

KEY CONCEPTS - HUMANITARIAN CEASEFIRES

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Humanitarian ceasefires are arrangements between conflict parties to suspend violence altogether or in designated areas to improve the situation for civilians and those caught up in war, with restricted access to adequate health care, water, food, and shelter. A pause in violence can therefore greatly benefit the local population who suffer the worst effects of violence.

Some key points on humanitarian ceasefires:

- Usually signed documents that set out specific terms of the agreement
- Involve the support of a third-party actor.
- Distinct from the more informal local conflict mitigation or battlefield arrangements that can also often serve humanitarian functions.
- Often agreed to allow distribution of food items, evacuation of civilians, refugees, or in some cases injured armed personnel, or provision of health services.

For example, in 2014, the Syrian rebels and the Lebanese Armed Forces agreed a humanitarian ceasefire to allow for the evacuation of civilians and wounded, and to permit the delivery of food, medical, and humanitarian aid.

SCOPE OF HUMANITARIAN CEASEFIRES

Geography:

- May be limited to a defined geographic area that is negotiated and agreed by the conflict parties, e.g. a town or city.
- May also involve the creation of protected areas, humanitarian corridors, or demilitarized zones, where violence is limited over a longer period to allow a more constant supply of aid to reach those in need.

- May also cover the whole state, e.g. to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access.

Length:

- Usually temporary, ranging from a few hours or days (and sometimes labeled by the likes of the UN office for humanitarian affairs as a “humanitarian *pause*”).
- More rarely, will extend over weeks or even months.
- In most cases, parties start with a short agreement that is subsequently prolonged, rather than beginning with an extended agreement.

Benchmarks:

- Often contain tangible, measurable benchmarks
- This makes it possible to hold conflict parties accountable for reaching, or failing to reach, these benchmarks.

USAGE OF HUMANITARIAN CEASEFIRES

Parties are often reluctant to engage in humanitarian ceasefires:

- Parties fear that a temporary break in fighting may be abused by their opponents or place them in a military and strategic disadvantage - such concerns may be mitigated by clearly delineating – the duration, the area covered, and the objective of the agreement.
- Parties will often only agree to a humanitarian arrangement if they see some benefit, e.g.
 - A need to increase legitimacy or support from civilians.
 - Reducing pressure from domestic or international third parties.
 - In the wake of a serious crisis, when demand from civilians, local and international actors is likely to be highest.

HUMANITARIAN CEASEFIRES IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Humanitarian ceasefires are often separate from the broader political negotiations

- Tend to be more successful when they are not politicized.
- Linking the humanitarian arrangements to political demands can stalemate the negotiation process.
- Separating humanitarian ceasefires and politics can often be hard: parties may disagree on whether something is political or humanitarian, or humanitarian issues might be considered the primary motivation for political talks.

Humanitarian ceasefires can still have an important indirect effect on the political negotiation process:

- Lower threshold for cooperation, as may only require a brief adjustment to fighting behavior.
- Can provide opportunity to test and trial limited forms of cooperation and reliability of opponents.
- If successful: can serve as a confidence building measure that eases more substantive negotiations in the future.

Humanitarian ceasefires can also have the opposite effect:

- If humanitarian agreements are abused for military gains, this destroys trust and makes concluding other forms of agreement more difficult in the future.

Humanitarian ceasefires are not always a part of the broader peace process:

- Mediators and conflict parties may have plans for their use at some point in the future, or they may move straight from a declaration of intent to a cessation of hostilities agreement.

ROLE OF THIRD PARTIES AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The negotiation and implementation of humanitarian ceasefires often:

- Requires support from third parties and technical experts.
- Builds the capacity of the conflict parties to engage in more significant ceasefire and peace negotiations.