CONFLICT & CLIMATE: DRIVERS OF DISASTER

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INTRODUCTION

BY AMBASSADOR DANIEL V. SPECKHARD, PRESIDENT & CEO

Conflict and climate change . . . These will be two of the most critical driving forces behind humanitarian emergencies over the next year and into the foreseeable future, even if their effects are indirect.

Armed conflict continues to cause some of the world’s largest and most direct humanitarian crises, including the war in Yemen, the ongoing conflict in Syria and fighting in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is the source of the highest levels of displacement on record, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. An unprecedented 65.3 million people have been forced from their homes, more than half of them children.

The world is a more dangerous and violent place by several measures. The Global Peace Index, which uses 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators to monitor world conflict, saw its fourth consecutive yearly decline in peacefulness last year. The same study found that effects of violence and the measures taken to address it have had a $14.6 trillion impact on the global economy. Imagine if a fraction of that cost was devoted to addressing global hunger.

Increasingly, these armed conflicts are affecting civilians, either as targets or collateral damage as those who wage war are losing respect for the safeguards enshrined in international law. Conflicts are dragging on for years, generating destructive war economies that act as a kind of development in reverse. They also result in mass displacements of affected populations, hastening civilian deaths due to disease and malnutrition as they tax the capacity of host communities and international agencies to respond. From the trafficking of people, weapons and minerals — currently booming criminal industries — to the rise of right-wing nationalism in Europe, the ripple effects of conflict can be seen across the world.

Like violent conflict, the threat posed by climate change has become a present tragedy. Two prominent studies released at the end of 2018 highlighted the toll climate change is beginning to take now, and the dire implications we face if we don’t take immediate action. A report by 13 U.S. federal agencies said climate change is already having a damaging impact and could slash up to 10 percent of GDP by the end of this century. And an article in the respected medical journal The Lancet warns that rising heat — as the result of climate change — is increasing health risks, especially among the elderly and other vulnerable people living in urban areas. It also highlights increases in diseases like dengue fever, which are more easily transmitted with even small elevations in temperature and precipitation.
Climate change has also been identified as a major driver behind the recent increase in global hunger, after years of promising decline, as well as the cause of severe food crises. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization’s 2018 global food security report, “The cumulative effect of changes in climate is undermining all dimensions of food security — food availability, access, utilization and stability.” The negative impact of climate change on global food production, its impact on food security and livelihoods, and increased degradation of natural resources all makes this a vicious circle that threatens to spiral downward without immediate, decisive action.

This 2019 Early Warning Forecast focuses on several countries and regions that are cause for concern, but also highlights trends in weather-related disasters and the shrinking humanitarian space. As with past editions, this Early Warning Forecast is not comprehensive, but singles out those specific crises or issues that will have ripple effects well into the coming years.

Here are our areas of focus for the 2019 Early Warning Forecast:

1. YEMEN: THE WORLD’S WORST HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

We enter 2019 confronted with the possibility that the humanitarian crisis in Yemen could become an epic tragedy, as the U.N. warns that upward of 14 million people could be at risk of starvation in what would be the worst famine in 100 years.
A civil war that has been raging in Yemen since 2014 escalated in March 2015 with a Saudi-led aerial bombing campaign conducted with the assistance of U.S. material and logistical support. While the grievances of the Shia Houthi rebels are rooted in local issues, the support of Iran has bolstered those who see them as part of a regional proxy war, pitted against a coalition of Sunni Gulf nations supported by the US.

The toll from the war in Yemen is extreme, with the U.N. estimating that 15,000 have been killed, with at least one independent estimate putting the toll at more than 60,000, a figure just covering battle casualties and not including fatalities from disease or starvation. The fighting has displaced at least 2 million people and has left 17.8 million people suffering from hunger, with 8.4 million severely malnourished, in addition to triggering an epidemic of cholera. The fight over the Port of Hodeida has only worsened food availability.

These crises are exacerbated by the destruction of crucial civilian infrastructure, including the bombing of water, sanitation and health facilities, and the continued attacks on civilian targets, including a school bus full of children, weddings in hotels and active health facilities.

The Administration, under increasing pressure from Congress, has taken some steps to reduce U.S. support for the Saudi coalition’s military efforts and says it is pressing for peace. However, an increasingly bipartisan effort to restrict further U.S. support is gaining ground. An agreement in December to impose a ceasefire in Hodeidah raises hopes for peace in 2019.
2. ARE SUPERSTORMS THE NEW NORMAL?

