Coronavirus escalated armed conflicts in several war-torn countries

December 17 2020

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Armed conflict activities increased in five countries during the first wave of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic says new research from the University of Melbourne.

India, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and the Philippines all saw an escalation of civil wars because conflict parties exploited either state weakness or a lack of international attention due to the pandemic.

"I looked at the countries that had the most palpable records of conflict," said researcher Dr. Tobias Ide, a Discovery Early Career Researcher Fellow from the School of Geography. "What I found was that rebel groups try to exploit situations in which governments are busy with containing the pandemic and its economic fallout. Increased activities of the Islamic State in Iran are just one example. At the same time, there is little international protest or support as each country is focused on its own struggle with the virus."

Armed conflict intensity in four countries (Afghanistan, Colombia, Thailand and Yemen) decreased between March and June, according to the study as a result of both state and rebel forces failing to get traction under the pandemic.

"However, there are few reasons to be enthusiastic about this development," said Dr. Ide. "The Taliban in Afghanistan and the ELN rebels in Colombia, for instance, reduced their attacks during the first months of the pandemic. But they also used the COVID-19 crisis to recruit new fighters among impoverished groups, and to gain public support from their own pandemic response."

Dr. Ide's paper, "COVID-19 and armed conflict," is published today in the *World Development* journal, focusing on nine countries that experienced significant levels of armed conflict when the pandemic began to unfold in March 2020.

With the pandemic currently raging in the northern hemisphere and several key states in the Asia-Pacific (e.g. India and Indonesia) and international attention preoccupied with the pandemic that has so far

infected some 71,581,532 according to the World Health Organisation, the findings provide important insights.

"Escalating armed conflicts pose significant obstacles when dealing with the pandemic as health infrastructure is destroyed and the government losses resources to respond to the virus," said Dr. Ide.

More information: Tobias Ide. COVID-19 and Armed Conflict, *World Development* (2020). DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105355

Provided by University of Melbourne