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Houthi offensive risks worsening Yemen humanitarian crisis

Into its seventh year, the civil war in Yemen has just taken its turn for the worse following the Houthi offensive on Marib, the last remaining stronghold of the internationally-recognized government in the north. The latest escalation started in February when the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels fired several missiles into the city, leaving several troops loyal to the Saudi-backed government dead. Since then, fighting has occurred almost on a daily basis in the region in what appears to be one of the key battles for control since the civil war erupted in 2015.

The city of Marib is critical for both sides as it is home to one of Yemen's largest oil infrastructures. Thousands of gas and oil fields are located in the region, and controlling it would mean tapping into a lucrative industry that ensures a steady stream of revenues. For the Houthis, the control of Marib also meant greater leverage for them when peace talks resumed. While the Houthis have claimed the seizure of most of the districts around the city, the Saudi-led coalition has also intensified their bombing campaigns on Houthi infrastructures, particularly in Sanaa and Taiz.

As the battle rages on, a looming humanitarian crisis has also prompted the United Nations (UN) to sound an alarm

and issued a call for de-escalation. Millions of civilians as well as 800,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) could be at risk should the conflict prolongs. Famine is also on the horizon, with an estimated 11 million Yemenis going hungry and five million more being "one step away from famine" amidst the continuing violence. With aid programs still underfunded, the UN said an absence of a peace plan could hinder the inflow of fuel and other commodities desperately needed by the people through the port of Hodeidah.

Amidst the deteriorating situation, diplomatic efforts have also been geared up in the hope of reaching a solution to avoid a full-scale catastrophe. The newly-minted US administration under President Joe Biden has offered an olive branch to the Houthis by revoking their designation as a foreign terrorist group as well as lifting some sanctions against them. Besides, it has also ended support to the Saudi-led offensive while aggressively pushing for all actors to return to the negotiating table. With Saudi's overture for a possible ceasefire in late March, Washington's diplomatic engagement seemed to have bear fruit though the continuous failure of all sides to agree on a roadmap in creating permanent peace could mean that that the light is still far from the tunnel.



Fragile security situation in northeast DR Congo

The security situation in the northeast of Congo-Kinshasa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo) has remained precarious for decades, with state control being limited in the region. The situation gained new attention internationally in late February when the Italian ambassador to Congo-Kinshasa was killed in an ambush attack on a humanitarian convoy in North Kivu.

According to estimates by the regional monitoring group Kivu Security Tracker, there are over 100 armed non-state groups in the eastern regions Ituri, North-Kivu, South-Kivu, and Tanganyika. The most active armed group regarding attributed attacks and casualties inflicted in the area is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). The ADF is an Islamist insurgency group that has been active in Congo-Kinshasa and Uganda since the late 90s and is now primarily based in the Beni region of North-Kivu. It has been a subject of debate among experts recently whether or not the group should be considered a part of the global Islamic State network, particularly if it is considered a functional part of Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP). While Congolese armed forces have conducted operations against the ADF since 2019, they have been unable to make significant gains in curbing the group's influence.

The armed violence in the region is targeting civilians to a great extent and seems to have increased during the last 18 months. According to statistical data from the United Nations, the number of deaths caused by militant attacks more than doubled in 2020 (ca. 2,400) compared to the year before. Most of the violence has been recorded in Ituri and North-Kivu. The specific locations that are considered most highly affected by violence are the Beni district in North Kivu, and Djugu and Irumu districts in Ituri.

Recent figures also indicate that the number of attacks has surged during February and March following a relatively calm January period. Considering the lack of progress on behalf of security forces, it seems unlikely that the situation will improve over the short term. Unfortunately, the opposite seems more likely based on recent trends. A reversal of this may require multinational military support due to structural and organizational problems within the military as well as lacking equipment.

