
Special Commentary: Outbreak: COVID-19, Crime, and Conflict

May 14, 2020 | Dr. Paul R. Kan

The COVID-19 pandemic is the byproduct of illicit global trafficking. Although COVID-19 was likely transmitted to humans via pangolins sold in the wet markets of Wuhan, China, these markets acted as mere way stations for the virus. The natural habitats of the pangolins are the forests, grasslands, and savannahs of Africa. But, through a [network](#) of impoverished local communities, poachers, transnational organized crime, gangs and corrupt officials, approximately 2.7 million of this endangered species are captured and smuggled to Asia every year. The pangolin has earned the sad distinction of being “[the most trafficked animal on earth.](#)”

The illicit global network of wildlife trafficking was a major facilitator of the pandemic, but the effects of the virus’ spread are, in turn, facilitating more criminal activities while creating the potential for greater internal instability in many states. The contagion-crime nexus has been overshadowed by the urgent need to combat the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, COVID-19 is acting as an amplifier for crime and conflict that will have repercussions in the international security environment in the near and long term.

RAIDING THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

The global trafficking of pangolins was a highly lucrative business before the COVID-19 pandemic. Wildlife trafficking in general is not only profitable but is not punished as severely as trafficking in other illicit commodities. The combination of high profit and low risk has made wildlife the fourth largest illegally trafficked commodity in the world after drugs, weapons, and humans. At an estimated value of [\\$7 to \\$23 billion per year](#), global wildlife trafficking provides the context to understanding how illegal pangolin smuggling created the conditions for the outbreak of COVID-19 and how organized crime will continue to bring violence to societies and undermine state governance.

The United States has recognized the significant power of [wildlife trafficking](#) and its ability to harm the stability of a number of countries. Congress passed the [Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt \(END\) Wildlife Trafficking Act in 2016](#), directing federal agencies to work to strengthen law enforcement, demand reduction, and build international cooperation and commitment. In

fiscal year 2018, the US government dedicated approximately \$122 million to combat global wildlife trafficking. This funding supports a multilayered approach that includes international, regional, national, and local actions to tackle the illicit worldwide trafficking of animals. The Department of Defense also plays an important role in combating wildlife trafficking. The [2015 National Defense Authorization Act](#) specifically mentions that the DOD may support law enforcement missions around the world to counter transnational organized criminal activities including “the illegal trade in natural resources and wildlife.”

However, both supply and demand incentives in the pangolin trade have made it resistant to US and other efforts to halt it. Trafficking in pangolins did not emerge solely from a demand in Asia for the mammal’s purported medicinal benefits. When China banned sales of ivory, Asian organized crime adapted and engaged their African criminal counterparts to shift to the acquisition and selling of pangolins.

Transnational organized crime’s role in wildlife trafficking has worsened challenges to state governance by weakening [law enforcement and aiding violent opposition groups](#). In some cases, [insurgent and terrorists groups](#) have helped supply organized criminal gangs with illegal wildlife products. The outbreak of COVID-19 will continue to exacerbate these criminally generated effects.

BUSINESS AS USUAL DURING THE UNUSUAL

Operating as a “shadow state” in many countries, organized crime groups have long played a role in dealing with the repercussions of disasters. In the aftermath of hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, as well as during famines, disease outbreaks, and sudden economic downturns, criminal syndicates have helped to alleviate societal suffering in ways that governments have not. As a result, organized crime groups have been able to take advantage of societal disruption to further their interests at the expense of state legitimacy.

Although organized crime syndicates often act predatorily against people and businesses, they have nonetheless used their illicit supply chains to deliver necessities in uncertain times. After the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, [the yakuza](#) mobilized a fleet of trucks to be the first to deliver food, bottled water, and blankets to hard hit communities. With their accumulation of illicit profit, organized crime groups have also been a source of capital for communities that have taken hard economic hits. During the 2008 financial crisis, the Italian mafia groups offered needed liquidity in the form of [business and personal loans](#). The current pandemic has proven no different; [Mexican drug cartels](#) have been distributing similar humanitarian and economic relief in the form of food and cleaning supplies.

Far from being altruistic acts, criminal support for affected and vulnerable communities is a way for organized crime to continue to exert, and even expand, its power and legitimacy. Criminally supplied relief comes at a cost to be paid when legitimate emergency aid arrives in the form of reconstruction and business loans. Organized crime has routinely received [a share of](#)

[government directed emergency funds](#) aimed at helping residents and legal businesses recover from disasters through bribery, extortion, and corruption.

Beyond gaining money from the diversion of government funding, organized crime has also found novel ways to generate illicit profit in crises. In the initial stages of the current pandemic, many organized crime groups' illicit activities were dealt a blow—the sudden disruption of the global supply chain affected their ability to transport and sell many illegal commodities. Drug traffickers have struggled to get needed precursor chemicals to manufacture certain narcotics and their customers have stayed away due to stay-at-home and social distancing restrictions. Criminal syndicates have quickly shifted to new black market opportunities such as [counterfeiting personal protective equipment and disinfectant](#). Russian organized crime has assisted in [diverting scarce ventilators](#) to wealthy oligarchs who have links to the government.

