11 HUMANITARIAN HOTSPOTS FOR THE WORLD TO WATCH IN 2018

Lutheran World Relief’s Early Warning Forecast

By LUTHERAN WORLD RELIEF
CONFLICT IS FUELING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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As a difficult 2017 comes to a close and we move into 2018, we are confronting multiple humanitarian crises that are massive in scale and that will continue and possibly worsen in the next year. We have been struggling with four food crises — in three African nations and Yemen — that are verging on famine, we are seeing historic levels of migration and displacement, and rampant cholera is claiming lives daily.

Armed conflict is the thread that is running through these crises. From Syria to Yemen to South Sudan to the Philippines and Myanmar, we are witnessing spiraling violence and repeated violations of humanitarian law, including targeting of hospitals, schools and civilian residential areas, as well as blockades of relief aid. These large, simultaneous emergencies have taxed the international community’s ability to respond.

The global political shift toward nationalist populism is ratcheting up the tension. The lack of cohesive leadership in the international community by democratic nations endangers not only humanitarian responses for the enormous crises the world currently faces, but makes it more difficult to anticipate and prepare for the next. There is less will and fewer resources for international engagement, a situation that emboldens those who violate international law and human rights with impunity.

The international political and security situation is at one of its most dangerous points since the end of the Cold War, and in such an insecure and deeply hostile world, the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people will suffer the most. As more and more Western governments close their borders to refugees fleeing war, the world’s capacity for compassion seems to be shrinking. These are some of the challenges we confront in this coming year.

This list is not exhaustive so does not include some well-covered humanitarian crises, but rather draws attention to a mix of issues and regions that should merit the world’s attention and compassion in the coming year.
1. THE ROHINGYA, FACING ETHNIC CLEANSING, FLEE TO BANGLADESH

The Rohingya, an ethnic-Muslim minority who have long experienced discrimination in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, have been the targets of violence, including murder, rape and arson of homes at the hands of security forces since unrest erupted in Rakine state in late August, according to Human Rights Watch.

The attacks have triggered a mass migration as more than 620,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar in recent months to neighboring Bangladesh. The U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has called it the world’s fastest growing refugee emergency.

The movement of the Rohingya into Bangladesh highlights the fact that the burden of hosting refugees around the world does not fall on developed countries, despite the well-publicized outcry, but rather on neighboring developing and middle-income countries, which are less able to handle the influx. According to the UNHCR, the country with the most refugees in mid-2016 was Turkey, with 2.9 million. The top 10 list of refugee-hosting nations is rounded out by Pakistan (1.4 million), Lebanon
2. ENDING PROTECTED STATUS STRAINS ECONOMIES IN HAITI & CENTRAL AMERICA

As part of the new U.S. restrictions on immigration, some who were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) due to hardship conditions in their home countries are seeing an end to their permission to remain in this country.

TPS has been granted in recent years to migrants from countries where war or natural disaster have forced them from their homes. It allows them to live and work legally in the United States. The Administration announced in November that TPS would be terminated for some 59,000 Haitians who came to the U.S. following the devastating 2010 earthquake and 2,500 Nicaraguans. They must return to their countries by 2019 or face deportation. A decision on the fate of nearly 200,000 Salvadorans, the largest nationality with TPS status, as well as 57,000 Hondurans, was pending as of late 2017.

The mass repatriation is expected to put an enormous strain on already stressed local economies. Haiti has still not fully recovered from the earthquake, which destroyed homes and infrastructure and killed as many as 200,000 and displaced 1.5 million people. In addition, Haitians have had to grapple with a cholera epidemic and the $2 billion in damage caused by 2016’s Hurricane Matthew.

Add to that the fact that in Haiti — the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere — more than half the population lives below the national poverty line of $2.42 a day. In the Central America regions, there is a concern that the halt to remittances from the U.S. will adversely affect local economies. According to a World Bank estimate, remittances from El Salvador, which total $4 billion, Honduras, $3.3 billion, and Haiti, $1.3 billion, made up more than 15 percent of GDP in 2015. And the departure of workers from Central America and Haiti is expected to have a negative impact on the U.S. economy as well, costing tens of billions of dollars in lost GDP over the next decade.
3. UGANDA STRUGGLES WITH A REFUGEE SPIKE

Uganda has been known as one of the world’s most compassionate countries for welcoming refugees, allowing free passage across its borders and with lenient policies that allow for travel and work. But its migrant-friendly policies are increasingly putting the East African nation under strain.

