



COVID-19: UN RESPONSES & PERSPECTIVE

By
Sarah Akram
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The recent spread of the COVID-19, which started as an epidemic and progressed into a pandemic of massive proportions, has the world in disarray. In early March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared the coronavirus a pandemic which has affected nearly all countries around the globe and thrown the world into dangerous uncertainty. What started in the Wuhan city of China now has the entire world in its embrace. Societies are in turmoil, economies are on a downslide and the world has entered into a new era of recession much worse than the ‘great recession’ period of 2007-2008, in what the International Monetary Fund has termed as the ‘great lockdown’.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought devastation and destruction in several realms of life around the globe. Just as hundreds of thousands have recovered, millions have been infected and some 100,000 have lost their lives as of April 10. The number of deaths and those infected are expected to rise in the coming months.

Developing countries with weak health care systems find themselves straining under the burden of dealing with COVID-19 with insufficient equipment and testing kits. Political, social and economic costs of this pandemic are likely to be extremely exponential, and adding to the above, the psychological impact of COVID-19 will be most intensely seen in refugee communities and migrant camps as well as conflict zones. The alarm bells were heard, but what evolved from an epidemic to a pandemic has raised several concerns in the UN as well.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread its grip around the world over March, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres declared, “What the world needs now is solidarity. With solidarity we can defeat the virus and build a better world.” He was speaking at the launch of a new UN report, “*Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the new socio economic impact of the COVID 19*”, in New York on March 31, 2020. The UNSG has called the coronavirus the most challenging crisis since World War II.

The COVID-19 pandemic had raised many questions about the ineffectiveness of the UN and also how the UN is vulnerable and highly dependent on big powers. The greatest criticism of the UN came at the time of this pandemic and how the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is missing in action. The UNSC, being the most powerful arm of the UN has been silent since the COVID-19 has taken the world in its embrace. Time and again, the UNSG has pleaded for a global response as well as an end to all armed conflicts so that nations may focus on fighting the pandemic. On the contrary, the UNSG’s calls for ceasefire have been highly disregarded as there has been insignificant support from the all-powerful Security Council.

The current tension in this period of the pandemic, especially between China and the US over the origin of the virus is highly discouraging. Consequently, the UNSC reflects disunity, which is a blow to global values of unity and multilateralism. The UNSC did not declare the COVID-19 to be a threat to peace and security, which if declared as such would be a very pertinent step. The World Health Organization (WHO) chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has also reiterated the UNSG’s message of coming together to fight this global pandemic. In a recent development, President Donald Trump after threatening to halt WHO funding, has now announced his decision to freeze payments to WHO over its handling of the coronavirus pandemic¹. The US President said that the funding would be on hold for 60 to 90 days, pending a review of the organization’s warning about the coronavirus and China. This move by President Trump is a reflection of his undermining of globalism and the importance of multilateral organizations.

Despite the criticism, the new UN report deserves a serious consideration at this world forum. Mr. Guterres has stated that the disease is attacking societies with utmost intensity, while undermining people’s livelihoods and at the same time, claiming lives. The report analyzes the volume of the outbreak as well as the severity of the pandemic and how it has played havoc around the globe. The UNSG has called COVID-19 the greatest test ever faced since the evolution of the UN.² He also stated that this crisis requires that there should be ground-breaking, all-encompassing, well-

¹ David Smith, Trump halts World Health Organization funding over coronavirus ‘failure’, *The Guardian*, April 15, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/coronavirus-trump-halts-funding-to-world-health-organization>

² UN launches COVID-19 plan that could ‘defeat the virus and build a better world’ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060702>, UN News

coordinated policy actions from the bigger economies of the world and that this is the time for support to the poor and weak people and countries.

The UNSG has recommended a number of measures for the world, which include a rapid and well-coordinated health response system to suppress quick transmission and end the pandemic. While laying stress on developed countries to help the less developed, he stressed focusing on the vulnerable by formulating policies which support provision of health services as well as protecting the economy. The most important aspect that the Secretary General stressed upon has been the choice the world will face after it moves past this crisis. This is essentially going to be a choice between dealing with issues that make the world less susceptible to a crisis or going back to the old world order.

Similarly, the report also gives very dismal 2020 socio-economic estimates that reveal discouraging figures about job losses which are estimated at five to twenty five million.³ Moreover, a thirty to forty per cent downward pressure on foreign direct investment as declining tourism is also estimated. The UNSG called the pandemic “a defining moment for modern society” and called for a new type of global cooperation. Amid all this, UN agencies and partners are at the forefront, while working hard to evolve policies and strategies.

For instance, the WHO and UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund) have decided to partner on a Solidarity Response Fund in order to fight the pandemic, which will be powered by the United Nations Foundation and Swiss Philanthropy Foundation.⁴ As a major partner in this joint effort, UNICEF will lead emergency efforts to ensure that communities get access to basic amenities and health workers are guided properly to deal with this pandemic. The COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund is aimed at helping vulnerable communities.

Just as the global community struggles with this pandemic, the UNSG has also urged for a global ceasefire in order to combat the coronavirus in conflict ridden zones.⁵ The key to progress and a more effective response to the pandemic are only seen as innovation and cooperation between the countries in evolving future roadmaps. Therefore, global solidarity is the solution to a troubled world, which is now struggling to cope with a crisis of huge dimension. This is a humanitarian crisis and a lot needs to be done before it is too late. And since this pandemic is unprecedented in modern history, new and robust approaches to tackle this crisis are largely dependent on sound global responses - the UN can

³ Ibid.

⁴ WHO and UNICEF to partner on pandemic response through COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/03-04-2020-who-and-unicef-to-partner-on-pandemic-response-through-covid-19-solidarity-response-fund>.

⁵ UN chief calls for global ceasefire to fight coronavirus, April 3, 2020, <http://www.radio.gov.pk/03-04-2020/un-chief-calls-for-global-ceasefire-to-fight-coronavirus?fbclid=IwAR2mt-gonFBWGVfC6BiQiOcOHXDB7MFZ5qcNx0eKTzqWkp5KkXwIxEufAJw> Radio Pakistan

be the leading light in this matter. Coming together on a common platform is the only way forward for the countries of the world. What the world needs at this time are solidarity, unity and cooperation.