



ARMIES IN TIME OF PANDEMIC!

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COVID-19 pandemic, aka Coronavirus in virology, has spread like wildfire since December 2019. Caused by Acute Respiratory Syndrome, the said virus was discovered in Wuhan, China, and was diagnosed as an infectious disease that kills the people contracting or developing it. Since then, the infection rates have snowballed dramatically, and little by little it has begun to sweep the world in its entirety. Until April 11 of 2020, the number of infected people skyrocketed beyond 1.69 million cases, and COVID-19 was dolorously ubiquitous in more than 200 countries and territories, killing more than 102 thousand people!

While this is not the first time that the world has faced a deadly virus, especially in the Middle East (medical reports reveal that COVID-19 is the second virus to have struck the Middle East, following MERS-COV in 2012), the current situation is completely different; COVID-19 has become an unprecedented global crisis. Against a backdrop of a life-threatening pandemic with no vaccine made currently available, COVID-19 is ferociously whittling away at public health and national safety; containing it poses serious challenges. Although it is quite easy to eliminate COVID-19 using the simplest formulae of disinfectants, evidence indicates that it can remain active on some hard surfaces for up to three days.

History has shown that even a “Flu Pandemic” should not be underestimated. The “Spanish Flu”, nearly a century ago, claimed about 50 million lives, a number that exceeds the victims of the First and Second World Wars. At least 57,460 US military personnel in World War I died of influenza, compared to 50,280 people who died in the battlefield at the time. Another review of the US Army medical experience in 1917-1919 reveals that about 1,125,401 personnel were hospitalized with influenza, bronchitis, and pneumonia during this period.

It can be inferred that while everyone has a role to play in combating COVID-19, the efforts of the armies are increasingly gaining more importance in this regard. Armies should prepare well for this “covert war”, so to speak. As long as the armies are entrusted with the mandate of maintaining law and order, and ensuring public safety, the law may require armies to address local challenges when a pandemic breaks out, including assisting the national leadership, observing law and order,

assigning the workforce to important civil roles, coordinating resources and logistic support, maintaining public confidence and implementing measures and procedures, such as lockdowns, quarantines and social distancing.

“We should prepare to fight the way we may be forced to act accordingly, and it is now clear that the time has come to do so”, states General Sir Nicholas Carter, Commander of the British Armed Forces. It is worth noting that the deployment of armies to national emergencies on a large scale is a widespread phenomenon, and it can be observed after Hurricane Katrina hit the American Gulf Coast in 2005; about 70 thousand soldiers were deployed to provide assistance. Many countries have followed suit as they conducted a lockdown (group quarantine) given the seriousness of COVID-19, in addition to the deployment of the army and imposing lockdown measures.

It is well established that without the assistance of the army and the police, the objectives of the lockdown to reduce the number of infected cases by isolating suspected persons and their families and imposing social distancing cannot be achieved. Lockdown *per se* is an emergency protocol to prevent people from leaving a certain area, and this protocol can only be forced by the authority. Research studies reveal that without achieving lockdown measures or social distancing in countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, 81% of their population will be infected.

Believing that lockdown is an efficient way to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Chinese government, as of January 23, 2020, has closed Wuhan and Hubei Province and the immediate vicinity; transportation has come to a halt, and millions of commuters have been prevented from working or going to school. As such, the number of cases began to decrease, until the "National Health Authority" in China announced that there were no new infections in Hubei, on March 19.

The spread of COVID-19 has increased the burdens and traditional duties of armies, as training for recruits, international military maneuvers, and many ongoing operations, including counterterrorism, have been suspended. Despite this, the negative effects resulting from COVID-19 should be flagged up for combat readiness, military operations, military healthcare infrastructure, movements, workforce and the change of the designated role from military missions to relief and outreach missions.

On the other hand, the excessive use of force by the army should be carefully prevented because if this happens, it will definitely undermine the trust of community and shake the relationship between civilians and the army, thus undermining the main goal of protection. As such, the army and police forces should exercise restraint while imposing lockdown actions, and not be drawn into violence. For instance, news agencies reported that police in Nairobi shot dead a 13-year-old boy, as he was standing on his balcony during lockdown, and graphic pictures and videos in several areas showed police beating people who were trying to obtain basic

supplies.

In this context, Amnesty International, Human Rights Organization and Law Enforcement Agencies urged the world community to work with self-restraint, maintain respect for law and order, maintain security and restore order during the lockdown in order to stave off COVID-19.

Also, among the important issues that need to be further followed up and well addressed is the safety of army personnel due to the roles of being exposed to infection. For example, the internal notes of the US military revealed that its policies towards the pandemic were ineffective. At the end of March 2020, 288 confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported among the US army, despite statements by the US leaders to have well intensified restrictions imposed on soldiers. Since the armed forces play a very active role during lockdowns and quarantines, preventive measures should be taken to prevent the army from becoming a potential vector of the virus. This includes taking all necessary measures to ensure that soldiers are not exposed to COVID-19. In this context, the psycho-social influences among soldiers should be well noted.

We arrive at a conclusion drawn from the foregoing that there is a cardinal role for the armed and military forces in enforcing and maintaining respect for law and order and establishing security, among other things, which is crucial to ensuring the success of collective efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic; it is critically necessary to develop appropriate policies to strike a balance between the interests of all parties involved and ensuring protection for all, while leaving no one lagging behind or in the lurch.