Governments have not always taken a confrontational stand against organized crime groups in disasters and crises. In fact, states have also benefited from the community control that many criminal groups exert, this has been especially noticeable during the COVID-19 outbreak. Gangs in [El Salvador](#) have helped enforce stay-at-home restrictions while gangs in the *favelas* of [Brazil](#) are mandating more stringent measures than the government. The exertion of community control buttresses organized crime groups as alternate forms of governance and legitimacy in many countries.

THE COMING COVID CONFLICTS?

In a May webinar on “[Corruption, Global Trade and COVID-19](#),” Nikos Passas warned of emerging of “criminogenic asymmetries”— inequalities and gaps between the legitimate and illegitimate provision of scarce public goods leading to group grievances that feed violent movements. The sudden economic downturn and increasing private and public debt due to the COVID-19 outbreak has combined with the strain on people, businesses, and governments to create fertile ground for criminogenic asymmetries. Emergency measures to prop up economies have, so far, included broad discretionary power to distribute benefits, but will come with little political appetite for the slow-moving processes needed for transparency, oversight, and accountability. Such conditions will give rise to new criminal schemes to gain access to funds and resources that have reduced official scrutiny. As a result, government corruption is also likely to emerge. Increasing crime and government corruption will nurture group grievances and lend credibility to calls from violent actors to alter fundamentally the political status quo.

Group grievances surrounding COVID have already created simmering conflicts—leaders in [Bolivia and Sri Lanka](#) have used the outbreak to delay elections, leading opposition figures to claim widespread extraconstitutional manipulation of democratic processes. In the predominantly Muslim state of Gujarat, India, hospitals have been accused of “[apartheid](#)” for [separating patients](#) based on religion. [Hezbollah](#) has been able to gain access to highly sought after medical supplies and is utilizing thousands of its medical professionals to fight the pandemic, bolstering its status as an alternative to the Lebanese state.

The pandemic will also constrain the ability of political leaders to rely on traditional levers of power as in the past. The capacity of the police and military to manage conflicts and deal with crime will likely be diminished. State agents will be preoccupied with medical responses to the spread of the virus and hamstrung in meeting the growing social and political challenges. International organizations and non-governmental organizations that have worked to resolve internal conflicts will also be affected by the pandemic; their operations on the ground and on the frontlines will contract. Many [international organizations and non-governmental organizations](#) have already removed their personnel from conflict zones, not due to increased levels of violence, but because of health concerns related to the spread of the coronavirus. The United Nations announced an [end to the rotation, repatriation, and new deployments of peacekeepers](#) due to the spread of COVID-19, endangering fragile ceasefires and fresh transitional political agreements. Recognizing the unprecedented threat of COVID-19 and its intersection with violent conflicts, the UN Secretary General appealed for [a global ceasefire](#).

CONCLUSION

The end of the pandemic will not mean that the crime and corruption associated with it will also come to an end. Even the development of a vaccine or a successful therapeutic regimen to prevent or treat COVID-19 will be subjected to criminal schemes; organized crime can divert medicine before it reaches the right populations or make counterfeit medicine to earn illicit profit. Seeking or finding treatments for COVID-19 may, therefore, also become part of future criminogenic asymmetries. Conflict zones will also reduce the access to populations when administering vaccinations or medical treatments, prolonging the pandemic in certain communities.

Without new strategic approaches to tackle the contagion-crime nexus, internal conflicts will blossom and haunt the international security landscape. International coordination is not only needed to find adequate medical solutions to COVID-19, but is also needed to reign in the criminality that fuels group grievances. One easy strategic approach is to raise the priority of illegal wildlife trafficking as an international and national security threat. The international community had treated wildlife as a lower tier illicit commodity to tackle. However, the current pandemic justifies the targeting of wildlife trafficking networks more fully and with a new sense of urgency. Preventing the next pandemic will require breaking the contagion-crime nexus, which may result in mitigating and stopping conflicts.

The US Army can play an important role in reducing global wildlife trafficking. The Army has many institutional links to military forces in source countries where endangered species are harvested and where well-armed poachers and technologically proficient criminal groups often outmatch local forces. With a renewed commitment to the training of local forces to take on wildlife traffickers, the Army can engage once again in a comprehensive program that focuses on [operations](#) like “casualty care in austere environments, mission orders, mission planning, key leader engagements, detainee operations, site exploitation, civil military operations, the fundamentals of patrolling, and tracking and operating geospatial equipment.” Working with

non-governmental organizations and conservation organizations that track and combat wildlife trafficking would also add to the Army's ability to understand current and emerging patterns and practices in the exploitation of endangered and rare species. As an institution, the Army can also provide training programs to dissuade its own Soldiers from [obtaining endangered and rare species products](#) in regions where they are serving and, therefore, reduce one part of the demand.

Elevating the contagion-crime nexus as a strategic threat is not just an issue of global public health or human security, but also a significant way to lessen the scope and scale of internal conflicts. With the world focused on combating the pandemic, the opportunity exists for the United States and the Army to take the lead in developing strategic approaches to stop, not only the next pandemic, but also the outbreak of fresh rounds of violent conflicts.

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