After a series of hurricanes devastated Florida, Houston and the Caribbean over the course of a single month in 2017, and a third straight above-average Atlantic hurricane season in 2018, the inescapable question arises whether these destructive weather patterns are becoming routine.

Scientific consensus warns that impact from climate change is significant and is already taking place. The National Climate Assessment released in late 2018 warns that the “impacts of climate change are already being felt in communities across the country,” and that “more frequent and intense extreme weather and climate-related events, as well as changes in average climate conditions, are expected to continue to damage infrastructure, ecosystems, and social systems that provide essential benefits to communities.”

A recent review of global data shows that the number of hurricanes and typhoons with wind speeds higher than 200 km (category 3) has doubled and those exceeding 250 km per hour have tripled since 1980. Studies also show that storms are intensifying more quickly, making it more difficult to make accurate forecasts, reinforcing the importance of disaster preparedness. Storm systems are also moving more slowly, dropping larger amounts of rain and causing catastrophic flooding. One prominent climate scientist is advocating for adding a Category 6 to the Saffir-Simpson hurricane wind scale to account for the greater intensity of future storms.
The bitter irony of climate change is that those who least contributed to it will suffer and pay the most. Disasters have a devastating impact on vulnerable people and communities, destroying fragile ecosystems, damaging critical infrastructure and reversing years of progress achieved through sustainable development programs. Supercharged storms in vulnerable parts of this hemisphere, such as Central America and the Caribbean, as well as in many parts of Asia and Africa, require urgent investments in disaster risk reduction initiatives, including instituting early warning systems, improving evacuation procedures and shelter facilities, and enhancing community and governmental disaster response infrastructure. Unless we make these investments now, we will pay much more later.

3. A LEGACY OF SUFFERING IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which has suffered for decades from a legacy of violent conflict, including two wars since 1996, is reeling from renewed conflict.

It still suffers from the legacy of what has been called “Africa’s World War” from 1998-2003, which involved the armed forces of at least seven countries and multiple militias, leading to the deaths of millions and fueling ongoing low-level militia clashes that continue to this day. These conflicts are rooted in regional ethnic struggles, combined with the competition to exploit the country’s vast resource wealth in diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, zinc and coltan.

The latest surge in violent conflict and intercommunal violence began in 2017 and has forced more than 2.16 million people to flee their homes, an average of 50 families every hour of every day. And further stirring of tensions is likely in the context of a long-delayed presidential election, now scheduled for late 2018. Today, the total number of internally displaced people in the DRC has reached 4.4 million, the highest number of any country on the African continent. North Kivu Province remains the most affected, accounting for more than 1.1 million displaced persons.

An outbreak of Ebola in North Kivu is only compounding the suffering, a mounting toll of at least 450 confirmed cases and more than 240 deaths. This comes in the wake of an earlier wave in 2017, with more than 55,000 cases that caused in excess of 1,000 deaths. While the country’s health infrastructure has seen gains in addressing the threat of Ebola, continued violence and displacement exacerbate the problem by working against efforts to control the outbreak.
4. UNDERMINING THE PALESTINIAN HEALTH SYSTEM IN EAST JERUSALEM

A cut of $25 million in U.S. aid to the East Jerusalem Hospital Network, part of a larger halt in U.S.-Palestinian assistance, is threatening a vital source of health care to a vulnerable population. This punitive use of foreign assistance is out of step with the previous U.S. approach to the provision of critical health services in conflict situations. It does not bode well for a neutral humanitarian response elsewhere.

Hospitals affected include the Lutheran-supported Augusta Victoria Hospital, as well as those supported by the Catholic and Episcopal/Anglican churches, and the Makassed Islamic Charity Hospital and the Red Crescent Maternity Hospital. These hospitals provide specialized health care that would otherwise not be available to Palestinians in East Jerusalem, including cancer treatment, eye surgery and services for disabled and autistic children.

The action prompted a joint letter from Lutheran, Catholic and Episcopalian religious leaders expressing their grave concern at the aid cuts, saying that “It is difficult for us to understand why this
humanitarian assistance is being brought to a halt, given that lives are being threatened unnecessarily.”