More than 2 million people from South Sudan have fled their homes in the last year due to the civil war raging in their country, with half seeking refuge in Uganda. In August, Uganda welcomed its 1 millionth South Sudanese refugee. It is now home to the world’s largest refugee camp, Bidi Bidi, which accommodates 270,000 people and has been closed to new arrivals since December.

According to Uganda’s prime minister, the influx is placing tremendous strain on the country’s services and infrastructure. The refugee population is overwhelming an already overburdened health care system that lacks enough doctors, nurses and clinics to adequately treat the swelling numbers, particularly children and women who need maternity care. Humanitarian workers are struggling to provide adequate food, water and shelter, as well as access to education for children. With violence in South Sudan continuing to spiral, the refugee influx will likely continue at least into the near
A specimen of coffee leaf rust. Sean Hawkey for LWR

**HUNGER & FOOD SECURITY**

4. **DISEASES & PESTS ARE DEVASTATING CROPS**

Among the greatest threats to global food security are the pests and plant diseases that ravage farmers’ precious crops and deprive them of both their livelihood and their family’s nutrition. According to the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), border-breaching plant pests and diseases have increased dramatically in recent years, fueled by the effects of climate change and rapidly spread thanks to the mobility fostered by globalization and trade. The FAO estimates that plant pests and diseases reduce the crop yield each year by between 20 percent and 40 percent. These are among the challenges that can impoverish and displace smallholder farming
communities threatened by uncertain rains, more intense natural disasters and land tenure challenges.

Here are some of the diseases and pests that are causing the most concern:

- Fall Armyworm mostly destroys maize crops, but also consumes rice, sorghum, millet, sugarcane, vegetable crops and cotton. It is native to tropical and subtropical regions in North and South America, but was detected in Africa for the first time in 2016 and is spreading rapidly, including nearly all of Southern Africa, and several countries in West, Central and East Africa. It has the potential to spread to Asia and the Mediterranean.
- Coffee leaf rust is characterized by yellow spots on foliage that eventually withers the trees. The only remedy farmers have is to destroy the affected trees. It has struck half the coffee-producing areas in the countries of Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Panama. El Salvador saw coffee production fall by 70 percent between 2010 and 2014, the years of greatest infestation. During the same period, production fell by 23 percent in Honduras, 18 percent in Guatemala and 11 percent in Nicaragua.
- Panama disease is a fungus threatening the world’s banana supply, currently made up nearly completely by a single variety called Cavendish. A different strain of the disease wiped out the world’s banana supply in the 1960s and led to the extinction of the most common variety at that time. This strain started in Malaysia in the 90s, and spread to Africa in 2013.

5. IN YEMEN, USING FOOD AS A WEAPON

Although it once lurked below the public radar, the conflict in Yemen is now being recognized as the world’s worst humanitarian disaster. The prospects for 2018 are grim for a resolution to this conflict and an end to the suffering of the Yemeni population.

The Saudi-led coalition, with material support from the U.S., has conducted an indiscriminate bombing campaign that has destroyed public infrastructure and claimed thousands of civilian lives. The misery caused by the chaos on the ground has triggered an epidemic of cholera that has sickened nearly 1 million people. And a protracted Saudi blockade of Yemeni ports of entry prevented life-saving aid from reaching the war’s victims.

The interests of the U.S. are not best served by support for acts that may violate international humanitarian law and deny relief to victims of this conflict, seen by
some as part of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Rather we should take a more constructive role as a peacemaker by supporting a ceasefire, advocating for unfettered humanitarian access, and working toward a negotiated settlement. The agreement would provide for a power-sharing arrangement that will enable all segments of society to be represented in the governance of a stable and sovereign Yemen.

THE THREAT FROM EXTREMISM

6. AS ISIS LEAVES IRAQ, KURDISH TENSIONS ESCALATE

The people of Northern Iraq suffered through a brutal 3-year occupation by ISIS that included widespread bombing, using civilians as human shields, summary executions and an atmosphere of terror to intimidate and subdue the populace. In and around
the city of Mosul, thousands of civilians perished, 900,000 fled and much of the city has been leveled.

The liberation of Mosul in July 2017 promised to bring some relief and a space for the brutalized children and adults to recover, to deal with psychological trauma and to resume livelihoods that had been put on hold. However, the threat of armed conflict persists.