Clashes in Fashaga Triangle escalate ongoing Ethiopia-Sudan tension

Direct military clashes between Sudan and Ethiopia have been continuing in Al-Fashaga, a disputed area between Sudan's Gedaref state and Ethiopia's Amhara as well as Tigray regions since December 2020.

The area is fertile farmland that has been cultivated by Ethiopian farmers for decades, despite being internationally recognized as being part of Sudan. Both sides have blamed each other for the escalation, which took place during a major Ethiopian security operation in Tigray. Ethnic Amhara militia groups, who have a strong claim on Al-Fashaga, played a prominent role in operations. While diplomatic

channels remain open, sporadic attacks have continued amid a military buildup on opposite sides of the border. Furthermore, there are concerns that negotiations will be intertwined with Sudan's socioeconomic concerns over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), thus delaying an effective resolution. A prolonged conflict would have negative political consequences in the belligerent states. In Sudan, the military's dominant role in the crisis threatens the delicate balance of power in the transitional government. For Ethiopia, on the other hand, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's continuous reliance on Amhara militias could also be detrimental at a time when ethnic tensions are increasing across the country.

Locust outbreak threatens food security in Kenya

Since January, Kenya has been battered by fresh waves of desert locust invasions that have threatened the food security of millions of people as they devour various crops, including maize, bananas, and tea harvest.

Described as the worst outbreak seen in last 70 years, the invasions have left serious agricultural damage in their wake, therefore endangering the livelihoods of many in

a region already weakened by extreme-climate events, armed conflict, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. At the height of infestation, 39 of Kenya's 47 counties reported invasions of the insects that also spread to other Eastern African countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, and Yemen. These hazards also inflict cascading negative economic consequences at the household, community, national and regional levels that can endure for months, years, or even generations.

Crack within ruling party leads to Nepal's political turmoil

Deterioration of trust between leaders has caused the ruling Nepal Communist Party to be split into two competing factions, pushing the country into a political crisis.

The latest episode began in December 2020, after a number of lawmakers sought an emergency session of Parliament to hold a vote of no-confidence against current Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli. The action triggered Oli to dissolve the Parliament with a snap election expected between April and May 2021. It was believed that the stunt made by the lawmakers was to demand Oli's resignation

following alleged unfair treatment. Over the years, Oli's authoritarian style of ruling and repudiation to share power with allies has led to an erosion of support as well as the loss of trust. The country had since been rocked by a series of protests, especially in Kathmandu. In February 2021, it was also partially paralyzed following a nationwide strike that shut down schools, transportation, and markets. With the ongoing uncompromising situation, the political crisis is expected to continue, as Oli is unlikely to surrender his power in the near future despite multiple attempts by a rival faction to unseat him.

