

The Effect of COVID-19 on Peace Agreement Implementation

The cases of Colombia, South Sudan, and the Philippines

On 9 April 2020, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres raised concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic could stall peace processes and destabilize hard-won peace. These concerns are reflected in UNSC 2532. While no peace processes have collapsed due to COVID-19, several are facing implementation slowdowns. In particular, implementation processes that require mobilization of civilians and resources at the local level are facing challenges, as the pandemic has debilitated and dispersed citizen agency and diverted critical resources toward crisis response. In this paper, we look at recent peace agreement implementation data from Colombia, South Sudan, and the Philippines (BARMM). We recommend that local, national, and international stakeholders provide support for implementing peace during this pandemic and beyond.

Brief Points

- There has been no indication of a reduced commitment to implementing the peace agreement on the signatories' part, but delays in implementation activities are reported.
- In Colombia, the Kroc Institute has recorded fewer implementation events for the past few months.
- In South Sudan, the cantonment sites are near collapse, and training centers responsible for training 83,000 unified national forces have faced limitations.
- In the Mindanao, phase three of the decommissioning process targeting 14,000 MILF combatants is yet to begin. All elements of normalization might not be complete before the 2022 elections.

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Introduction

On 9 April 2020, the UN Secretary General addressed the UN Security Council on the risk of peacebuilding reversals in post-conflict situations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 1 July 2020, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2532 echoing the Secretary General's fear. Despite this, little is known about peace implementation processes amidst the exogenous shock of the coronavirus pandemic.

Researchers have found that natural disasters sometimes jumpstart stalled peace negotiation and implementation processes. The successful negotiation in Aceh in 2005 was attributed to the 2004 tsunami leading to reconciliation between the Free Aceh Movement leaders and the Indonesian government. In Nepal, it was only after the April 2015 earthquake that killed over 9,000 civilians that the political parties agreed to fast-track the delayed constitution drafting process outlined in the 2006 peace agreement. Both Nepal and Aceh were able to secure stable peace after natural disasters. While these two cases suggest natural disasters can sometimes open peace negotiations and facilitate the implementation process, we know little about the effect of the pandemic on peace processes. Below, we present the current state of implementation from Colombia, South Sudan, and the Philippines (BARM) and assess the ways in which the pandemic could pose challenges to the implementation process.

Implementation in Colombia

Implementation of the 2016 Colombian Final Agreement negotiated between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo) advanced by an additional 6% between December 2018 and November 2019, according to the latest report by the Kroc Institute's Peace Accords Matrix Barometer Initiative. Out of 578 stipulations or commitments in the 2016 Colombian Final Agreement, 25% have been fully implemented, 15% are at an intermediate level of progress, 34% are at a minimal implementation status, and 26% of commitments are yet to be initiated.

To fulfill the mandate of monitoring and verifying the overall implementation progress of the 2016 peace agreement, Kroc Institute

analysts collected, analyzed, and validated over 4,500 major implementation-related activities throughout Colombia in 2019. For the first five months of 2020, the Kroc analysts received and verified 1,165 events.¹

Figure 1 compares the monthly implementation events for the first five months of 2020 with those of 2019. As shown in the figure, the number of implementation events reported in January and February of 2020 was 22% and 17% lower than that of 2019. Implementation-related events reported in March, April, and May were 44%, 31%, and 55% lower than those in 2019.² This decline is understandable as the implementation focus has shifted to territories, and implementation-related activities tend to decline over time with implementation success. However, once COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, Colombia adopted a series of preventive measures, including travel restrictions. Given that the current phase of implementation relies on community participation and consultation, COVID-19 related restrictions could hinder implementation.

Despite COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, there have been reports of Truth Commissions reviewing 8,000 testimonials, remote communities drafting their own health plans, and cooperation between the FARC party and the government on providing supplies to combatants in training and reintegration camps. Thus, a decline in implementation-related events does not indicate limited commitment to implementation on the part of the Colombian government and the FARC. The low number of events, however, may be an early indication of difficulties

in mobilizing people and resources necessary to initiate and sustain implementation priorities. The current implementation priorities in Colombia relate to rural development (Point 1), programs related to the Substitution of Illicit Crops (Point 4), and the Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Non-Repetition measures (Point 5). Implementation of these programs and priorities needs significant mobilization of resources, communities, and stakeholders. In fact, the 2016 Colombian Final Agreement envisages a consultative peace implementation process with the active participation of the Afro-Colombian population, indigenous groups, women's groups, and communities. Therefore, various constituencies and communities are expected to participate in the consultative and implementation spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions and precautions have severely limited the movement of people and resources in Colombia. Under such circumstances, implementation of the current priorities outlined above, which are people and community centric, is likely to face obstacles.