This funding cut is part of a wider curtailment of aid to Palestinians that included a $200 million reduction in economic support for programs in West Bank and Gaza, and the halting of $300 million in U.S. funding to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees. These reductions could force the agency to severely cut back on the services it provides to 5.4 million Palestinian refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza. “Schools and hospitals may be forced to close, thus depriving Palestinians of education, health care, needed jobs, and hope for a better future,” said a letter signed by 16 U.S. Christian leaders.

There is a danger that these cuts could create even more resentment and anger and act as a catalyst for violence and counter-reaction as desperation grows. The immediate humanitarian impacts are clear, but this also has implications for the broader Middle East peace process.
5. VENEZUELA FUELS A REGIONAL CRISIS

The crisis in Venezuela, a social catastrophe of bad governance that has spurred an economic free-fall, is pushing as many as 100,000 people per month to flee to neighboring countries. This mass migration — anticipated in the 2018 Early Warning Forecast — is threatening the stability of the entire region, particularly the fragile peace in Colombia.

Inflation in Venezuela is expected to exceed 1 million percent, and there are critical shortages of food, medicine and basic government services in a country that permits little humanitarian aid from non-governmental sources. An estimated 3 million Venezuelans have left the country since the crisis began in 2015, with 1.1 million fleeing to Colombia, 506,000 to Peru and 221,000 to Ecuador.

The influx of refugees is straining the capacity of host communities in neighboring countries to provide the essentials of food, water, shelter and basic health care. Tensions are rising as the livelihoods of people in the host communities, particularly in Colombia and Peru, are being
6. A REGIONAL CRISIS DETERIORATES IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

A worsening regional crisis in the Lake Chad Basin is affecting more than 17 million people across northeastern Nigeria, Cameroon’s Far North, western Chad and southeastern Niger, fueled by violent conflict, extreme poverty, underdevelopment and climate change.

In this area, one in three families is food insecure and malnutrition rates have reached critical levels. One in every two people needs urgent humanitarian assistance.
Attacks by Boko Haram and the Islamic State affiliates have fueled widespread civilian casualties and displacement. The U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates 2.4 million people are internally displaced through the Lake Chad Basin, with the vast majority in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, where humanitarian access is restricted.

Northeastern Nigeria and southern Niger are suffering from the worst cholera outbreak since 2010, according to the World Health Organization.

Cameroon is on the brink of civil war, as clashes have escalated between Anglophone forces seeking independence in the northwest and southwest regions. The clashes started in 2017 after a crackdown on protests by the English-speaking minority that was seeking more recognition by the French-speaking central government. Currently more than 437,000 people are internally displaced. The current president — just re-elected after more than 35 years in power — has not recognized any of these grievances and prospects for a peaceful resolution are grim.

7. THE SHRINKING HUMANITARIAN SPACE

It is increasingly becoming difficult for humanitarian organizations to safely deliver aid to people in need, particularly in conflict zones.
Armed actors and UN member states alike — including key allies of U.N. Security Council members regularly transgress basic “rules of war” and other humanitarian norms, such as the use of poison gas, using sieges to force food shortages as a weapon of war, and the deliberate bombing of medical facilities and civilian infrastructure. Counter-terror measures can inadvertently limit transfer of aid funds and can be used as a pretext for narrowing or closing humanitarian space. And humanitarian aid and access are being used as bargaining chips by both state and non-state actors in armed conflicts, undermining a neutral and impartial response to those suffering in war or disaster.

These hurdles are impeding the ability of aid organizations to carry out their work. For example in South Sudan, there were at least 750 incidents involving denial of humanitarian access 2016 and 2017, many committed by government authorities, according to a report by the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. Difficulties in the national government to provide consistent cooperation, coupled with the ongoing threats of violence and the lack of basic infrastructure such as roads and bridges, make working in South Sudan one of the world’s most challenging humanitarian situations.

In addition, aid workers are increasingly targeted for violence. In 2017, 313 aid workers were victims of major attacks, a 9 percent increase over the previous year. Of that number, 139 were killed (a 38% increase), 102 wounded and 72 kidnapped. During the first six months of 2018, 203 aid workers were reportedly killed, kidnapped or arrested. The deadliest attack was in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, where four employees of Save the Children were killed and 27 injured in an Islamic State attack on its office in January.

Footnotes: Cover photo: Monsoon flooding in Kerala, India, by Shishir Kurian / CSI /ACT Alliance