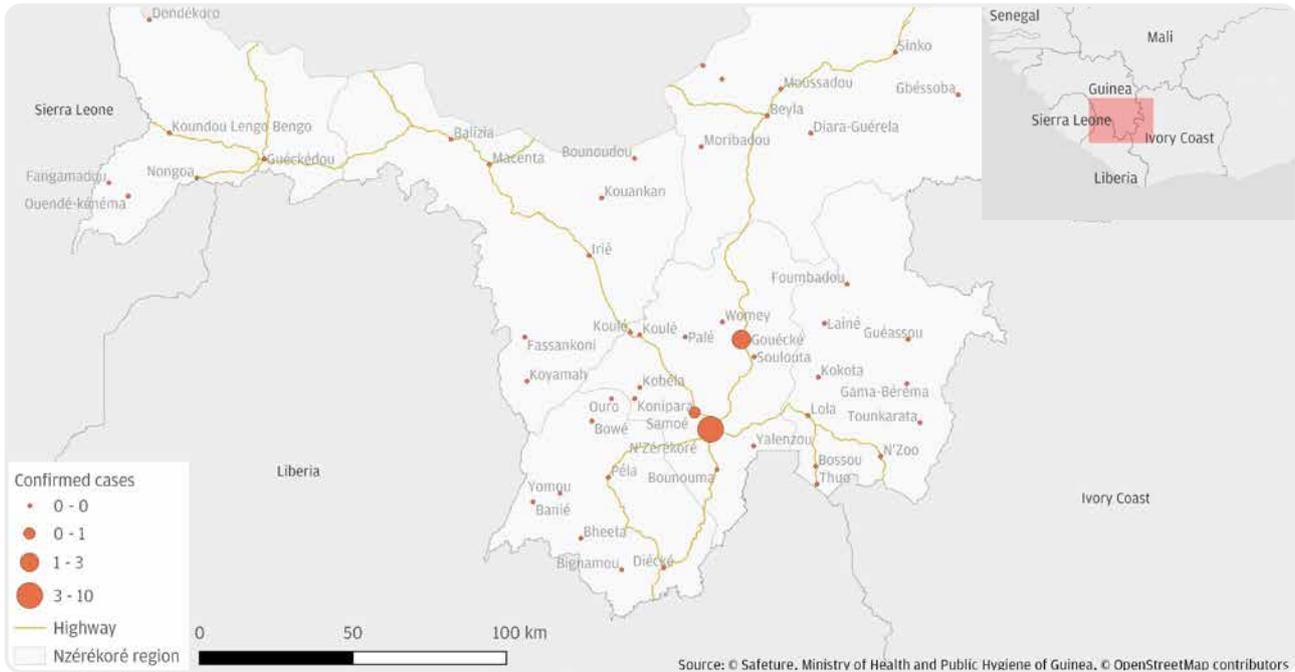
Widespread discontent triggers regular protests in Haiti

During the first trimester of 2021, demonstrations have taken place almost daily in Haiti, especially in Port-au-Prince.

These protests stem from initial demonstrations against an increase in fuel prices in 2018 and then turned into manifestations of the government's widespread disapproval. Against a backdrop of political stability, President Jovenel Moïse has also been facing increased calls to resign as fresh elections for lawmakers' new term

failed to be held in January 2020. In February, the situation also escalated as Moïse claimed a coup attempt against him. The opposition, however, remains unconvinced, with protesters insisting that he must resign. As protests drag on, clashes between demonstrators and security forces have also become increasingly common as the opposition continued to call for rallies. Travel to the country over the coming months is highly likely to face disruptions. These include, for example, road closures, heightened security across urban centers and public transport strikes.

Disease Watch: Ebola



As of the latest report from the Guinean Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene, dated 27 March 2021, there are 14 confirmed cases of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in three clusters (Nzérékoré, Gouécké and Samoé) in south-eastern Nzérékoré region.

Growing risk of Ebola cases amid latest outbreak in Guinea

The resurgence of an Ebola outbreak in Guinea in mid-February has sparked fear among its neighbors in the west Africa region.

With at least 18 cases being detected and four people dead, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has sent more than 11,000 vaccines to the country to avoid the repeat of high casualty figures experienced during the 2014-2016 outbreak, which left at least 11,200 fatalities. Rigorous responses are ongoing, including coordinating

the outbreak preparedness with six neighboring countries bordering Guinea, including Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, as well as installing additional Health Control Points (PoC) on the main exits of N'Zérékoré, which is the epicenter of the latest outbreak. As of middle March, over 1,600 people have been vaccinated. However, the number of individuals getting vaccinated is likely to increase at a slower pace in the coming months due to logistical challenges that may hamper distribution efficiency.