Implementation in South Sudan

Implementation of South Sudan's 2018 revitalized peace agreement has now entered the transition phase with the establishment of a national unity government on 22 February 2020. In its sixth report, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) – a body to monitor and report on the implementation of the agreement – highlighted that 56 out of 63 pre-transition tasks were either completed or ongoing, whereas seven tasks were pending (see Figure 2). These seven tasks are

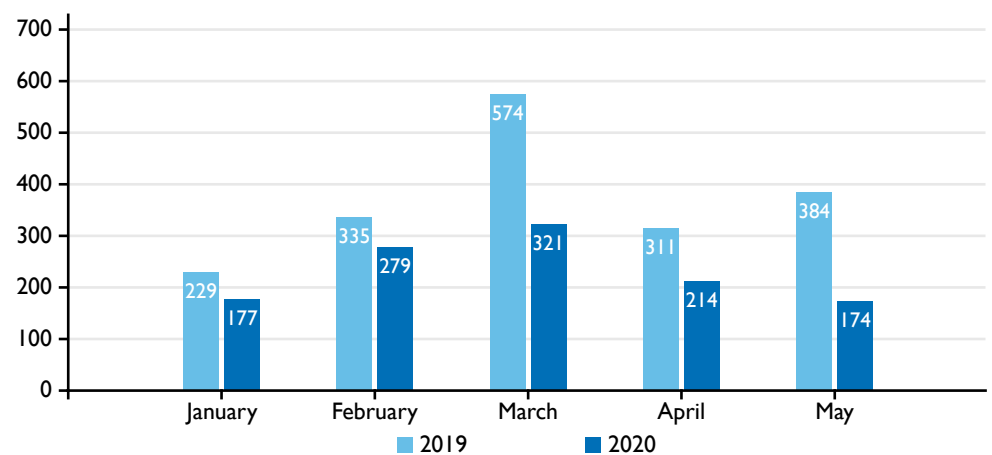


Figure 1: Comparison of major events related to peace implementation in Colombia

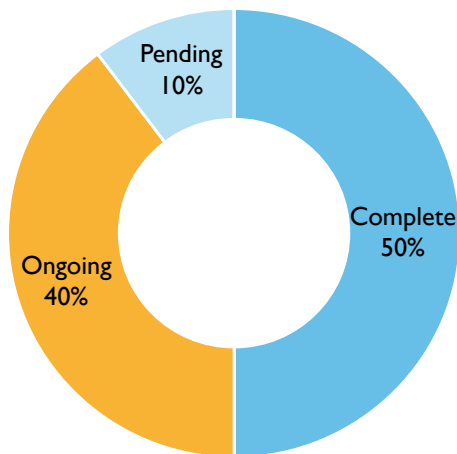


Figure 1: Implementation status of 63 pre-transition tasks as specified in R-ARCSS

key provisions related to the selection, training, and deployment of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF).

In addition to the remaining pre-transition tasks, the transition phase involves a further 186 tasks over the next 36 months. Of these 186 tasks, only two are complete as of the end of March 2020. Sixty-nine tasks were to be initiated or completed by June 2020, but have made no significant progress. For example, out of 36 tasks related to transitional justice, accountability, reconciliation, and healing (Chapter V), 11 were supposed to be implemented by June 2020. Some critical timebound activities have not taken place due to the pandemic, including a workshop meant for the parties to agree on the details for the permanent constitution-making process.

The R-ARCSS signatories are a step closer to finalizing the national unity government. Recently, parties were able to partially resolve issues related to the allocation of state governorship among political parties and appointed nine out of ten governors. In implementing the national unity government provisions of the revitalized agreement, however, parties did not fulfill the 35% required representation of women in the national and local executive bodies. The parties have yet to reconstitute the legislative bodies at local and national levels. The COVID-19 pandemic has further slowed down the already slow implementation process in South Sudan.

One of the implementation activities severely affected by the pandemic is the cantonment

of combatants and their training for the NUF. According to the report from the RJMEC, over 78,500 armed personnel from the state and opposition armed forces were registered in cantonment sites. Among these, over 45,000 moved to training centers, where they will receive their training and subsequently be redeployed as NUF. This is just half of the agreed 83,000 personnel.

The pandemic-related restrictions and obstructions are likely to delay the implementation of this key provision further. Indeed, an early sign of the pandemic's impact on implementation is noted in the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) and RJMEC report. Cantonment sites are near collapse due to the lack of logistics and supplies (food, shelter, medicine, water, etc.), with some forces abandoning the sites. This would further discourage completion of registration of combatants and disrupt the planned disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process. The current state of the cantonment sites poses a risk of approximately 35,000 combatants returning to communities. Training centers similarly lack resources. Due to a lack of medical supplies and staff, not all combatants in the training centers have received medical and DDR-related screenings.

In South Sudan, the implementation of humanitarian relief is also affected by the pandemic. The pandemic-related restriction in movement and the loss of opportunities to earn a livelihood have further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis for estimated 6 million food insecure people. After the improvement in the security situation, it was estimated that over 600,000 internally displaced persons and over 225,000 refugees returned to their communities. This progress has also slowed down since March 2020.

Implementation in the Southern Philippines

The 2014 Comprehensive Peace Agreement on the Bangsamoro has a real chance of ending the armed conflict in the Southern Philippines that has lasted for many decades. After the 2018 Organic Law, the administrative capacity of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) gradually improved. The 80-member Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA) and the interim Chief Minister were appointed in February 2019. According to the

2014 agreement, this transitional arrangement will be institutionalized with a successful normalization process, which completes with elections in 2022.

