Global Peace Index: Global peacefulness falls with sustained rise in civil unrest in the last decade and is set to worsen as economic impact of COVID-19 takes hold

LONDON, June 10, 2020, Today marks the launch of the 14th edition of the Global Peace Index from the international think-tank the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP).

Key results

- Civil unrest has doubled since 2011 – 96 countries recorded a violent demonstration in 2019, as citizens protest against a range of issues, from economic hardship and police brutality to political instability.
- Although peacefulness has deteriorated in the last decade, militarisation is improving overall, and 100 countries have decreased their military expenditure since 2008.
- The economic impact of violence in 2019 improved due to lessening of the intensity of internal conflict, however violence cost the global economy $14.5 trillion or 10.4% of global GDP.
- Deaths from terrorism falls for fourth consecutive year, down by 75%.

COVID-19 highlights

- The economic impact of COVID-19 will negatively affect political stability, international relations, conflict, civil rights and violence, undoing many years of socio-economic development.
- As economic volatility increases, nations expected to divide into those that stabilise or deteriorate in peace and prosperity – those dependent on aid or with high debts particularly likely to suffer.
- Italy, Greece, Latvia and Poland amongst countries least likely to weather COVID-19 well due to economic challenges and poor performance on ‘social resilience’, while Norway, Australia and New Zealand best placed to handle the future.
- Economic downturn likely to lead to decreased support for UN peacekeeping operations, making peacebuilding more difficult, although it could also prompt fall in proxy wars.

The 14th edition of the annual Global Peace Index (GPI) report, the world’s leading measure of global peacefulness, reveals that in 2020 the average level of global peacefulness deteriorated for the ninth time in twelve years. Overall, 81 countries improved in peacefulness in the 2020 report, whilst 80 deteriorated.

Rising civil unrest is emerging as a key future risk factor, with riots, general strikes and anti-government demonstrations increasing substantially since 2011. This year, new research into COVID-19 from the IEP also provides insight into a world facing heightened risks across most measures of the GPI, due to the emerging economic downturn, which is set be the worst since WWII.
Iceland remains the most peaceful country in the world, a position that it has held since 2008. It is joined at the top of the index by New Zealand, Austria, Portugal, and Denmark. Afghanistan remains as the least peaceful country, a position it has held for two years, followed by Syria, Iraq and South Sudan.

The greatest improvement in peacefulness occurred in the Russia and Eurasia region, which saw progress in the IEP’s research domains of Ongoing Conflict and Safety and Security – with Armenia recording the largest improvement of any country, rising 15 places to rank 99th.

South America recorded the largest deterioration in peacefulness due to issues in Militarisation and Safety and Security. However, the Middle East and North Africa remains the least peaceful region. Benin experienced the biggest deterioration of any country in the world, falling 34 places.

Steve Killelea comments: “The fundamental tensions of the past decade around conflict, environmental pressures and socio-economic strife remain. It’s likely that the economic impact of COVID-19 will magnify these tensions by increasing unemployment, widening inequality and worsening labour conditions – creating alienation from the political system and increasing civil unrest. We therefore find ourselves at a critical juncture”.

Civil Unrest, militarisation and terrorism

A key trend identified in this year’s report is the growing level of civil unrest across the world. At least 58% of GPI countries experienced violent protests in 2019, notably in Chile and Hong Kong, as citizens protested a range of issues including economic inequality, police brutality, political leadership and rising prices for key resources.

This reflects a longer-term trend, with riots around the world increasing by 282% in the last decade, while general strikes are up by 821%. Europe experienced the most protests, riots and strikes – however only 35% of the approximate 1,600 total were recorded as violent; the lowest percent in the world.

The report identifies a 4.4% improvement in ‘Militarisation’ since 2008, with increases in funding for UN peacekeeping in 2019. The number of countries importing and exporting weapons has also fallen to levels not seen since 2009. However, the improvements in peacekeeping contributions are likely to be short lived as governments direct funds towards propping up their economies.

The death toll for terrorism also continues to decline, with total deaths from terrorism falling to just over 8,000 in 2019, down from a peak of 33,555 in 2015. Similarly, the homicide rate indicator has continued its decade long improvement, as 57 countries improve, while 42 decline. In El Salvador, the country with the highest number of homicides per 100,000 people, the homicide rate fell by 25%.