While in the past year Islamic State fighters have been routed from many areas, including Mosul, they maintain strongholds in swaths of Syria and Iraq and continue to terrorize civilians. And new violence is erupting as a result of the September 2017 referendum by the Kurdish population to separate from Iraq, a move that has Iraq, Iran and Turkey all threatening military action. Until all parties can reach a satisfactory resolution of the Kurdish issue, a lasting peace will continue to elude Northern Iraq.

7. WEST AFRICA’S SAHEL: A CROSSROADS FOR EXTREMISTS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Violent extremism is a present and growing threat in the Sahel, a belt running across the continent immediately south of the Sahara Desert that includes Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and parts of Nigeria among others. This is happening in a region that struggles with recurrent food and nutrition crises. The nations of the Sahel are among the poorest and least developed in the world. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are among the nations with the lowest rating in the U.N. Human Development Index.

Affiliates of both al Qaeda and ISIS use the nations of the Sahel as bridges to move fighters and resources between North and sub-Saharan Africa. Centuries-old trade and migration routes that have linked sub-Saharan Africa with North Africa, and ultimately the Middle East and Europe, are increasingly being used for trade in illegal drugs and trafficking in persons in a vacuum left by conflict and weak governance. A rise in the movement of illegal weapons and armed groups can be traced to the fall of Moammar Gadhafi’s regime in Libya, and the invasion of northern Mali by a coalition of jihadis, ethnic militias and opportunists. The proceeds of many of these illicit transactions fund recruitment of young people to commit further violent acts against security forces and local populations, according to UN officials.

High-profile attacks by extremist groups in Niger, including the deaths of four U.S. servicemen, called attention to the threat of terrorism and raised questions about the purpose of the increased U.S. military presence in the Sahel more generally, which
members of Congress admitted they had not focused on (there are more than 800 U.S. troops in Niger alone). That focus is likely to grow in the coming year.

8. ISIS GAINS A FOOTHOLD IN THE PHILIPPINES

In late May 2017, an ISIS-affiliated group of local rebels, seized city of Marawi on the island of Mindanao and held siege for five months in the face of a furious Philippines military offensive. The battle caused significant destruction of homes and commercial buildings, and more than 350,000 people from Marawi and surrounding areas were displaced from their homes during the siege. The prolonged battle was a propaganda victory for the Maute rebels and an ominous sign of the group’s military capability.

Mindanao, home of most of the Philippines’ minority Muslim population, has a decades-long history of Islamic militancy. But the rise of ISIS-inspired groups has even sparked opposition among the longstanding rebel groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Moro National Liberation Front, which condemned the siege and reiterated their commitment to what has been a stalled peace process.

Alongside this new opportunity to press for long-term peace, threats remain. Although the leaders of the rebellion were killed, a considerable number of fighters remain, and could regroup for future combat. In addition, President Rodrigo Duterte’s counterterrorism campaign could further alienate civilian populations and create more sympathy for ISIS-related terror groups if it leads to widespread human rights violations. And the rebuilding process for Marawi presents both risk and opportunity for the Philippines government. If the residents whose homes were destroyed don't receive sufficient support, their disaffection could be fertile ground for extremist recruitment or support.

POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Zahida Al-Mohammed, a Syrian refugee, in front of her family’s shelter in a village in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. ACT/Paul Jeffrey
9. LEBANON: AN ARENA FOR SAUDI VS. IRAN TUG OF WAR

Lebanon, a small country that has been both a cultural and economic center of the Middle East, as well as a battlefield for its conflicts, is once again facing a political crisis that threatens to escalate. This situation is threatening the always restive balance among the three factions that share power in Lebanon: Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, and Maronite Christians.

Essentially, Lebanon has become an arena where the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for hegemony in the Middle East is playing out. The Saudis are seeking to counter Iran’s influence in the region, and specifically in Lebanon, by curbing its ally, Hezbollah.

In early November, Saudi Arabia decided to flex its muscle by summoning Lebanon’s Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a longtime ally of the kingdom, and forcing him to resign his post. This followed the launch of a ballistic missile from Yemen that landed in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. The Saudis blamed Hezbollah, and its Iranian sponsors, which are backing the rebel Houthis in the conflict in Yemen against a Saudi-led military coalition.
The situation remains fraught. Hariri returned to the country and with intervention from the French and support from the U.S., had his resignation suspended. However, the Saudis still have some moves at their disposal to pressure Lebanon to curb Hezbollah’s regional engagements. These include expelling Lebanese nationals working in Saudi Arabia or withdrawing Saudi funds from Lebanese financial institutions. Either move would cause major economic and political disruption.

