security sector in responding to COVID-19.

As well as helping to save lives during the pandemic, the current crisis also presents an opportunity for the security sector to demonstrate the benefits of people-centred approaches to security, and to re-imagine its role. International development partners and policymakers can play a key role in supporting security sectors first to get the approach right during the pandemic, and then, post-crisis, to reflect on their performance and use this analysis to inform efforts to 'build back better'.

In part, this is a question of affirming the importance of the principles highlighted earlier in this briefing – such as a coordinated inter-agency response, adherence to the rule of law, gender sensitivity and civilian oversight – and providing practical support and capacity-strengthening. If the benefits of such approaches can be demonstrated during pandemic response, and appropriate lessons are institutionalised, security actors could emerge from this crisis more responsive to people's needs, enjoying greater public trust and confidence, and better prepared both for future pandemics and for equivalent national crises.

Integrating pandemic response into security sector reform programming

This briefing sets out general principles for security sector response to pandemics, but security agencies (including non-state actors where appropriate) will need support to operationalise these principles. This could take the form of a 'pandemic preparedness' module incorporated into police planning and training. International partners can support this by funding the necessary reforms and adaptations, providing skills training as well as helping to develop and publish detailed guidelines for frontline officers. Guidelines should be adapted so they are context-specific, translated into relevant languages, and distributed at all command levels and on the front line.

Strengthening inclusion

As noted earlier, pandemics and measures to control them are often particularly felt by those already oppressed or excluded on account of their gender, race or other identities. Measures will not be effective if they do not consider the different realities of men, women, boys and girls. International partners should provide support to ensure that pandemic response strategies, including the role of security agencies, are based on intersectional analysis so that they are informed by, and tailored to, the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups. They should also support the inclusion of women and other excluded groups in the design and delivery of security measures. This should be accompanied by training programmes for security agencies (including non-state actors where appropriate), so they become more gender sensitive. Shifting these norms during a crisis could stimulate significant changes to institutions and practices which, with the right kind of support, could be maintained once the pandemic is over.

Taking a balanced approach to state and non-state actors

As this briefing has outlined, in much of the world – and especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts – security and justice are mostly provided not by formal agencies, such as police services, but by informal non-state actors. As a result, the OECD recommends that 'donors . . . take a balanced approach to supporting state and non-state security and justice service provision'.⁴³ This should include donor support for the security sector in pandemic response. The risks of a repressive and over-securitised response apply to non-state actors too, so there is an equally important need for external assistance that promotes inclusion, accountability, gender sensitivity and other norms.

However, it is often problematic for international partners, including the United Nations, donor agencies and international non-governmental organisations, to engage directly with non-state security providers. There may be an understandable reluctance to support non-state actors, whether to avoid jeopardising relations with the government, or because they are legally prohibited from doing so. There may also be logistical obstacles due to the difficulty of access and remote terrain. But solutions can often be found by engaging indirectly with non-state security providers via civil society, and by helping to build trust between non-state actors and national and international stakeholders in recognition of the vital services they can provide and of the legitimacy they often have in the eyes of local communities.

Strengthening accountability

International partners can support other parts of government, including civilian-led departments and lawmakers, to promote stronger leadership and oversight of security agencies. They can also provide non-governmental actors – such as civil society and the media – with resources, technical assistance and, where necessary, political backing, so that they can fulfil essential oversight roles.

The ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis are still playing out according to different trajectories and timelines in different parts of the world. The role of the security sector, and how international partners can best support it, will continue to be of critical importance in responding to the pandemic. Taking this briefing as a starting point, Saferworld plans to produce further analysis of different aspects of the security sector response to COVID-19, as well as targeted guidance for national and international stakeholders.

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The role of the security sector, and how international partners can best support it, will continue to be of critical importance in responding to the pandemic.
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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Cover photo – Filipino police officers conduct a thermal check on a motorcycle rider at a checkpoint at the border between Taguig city and Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines, 13 April 2020.

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About the Peace Research Partnership

Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a four-year research programme, the Peace Research Partnership, which generates evidence and lessons for policymakers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas. Funded by UK aid from the UK government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict.

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