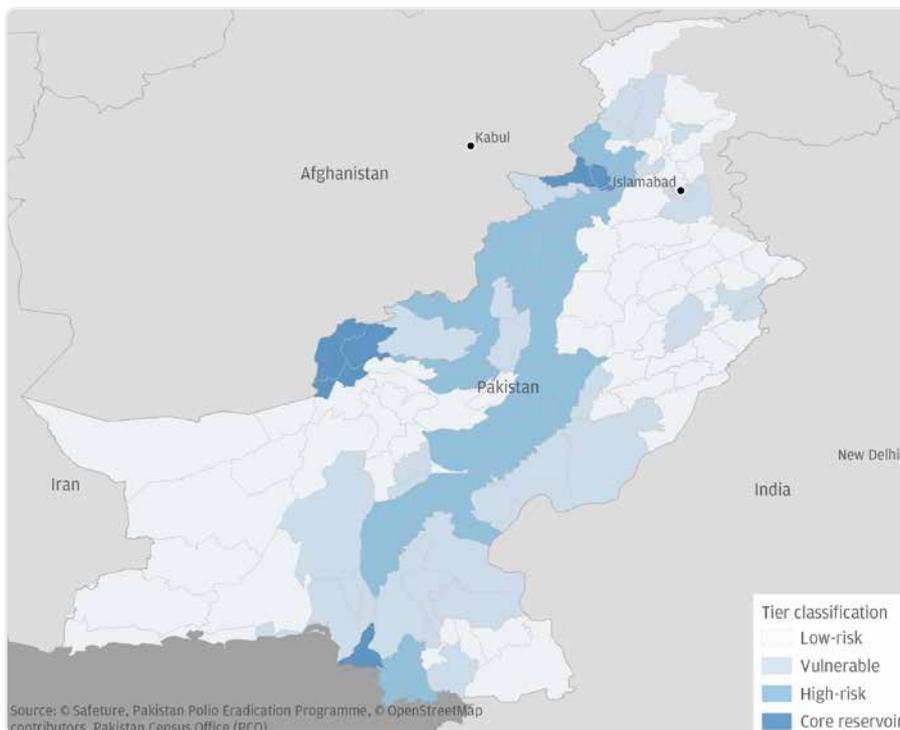
Disease Watch: Polio

Afghanistan and Pakistan step up cooperation to tackle transmission of poliovirus

Despite a significant improvement of poliovirus cases over the past decade, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have continued to report a peak of cases since January 2021 due to disruptions of vaccination programs in 2020.

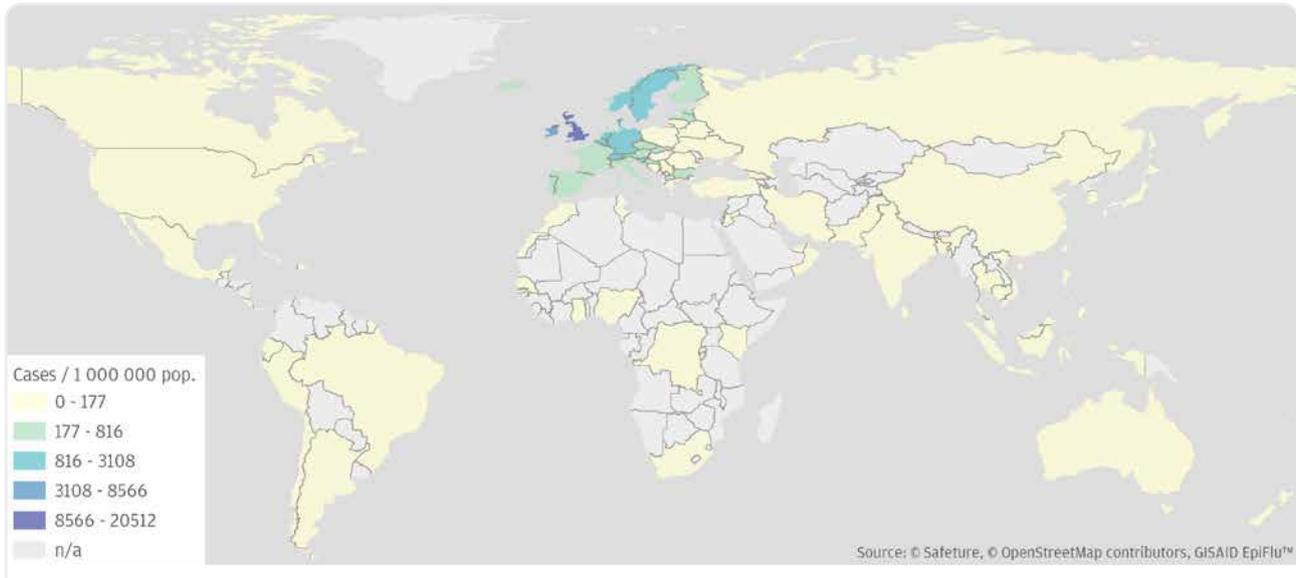
Considering that the virus remains endemic only in both countries worldwide, further cooperation has been stepped up to synchronize vaccination campaign schedules at the national and regional levels. Both governments have agreed that cross-border vaccination is critical due to people’s mass movement through border towns of Peshawar/Torkham in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Chaman/