Overall, the economic impact of violence in 2019 fell to $14.5 trillion, or 10.6%, of global GDP due to fewer deaths caused by conflict.

Environmental pressures
Environmental pressures continue to negatively impact peace. The IEP’s Ecological Threat Register indicates that 27 per cent of countries will face catastrophic water stress and 22 per cent catastrophic food stress by 2050.

The report also indicates that there were an estimated 2.26 billion people living in areas with high or very high exposure to climate hazards in 2019, with 1.24 billion of these people already living in countries with low levels of peace. By 2050 climate change is expected to create up to 143 million migrants globally, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa (86m), South Asia (40m) and Latin America (17m).

The impact of COVID-19

Special research by the IEP shows that COVID-19 is negatively impacting peace across the world, with nations expected to become increasingly polarised in their ability to maintain peace and security. This reflects the virus’ potential to undo years of socio-economic development, exacerbate humanitarian crises and aggravate and encourage unrest and conflict.

The IEP identifies the economic impact of lockdowns as a significant threat to peace. Reductions in international aid are expected as OEDC economies contract, further destabilising fragile and conflict-affected countries including Liberia, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

Countries with poor credit ratings, like Brazil, Pakistan and Argentina, may also struggle to borrow, repay debt and sustain their economies, leading to increased risk of political instability, riots and violence.

However, economically stable countries are also witnessing major disruption, as leaders come under increasing pressure over their COVID-19 response, with the US, Germany and France already experiencing protests. Rising political instability is expected in Europe, with riots and general strikes set to increase.

That said, the economic impact of the virus may have a more positive impact on proxy wars, as they become harder to finance amid economic decline and falling oil prices. Saudi Arabia’s activity in Yemen, Russian and Turkish intervention in Syria and Iran’s support for Militias, such as Hezbollah will all be notable examples to track in the year ahead.

Amid this burgeoning turmoil, US-China tensions and friction within multilateral organisations like the WHO, WTO and the UN Security Council are also increasing.

Regional overview:

- Only two of nine regions in the world improved in peacefulness in 2019: North America and Russia and Eurasia
- South America experienced the largest fall and was the only region to record deteriorations across all three GPI domains: Safety and Security, Militarisation and Ongoing Conflict.
- Europe remains the most peaceful region in the world. Greece and Belgium had the biggest improvement in peacefulness. Greece because of a better score on the political
terror scale, Belgium because of fewer deaths from internal conflict and both improved their homicide rates.

- Five countries in Asia-Pacific continue to rank in the top 25 of the GPI. New Zealand ranks first in the region and second overall in the 2020 GPI, despite its score falling 2.3% due to the Christchurch attack on March 15, 2019.
- Peacefulness in Central America and The Caribbean has fallen, with increasing deaths from external conflict and declining scores on the political terror scale. Mexico is again the least peaceful country in the region – experiencing a 2.3% deterioration in peacefulness. Its homicide rate increased by 29%.
- The Middle East and North Africa remains the world’s least peaceful region. Bahrain had the biggest improvement in its score at 4.8% - the third largest improvement of any nation overall
- The 2020 GPI marks the first time since 2016 that North America has seen an average improvement in peacefulness.
- Peacefulness in South Asia deteriorated on the 2020 GPI, owing to falls in peacefulness in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Bhutan is the most peaceful country in South Asia and is the only country outside of Europe and Asia-Pacific to be ranked in the top 20 of the GPI.
- Sub-Saharan Africa recorded a fall of 0.5% in its peacefulness score. Twenty countries in the region improved in peacefulness while 24 deteriorated. Benin experienced the biggest deterioration of any country in the world, falling 34 places in the ranking to 106th on the 2020 GPI.

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About the Global Peace Index (GPI)
Produced by the international think-tank the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), the GPI report presents the most comprehensive data-driven analysis to date on peace, its economic value, trends, and how to develop peaceful societies. The report covers 99.7% of the world’s population and uses 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators from highly respected sources to compile the index. These indicators are grouped into three key domains: Ongoing Conflict, Safety and Security, and Militarisation.

About the Institute for Economics and Peace
IEP is an international and independent think tank dedicated to shifting the world’s focus to peace as a positive, achievable and tangible measure of human well-being and progress. It has offices in Sydney, Brussels, New York, The Hague, Mexico City and Harare.

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