

Civil unrest has doubled, and COVID-19 could make things worse



Protesters from the 'Gilets Jaunes' (Yellow Vests) movement in Montpellier, France, 09 November 2019. [EPA-EFE/GUILLAUME HORCAJUELO]

Civil unrest has doubled in the past decade as citizens protest against issues ranging from economic hardship and police brutality to political instability, according to this year's Global Peace Index. The COVID-19 pandemic could make things worse.

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While riots around the world increased by 282% in the last decade and general strikes were up by 821%, the index recorded violent protest in 58% of countries over the course of 2019 – a development that according to researchers “reflects a longer-term trend”.

Europe experienced the most protests, riots and strikes – however only 35% of the approximate 1,600 total were recorded as violent; the lowest percentage worldwide.

COVID-19 impact

According to the researchers, tensions worldwide are likely to increase further as the COVID-19 pandemic will negatively affect political stability, conflict, civil rights and violence, and undo years of socio-economic development as nations worldwide are expected to become increasingly polarised.

“Rising political instability is expected in Europe, with riots and general strikes set to increase,” researchers noted, identifying the economic impact of lockdowns as a significant threat to peace, with the US, Germany and France already having experienced political unrest.

“It’s likely that the economic impact of COVID-19 will magnify tensions by increasing unemployment, widening inequality and worsening labour conditions – creating alienation from the political system and increasing civil unrest. We therefore find ourselves at a critical juncture,” Killelea said.

According to the report, Italy, Greece, Latvia and Poland are among the countries least likely to weather COVID-19 well due to economic challenges and poor performance on ‘social resilience’, while Norway, Australia and New Zealand are best placed to handle the future.

Asked by EURACTIV whether the EU’s economic response to the health crisis will be enough to mitigate social unrest in the future, Killelea said that was “rather unlikely”.

Peacefulness, militarisation and terrorism

Iceland remains the most peaceful country in the world, a position it has held since 2008, joined by New Zealand, Austria, Portugal, and Denmark. Meanwhile, Afghanistan remains the least peaceful country, followed by Syria, Iraq and South Sudan.

The greatest improvement in peacefulness occurred in Russia and the Eurasia region, with Armenia recording the largest improvement of any country, rising by 15 places in the index.

Despite the deterioration in peacefulness, more than 100 countries have reduced their military expenditure since 2008, though a handful of major powers have revamped their spending, causing global military expenditure to witness its biggest uptick in a decade in 2019, according to the latest survey by the Swedish Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

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While the report notes significant increases in funding for UN peacekeeping, the improvements in contributions are likely to be short lived as governments are set to direct funds towards fighting economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Decreased support for UN peacekeeping operations, making peacebuilding more difficult, could prompt a fall-back into proxy wars, the report stated.

Reductions in international aid are expected to further destabilise fragile and conflict-affected countries, including Liberia, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

“Additionally, tensions between the US and China are only going to increase with the economic downturn, which is going to affect the ability of the UN Security Council to operate properly on things they may have been able to agree on in the past,” Killelea said.

While the economic impact of violence improved over the last year due to lesser intensity of and fewer deaths caused by conflict, violence cost the global economy \$14.5 trillion (10.6% of global GDP).

The death toll from terrorism fell for the fourth consecutive year, down by 75% to just over 8,000 in 2019, down from a peak of 33,555 in 2015.

Environmental impact

While the number of natural disasters has tripled in the last four decades, the IEP’s Ecological Threat Register indicated that 27% of countries will face catastrophic water stress and 22% food insecurity by 2050.

“What we’d expect is that due to the pandemic’s economic impact, food security issues in the more fragile countries are going to rock the system, which will result in increased levels of civil unrest, in some places going alongside conflict,” Killelea said.

In 2019, an estimated 2.26 billion people were living in areas with high or very high exposure to climate hazards, with 1.24 billion already living in countries with low levels of peace.

By 2050 climate change is expected to create up to 143 million migrants globally, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa (86 million), South Asia (40 million) and Latin America (17 million).

[Edited by Benjamin Fox]

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