

# Horn of Africa and COVID-19: Peace and Security Implications and Possible Policy Options

## Background

Since early March 2020, countries in the Horn of Africa have reported a burgeoning caseload of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). This has prompted governments in the region to react to the pandemic by activating several containment measures including travel restrictions, declaring national states of emergency, instituting lockdowns and curfew hours, issuing directives on social (physical) distancing and maintaining hand hygiene as well as enhancing fiscal measures to cushion against the economic impacts of the contagion, besides ramping up public health capacity for surveillance, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and control of the contagion.

However, it is important to note that COVID-19 pandemic also bear significant peace and security ramifications, which might become overshadowed as government agencies re-order their priorities to focus on health and economic burdens of COVID-19. Relevant authorities and policy makers need to pay keen attention to the potential secondary political and security implications that the ongoing pandemic may cause, and which might undermine effective response toward

combating the disease or in the worst scenario reverse the gains made thus far. In this regard, it is imperative that governments as well as regional bodies including IGAD and the African Union (AU) design and implement strategies that take a whole-of-society approach in tackling the socio-economic, political and health impact of COVID-19.

## Potential implications of COVID-19 on Regional Peace and Security

### 1. Rise in Crime and Violence

As the economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic takes a toll on vast populations already grappling with extreme poverty and perennial economic deprivations, chances that there will be a surge in crimes and other forms of communal violence are high. Individuals and illicit gangs will seek to take advantage of the prevailing situation and the apparent strain on national security and justice systems to carry out criminal activities such as smuggling, robbery, and theft, among others. Already, fears are building in major towns and cities

such as Nairobi over the possibility of a deteriorating state of security. This is because some of the preventive measures taken by governments to curb the spread of the virus have meant reduced incomes which exacerbate levels of vulnerability and/or create opportunities for ill-motivated individuals and groups to engage in criminal activities either for survival or maximising their gain during the pandemic. Similarly, the release of prisoners as well as decongesting prisons might raise stakes for crimes if individuals leaving prison become a thorn in their own communities. In addition, violence between civilians and police is expected to mount up as security agencies seek to enforce bans on movement, curfews and lockdowns. At the community level, competition over diminishing resources and sources of livelihoods may stoke intra- and inter-communal conflicts.

## 2. Bulge in Terror threat

COVID-19 pandemic is gradually paralysing counterterrorism operations in the region. The AU sponsored mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has restructured its operations to allow only essential services to continue. Regular rotation and new deployments have been suspended for the next three months while non-essential staff are working from home. The al Shabab

and other terror groups operating in the region such as the Islamic State might want to exploit the moment to carry out attacks and/or maximise their recruitment schemes. ISIS has already urged its affiliates to rise up to occasion and exploit the ongoing global disorder as an opportunity to attack their 'enemies'.

## 3. Upsurge in Political Confrontation and Disunity

The outbreak of COVID-19 provides equal opportunities for political unity or disunity. In the region, the latter is highly likely to occur given the precariousness and instability that defines the political environment in many countries. There is a possibility that tensions will rise between the ruling governments and opposition parties as they will compete for public attention and trust over the management of the pandemic at the national level. In addition, the outbreak of the pandemic will cause political interference and constitutional impasse in some countries that are approaching elections or undergoing political transitions, should the incumbents invoke executive powers to suspend polls or declare states of

emergencies. For instance, a political crucible is boiling in Somalia, where the opposition through the Forum of National Parties (FNP) has called on the Federal Government to strictly adhere to election calendar amidst fears of possible delays due to covid-19 outbreak. Other countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda also face similar political challenges that may stoke tensions. In Sudan and South Sudan, where political transitions are underway, the outbreak of COVID-19 and its management may trigger fresh violence should these governments fail to address the needs of the people with regards to access accurate information, medical care, protection of livelihoods and provision of food aid to cushion them from the devastating effects of COVID-19. This may result in retardation or reversal of progress made towards transition.

## 4. Fractures on Humanitarian Aid and Peacekeeping

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, countries in the Greater Horn of Africa were already grappling with severe and incessant humanitarian crises including food insecurity, prolonged droughts and famine, floods, threat



The al Shabab and other terror groups operating in the region such as the Islamic State might want to exploit the moment to carry out attacks and/or maximise their recruitment schemes



from infectious diseases such as cholera and measles outbreak, desert locust invasion, economic shocks as well as violent conflicts that have left millions of people internally displaced or seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. As of February 2020, about 24.7 million people were food insecure with projection that these numbers could double due to diminishing humanitarian assistance coming into the region, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The outbreak of COVID-19 adds another layer to these humanitarian challenges with serious risks of fracturing the flow of humanitarian assistance, due to closure of major ports, restrictions of movements, and guidelines on social distancing. Moreover, the economic burden; massive job losses and interruptions of livelihood

caused by the disease will worsen the humanitarian condition in the region.

Covid-19 will also interfere with peace operations in the region, as forces attached to various peacekeeping missions adjust their activities to comply with relevant health guidelines. Should the situation worsen, a further deterioration of peacekeeping operations will ensue thus hampering peace support in some of the most fragile locations in the region. Such operations include the AU mission in Somalia, UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and the UN-AU hybrid operation (UNAMID) in Darfur. Already, anti-UNMISS sentiments are brewing in South Sudan over allegations that the staff attached to the UN mission imported the virus.

### **Recommendations for Governments, regional organizations, international organisations and non-governmental institutions.**

- 1. Add a security lens to COVID-19 strategic responses** - governments' responses should entail significant sensitivity to the security dimensions of the threat to ensure that security components are included in the strategic response.
- 2. Design & implement whole-of-society approaches** – Responses to COVID-19 should pay attention to national or local nuances of the threat and then seek to address these challenges by achieving a seamless integration of policy actions with societal perspectives.
- 3. Share intelligence information** – to forestall terrorist schemes and other transnational crimes governments and security agencies in the region will need share intelligence information with their counterparts in other countries. This will boost security surveillance across the region and prevent possible terror attacks at the time of the pandemic.
- 4. Cooperation and coordination of government efforts across the region** – Cooperation and coordination of efforts across the region is necessary in combating the Covid-19. Countries in the region should combine their efforts to formulate a comprehensive regional response strategy that would allow regional prioritization of risks and channelling resources appropriately. Additionally, regional coordination will enable support for weaker states in fighting Covid-19.

- 
- 
- 5. Create Humanitarian corridors** – Governments in the region should create special humanitarian corridors to facilitate the unhindered flow of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid must be considered as an essential service in the era of covid-19 pandemic. This will not only help save the lives of millions of people threatened by hunger and famine but also contribute in lowering the public health burden of the pandemic.
  - 6. Generate regional leadership** – The outbreak of Covid-19 presents unprecedented challenges ranging from socio-economic, to political, environmental, health and security that has the tendency to cause confusion at national level as has been witnessed in the past few weeks. It is therefore time for regional bodies such as the IGAD and the Africa Union to seize the moment at offer the much-needed regional leadership to coordinate region-wide response in tackling the disease.
  - 7. Support global ceasefire** – Regional organizations, governments and all armed groups in the Horn of Africa need to endorse the global ceasefire call and focus energy and resources in fighting and eradicating the disease.