The humanitarian implications of a crisis in Lebanon are immense. It is accommodating more than 1 million refugees from Syria and approximately 280,000 long-term Palestinian refugees in a country that had a population of 4.4 million. The influx has strained Lebanon’s infrastructure and has raised tensions. According to Human Rights Watch, residency policies introduced in January 2015 caused an estimated 70 percent of Syrians living in Lebanon to lose legal status, restricting their movement and their ability to work, access healthcare and send their children to school.

10. ZIMBABWE, POST-MUGABE: WHAT MAY BE NEXT

With the ouster of Robert Mugabe, who led Zimbabwe with an iron fist since it gained its independence with the end of white-minority rule in 1980, former vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa has assumed leadership of the country.

Following the military coup that led to Mugabe’s removal, thousands of people participated in public demonstrations in a rare display of popular political expression of dissatisfaction at the social, economic and political conditions they have endured. Once an exporter of food, Zimbabwe’s economy has collapsed under Mugabe, with 63 percent of its population living in poverty, and stunting affecting 27 percent of children. Hyperinflation has been so severe that the government at one point had to adopt the U.S. dollar as currency.

But will the transition in power lead to meaningful change? If it turns ugly with dashed expectations, it could trigger a major humanitarian crisis.

Some expressed hope that Mnangagwa would usher in political reforms. “The people have spoken. The voice of the people is the voice of God,” he told supporters upon his return from South Africa, where he had sought refuge after Mugabe ousted him in early November. “Today we are witnessing the beginning of a new and unfolding democracy.”

But indications are that with Mnangagwa, a longtime Mugabe aide who led his security forces for the repressive regime, Mugabe’s policies will continue. Mnangagwa
filled cabinet posts with his fellow ZANU-PF party members and senior soldiers, shutting out members of the political opposition. Observers believe that elections will likely be held in 2018, perhaps as soon as August, but do not expect them to be fair and open.

11. VENEZUELA ON THE BRINK

Venezuela makes a repeat appearance from last year’s Early Warning Forecast because, if anything, its risk of becoming a failing state has only increased. In the past year, its miserable social, political and economic conditions have gotten worse. Crime and violence are spiraling, and the capital Caracas has become one of the world’s most violent cities. More than 130 people have been killed in 2017 in demonstrations against the government of Nicolás Maduro, which at their height in the late spring and early summer saw hundreds of thousands take to the streets. In addition, the economic and social conditions has triggered a health care crisis. According to a report in the medical journal The Lancet, “Maternal and infant mortality have skyrocketed in Venezuela in the past two years, and diphtheria and malaria, diseases that were once controlled, are on the rise.”

As we had feared, tens of thousands of Venezuelans have fled their country for neighboring Brazil and Colombia, which face their own difficulties, with Brazil grappling with an economic crisis and Colombia implementing the provisions of its peace accords.

The U.S. has imposed sanctions on a dozen Venezuelan officials, but these are not seen to be having any significant impact. In August, President Trump threatened military action, a move quickly condemned by U.S. allies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Many observers believe that for any action against Venezuela to be effective, it must involve economic and diplomatic sanctions supported regionally, including the governments of Argentina, Colombia, Canada and Mexico.

DEVELOPING SITUATIONS

International affairs are always fluid, and there have been several humanitarian flare-ups that have occurred as we have compiled this list that also merit consideration.

In Honduras, the results of the recent presidential election are in dispute, and protests have erupted that have claimed at least 14 lives, according to Amnesty International. Supporters of presidential challenger Salvador Nasralla are raising credible allegations of electoral improprieties that favored the incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernandez, who had been ineligible for a second term until the
Supreme Court populated with his appointees ruled otherwise. The Organization of American States have called for new elections, adding to a chorus of voices questioning the results. This unrest threatens to further destabilize a nation that already had one of the highest murder rates in the world.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), fighters from the rebel Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed 14 U.N. peacekeepers from Tanzania in a December 7 attack in North Kivu in what was the deadliest assault on U.N. troops in 25 years. Five DRC troops were also killed. The DRC has struggled with decades of conflict, which has forced more than 4 million people to flee their homes, the highest total of internally displaced people in Africa. The last several months has seen a troubling increase in violence, particularly in clashes between government forces and militia groups, as well as inter-ethnic violence. One U.N. peacekeeper was killed in September, and two others were killed in October in an attack also attributed to the ADF. The election to select a successor to President Joseph Kabila was originally scheduled for 2016, but was delayed with ensuing political turmoil. It has been pushed to at least 2018, and perhaps later.