Spin Boldak in Balochistan. Besides that, efforts to counter misinformation and hardline religious views have been prioritized in both countries by amplifying verified information about vaccines through social media platforms in order to improve the basic health of the population. The path to eradicating the highly infectious, crippling, and sometimes deadly disease has shown positive views in recent months following the key role of vaccinators in building trust within communities about polio vaccines. Vaccination efforts are expected to redouble to get routine immunizations back on track amid complicating access issues and shortage of resources previously.



Wild Polio virus (WPV1) transmission risk tiers in Pakistan’s districts identified by the National Emergency Operations Centre’s “Pakistan Polio Eradication Programme”. Map current as of April 2021. District categorised as tier one (1) are defined as persistent local WPV1 circulation and repeated reseeding history, tier two (2) include intermittent transmission or sustained risk due to and tiers three and four (3,4) include vulnerable and low risk areas.

Disease Watch: Covid-19



Relative genome frequency for submitted samples of British variant of Covid-19 (B.1.1.7) per one million population as of 18 March 2021. The variant has been detected in 118 out of 194 countries.

Keeping an eye on Covid-19 variants

An increase in infections has led to a surge of hospitalizations and deaths across the globe following the discovery of Covid-19 variants.

In December 2020, the United Kingdom announced a Covid-19 variant described as B.1.1.7, while four other variants were later detected in Denmark, namely B.1.351 in South Africa as well as P.1 in Brazil and Japan. Scientists have also found more variants that are thought to have originated from Nigeria, known as the B.1.252. Several studies suggested these variants are more transmissible and can potentially worsen the pandemic. The new variants are being studied daily to understand how a human body responds to them, if in such a way that they can evade

the immune response generated by vaccines. While preliminary research showed that the currently available vaccines are capable of dealing with the three most concerning variants, data continues to roll in to understand how they are evolving. Despite the newfound variants, public health advice remains unchanged since there is not enough evidence to suggest that they can cause significant mortality or more severe disease. Multiple countries have continued to maintain best-practice in preventing the further spread of the virus by encouraging individuals to wear masks, practice social distancing and good hygiene measures. Changes to public health unit responses are expected from time to time due to emerging threats as more mutations are waiting to be discovered.



Dateline

-  1 April: **Islamic Republic Day in Iran**
-  4 April: **Easter celebration in the western hemisphere**
-  4 April: **Parliamentary election in Bulgaria**
-  9 April: **Presidential election in Djibouti**
-  9 April: **General election in Samoa**
-  11 April: **Presidential election in Benin**
-  11 April: **General election in Peru**
-  13 April: **Beginning of Ramadhan**
-  13-14 April: **Songkran Festival in Thailand**
-  14 April: **Vaisakhi and Tamil New Year**
-  17 April: **Independence Day in Syria**
-  25 April: **Parliamentary election in Albania**
-  27 April: **Freedom Day in South Africa**

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