This normalization process includes implementation tasks related to decommission and socio-economic reintegration of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatants, the creation of Joint Peace and Security Teams, and the implementation of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) recommendations.

One significant part of the normalization process is decommissioning MILF combatants and integrating them back to civilian lives. By the end of the normalization process, an estimated 40,000 MILF combatants will go through the decommissioning process. The first phase of decommissioning, which was ceremonial, took place in 2015 with the demobilization of 145 combatants. The second phase, which started in August 2019 and ended in March 2020, saw the demobilization of 12,000 or 30% of MILF combatants. Two further phases are yet to be initiated for an additional 28,000 combatants. The demobilized MILF combatants, their families, and conflict affected communities are expected to receive comprehensive economic packages. These include protection, livelihood programs, capacity building training, and health and education assistance. Many decommissioned combatants have not received this economic support. The national and regional governments are now focused on the pandemic and the decommissioning process and supporting the conflict affected communities could face further time and resource constraints.

A second normalization priority is the creation of 200 Joint Peace and Security Teams (JPST) composed of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the Philippines National Police, (PNP), and the MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF). The JPSTs are then to be deployed in areas jointly identified by the MILF and the Philippines government in order to maintain peace and stability during the normalization process. The 6,000 strong JPST will be composed of 3,000 BIAF, 1,600 PNP, and 1,400 AFP. As of November 2019, only 473 members (a total of 15 teams) from AFP, PNP, and MILF completed training to join the JPST. Further, out of 11 JPST barracks that are planned to be constructed in seven provinces across

Mindanao, only one was complete as of February 2020. There are preparations to conduct the JPST training with the integration of COVID-19 protocols, which will require additional resources.

With respect to the transitional justice aspect of the normalization process, nothing substantial has been achieved since the TJRC submitted its report and recommendations in February 2016. The BTA passed Resolution 56, which called on the national government in Manila to pass a law necessary to establish a new commission responsible to implement the TJRC recommendations. The government signed Executive Order 79 creating the Inter-Cabinet Cluster Mechanism on Normalization (ICCMN) in April 2019, and the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation (TJR) cluster of ICCMN developed a roadmap for implementation of TJRC recommendations. Except for a February 2020 roadmap meeting between the government and MILF representatives, no significant progress has been reported on this crucial issue.

A successful normalization process requires implementing priorities that are designed to stabilize the BARMM and achieve peace. Given the current state of implementation, there is a need to accelerate and simultaneously implement eight elements of the normalization process, which have taken a back seat since March 2020.³

Conclusion

Peace implementation processes face constant challenges posed by violence of different natures. In Colombia, there have been reports of an increase in violence against demobilized combatants and those who are social and human rights leaders. The Colombian government has implemented the special security protocols intended to protect the demobilized combatants but has fallen short of providing security.

In South Sudan, the signatories of the R-ARCSS are mostly able to avoid clashes, but violent events involving non-signatory groups have been reported. While the CTSAMVM Monitoring Teams are able to investigate clashes between the signatories, they are not able to visit incident sites. Nevertheless, the monitoring mechanism remains committed to investigating the incidents. In the Philippines' BARMM and greater Mindanao region, the MILF ceasefire is in place, but other armed groups have resumed violence after the coronavirus ceasefire. The clan feuds involving the two MILF commanders, local land conflicts, and entry of armed actors into indigenous communities displaced over 20,000 individuals from already conflict-affected and marginalized communities. Nevertheless, the BARMM government is organizing consultative meetings to find resolutions, as clashes like these might undermine normalization and development priorities.

While these peace processes have so far successfully managed to safeguard the implementation process from violence, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced governments to divert resources and focus away from implementation priorities. Further, global financial shocks have created additional resource constraints to the implementation of programs in the peace agreements. Under these unprecedented circumstances, recognition by the UN Security Council of possible reversal in peacebuilding success can provide a stimulus to generate and coordinate more resources in support of ongoing peace processes. A successful implementation process requires the coordination and mobilization of local, national, and international stakeholders. There is urgent need for greater support to help weather the impact of the pandemic on peace implementation. To ensure stable peace, there is no alternative but to implement the peace agreements that terminated deadly conflicts in Colombia, South Sudan, and the Philippines. ■

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THE PROJECT

The Peace Accord Matrix (PAM) project is the largest existing collection of implementation data on intrastate peace agreements. Working at the nexus between research and practice, the PAM project is comprised of researchers and practitioners seeking to promote and facilitate a higher order of integration between these domains.

Notes

1. Some of the implementation meetings are reportedly taking place virtually.
2. The number of events for April and May 2020 are tentative. Kroc analysts on the ground are adapting to the use of technology to verify implementation-related information.
3. These are policing, creating of transitional components of normalization, confidence-building measures, socio-economic programs, decommissioning of MILF weapons, disbanding of private armed groups, transitional justice and reconciliation, and redeployment of AFP.

Further Reading

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2020) *Philippines COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Plan*. 11 May 2020.

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PRIO

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