

Chapter 1

TERMINOLOGY AND A TYPOLOGY OF CEASEFIRES

This chapter reviews how ceasefires have been defined and classified in different contexts. In so doing, it draws out the possible implications for a ceasefire negotiation planning process.

1.1 Terminology

Armed conflicts, be they inter-state or intra-state, typically involve two or more conflict parties, which may comprise armed (or military) and political components. This Guidance uses the term “conflict party” to refer exclusively to armed actors who play formal roles on negotiation delegations in the context of a ceasefire process.

The terms “ceasefire” and “cessation of hostilities” are often used interchangeably. Agreements for the latter are generally perceived as less structured than ceasefire agreements, which feature more detailed provisions on objectives, timelines, security arrangements, and monitoring and verification mechanisms. In practice, the level of detail in individual ceasefire or cessation of hostilities agreements varies significantly, regardless of the formal title.

“Truce” and “armistice” similarly refer to situations in which conflict parties enter an informal or formal ceasefire or agree to halt military operations. Numerous other terms have also been used to denote ceasefires or cessation of hostilities, including “normalization”, “stabilization”, “standstill”, “stand-down”, and “suspension of military offensive”. The choice of terms is guided by preferences, as well as political, cultural and contextual sensitivities related to the conflict. For ease of reference and consistency, this Guidance uses “ceasefire” to capture the spectrum of such agreements.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of a ceasefire. As part of negotiations, parties agree on what a ceasefire entails in their context. Overall, however, a ceasefire agreement may be expected to:

- be a formal, written agreement between two or more conflict parties
- lay out its purpose and broad linkages to a political process
- specify the date and time at which it is to come into effect (and potentially stipulate how long it will remain in effect or when it is to be reviewed)
- define the geographical areas in which it is applicable
- outline prohibited and permitted military and non-military activities
- delineate modalities for monitoring and verifying the parties’ compliance with the agreement or, in settings where elaborate monitoring and verification is not feasible, stipulate procedures for basic coordination, dispute resolution and de-escalation among the parties.

In 2006, the Government of Burundi and the Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People–National Forces of Liberation (Palipehutu–FNL) agreed to define a ceasefire as the “cessation of all acts of violence against the civilian population; acts of vengeance; summary executions; torture; harassment; detention and persecution of civilians on the basis of ethnic origin, religious beliefs and/or political affiliation; arming of civilians; recruitment and use of children; sexual violence; sponsoring or promotion of terrorist or genocide ideologies”.¹

In Liberia, in 1993, the Interim Government of National Unity agreed on a ceasefire with the National Patriotic Front of Liberia and the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy, with prohibitions on acts such as importing arms and ammunition; altering or attacking military positions; employing propaganda to incite hostilities; and using mines and incendiary devices.²

1. Comprehensive Ceasefire Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Burundi and the Palipehutu–FNL, 2006, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/127>.

2. The Cotonou Agreement between the Interim Government of National Unity of Liberia (IGNU) and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), 1993, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/LR_930725_CotonouAgreement.pdf.



Demobilization in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
A helmet of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in a demobilization transit camp, 2014.
 Credit: UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

1.2 A ceasefire typology

This section provides a broad overview of different types of ceasefires, based on dimensions such as their relationship to the broader peace process, their focus, and the number of parties involved. In practice, a ceasefire may fit into several of these categories.

1.2.1 Ceasefires in the context of broader peace processes

Ceasefires reached in the context of intra-state civil wars are usually part of a broader political context rather than stand-alone processes. As a result, they are often classified in terms of their relationship to a broader peace process: preliminary or definitive (also called permanent).

Preliminary ceasefires

A preliminary ceasefire may begin before, in parallel with, or after the start of a broader, formal peace process, although it is not necessarily a prerequisite for a peace process. A preliminary ceasefire typically seeks to reduce violence, alleviate a humanitarian crisis, foster an environment that is more conducive to negotiations and lay out a path for a definitive ceasefire.

In protracted conflicts, mediators may have to deal with a series of failing or fragile preliminary ceasefires. In some cases, the conflict parties or spoilers may seek to exploit a preliminary ceasefire to strengthen their positions on the ground. If properly designed, agreements can limit this risk.

In 2000, the Governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a cessation of hostilities agreement.³ It aimed to freeze the conflict and create space for negotiating a definitive ceasefire, which was signed in December of that year, as part of the Algiers Agreement.

Definitive ceasefires

A definitive (or permanent) ceasefire is usually the result of a successful political process, in which the parties have reached an accord on all aspects of the peace negotiations. It is not necessarily preceded by a preliminary ceasefire.

In addition to other issues, a definitive ceasefire addresses broader security arrangements. In most cases, the active phase of a definitive ceasefire ends with the disarmament or demobilization of identified forces, but the follow-on security arrangements may remain in place for many years after an agreement has been signed. Definitive ceasefires are intricately linked to the political, social and economic dimensions of the broader peace agreement.

The Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement agreed to a permanent ceasefire as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005.⁴ One of its chapters outlined the permanent ceasefire and the security arrangements; its detailed annex stipulated implementation modalities.

3. Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Government of the State of Eritrea, 2000, <https://peacemaker.un.org/eritreathethiopia-cessationhostilities2000>.

4. Permanent Ceasefire between the Government of the Republic of the Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), 2004, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sudan-ceasefire-splma2004>.

1.2.2 Ceasefires defined by focus

Some ceasefires can be characterized by their focus. They may be designed to meet humanitarian objectives; to focus on a specific geographical area; to prohibit specific attacks on certain targets or the use of specific weaponry or tactics; or to secure a temporary suspension of hostilities.

Humanitarian pauses

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines a humanitarian pause as a “temporary cessation of hostilities purely for humanitarian purposes”. OCHA also notes: “Requiring the agreement of all relevant parties, [a humanitarian pause] is usually for a defined period and specific geographical area where the humanitarian activities are to be carried out.”⁵ International humanitarian law and related principles underpin all such arrangements and guide how negotiations for these arrangements should be undertaken with the stakeholders.

Negotiations for establishing and implementing humanitarian arrangements are best led by humanitarian actors, in part to ensure a focus on humanitarian objectives as opposed to political ends. If a humanitarian pause is sought while negotiations for a broader ceasefire are under way, close coordination of efforts on both tracks can help to avoid ambiguity around objectives, modalities and implementation mechanisms.

In 2004, the Government of Sudan, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army, and the Justice and Equality Movement signed the Humanitarian ceasefire Agreement on the Conflict in Darfur, a 45-day, renewable accord to ensure humanitarian access.⁶ The parties signed it in the context of a broader peace process.

Geographical ceasefires

Geographical (or local) ceasefires are limited to a physical area, such as a town or city, a region, a state or a province. While they may be designed to manage a hotspot, de-escalate conflict in a particular location or protect a specific population, they can simultaneously demonstrate goodwill and a party’s ability to exercise effective command and control over their forces. Geographical ceasefires can help to determine the feasibility of a wider ceasefire.

Among the challenges facing such ceasefires is the possibility that conflict parties will seek to redeploy or resupply forces in areas outside the ceasefire zone. Agreements can mitigate this risk if they include clear provisions on prohibited actions and if they establish a monitoring and verification mechanism to oversee ceasefire implementation (see Section 3.5 and Chapters 4 and 5). Mediators and conflict parties are encouraged to consider how geographical ceasefires could fit into a broader national ceasefire, should one be reached.

In 2018, the United Nations convened consultations during which the Government of Yemen and the Houthis signed the Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa. As the name suggests, this ceasefire agreement focused on a specific geographical region of Yemen (Hodeidah governorate).⁷

Sectoral ceasefires

Sectoral (or partial) ceasefires usually involve unilaterally declared or mutually agreed prohibitions on targeting certain groups (such as the police, civilians, women or religious entities) or infrastructure (such as the water or

BOX 1: The UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire, 2020

On 23 March 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres issued an appeal for an immediate global ceasefire to foster conditions for the delivery of critical aid, revive diplomatic channels and support communities most at risk of COVID-19 infection.

The appeal for a global ceasefire was anchored in short- to medium-term humanitarian objectives, even as it sought to reinforce diplomatic action in pursuit of peace. The call received vocal support from many UN Member States, a range of regional organizations, and international and local civil society actors, including a significant number of women’s organizations. The sustainability of such humanitarian truces depends on the cooperation of conflict parties (and their backers), whose calculations and objectives may be at odds with those of the humanitarian community.

5. OCHA, “Glossary of terms: pauses during conflict”, June 2011, <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/dms/Documents/AccessMechanisms.pdf>. For more details on humanitarian engagement with conflict parties, see OCHA, “Humanitarian access”, <https://www.unocha.org/themes/humanitarian-access>.

6. Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement on the Conflict in Darfur, 2004, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sudan-darfur-humanitarian2004>.

7. Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa, 2018, https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/hodeidah_agreement_0.pdf.



A ceasefire monitor from the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara looks through binoculars during a patrol in Oum Dreyga, Western Sahara, 2010
Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret

electricity supply, schools, hospitals or transportation hubs), or on using certain tactics or weaponry (such as aerial bombardment, missiles, artillery, mortars or landmines). Such ceasefires can help to build trust or signal a commitment to pursuing peace to a wider group of stakeholders. Mediators and conflict parties may use them in conjunction with other arrangements, such as geographical ceasefires (see Box 1).

In 2015, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) declared in a unilateral ceasefire that the group would not attack certain infrastructure – such as electrical pillars, pipelines and ports – or national security forces. In response, the Government of Colombia announced a unilateral suspension of bombardments on FARC camps, which helped the parties build mutual trust and facilitated the ongoing peace process.

Temporary ceasefires

Temporary ceasefires are established for a limited time, during which parties mutually agree to specified commitments, often in a particular geographical region. Such agreements can boost trust among parties as they negotiate a broader ceasefire.

In 1994, the Republic of Tajikistan and Tajik opposition agreed to a temporary ceasefire and the cessation of other hostile acts, on the Tajikistan - Afghan border and within the country, until the referendum on the draft of the new constitution and the election of the president.⁸

In 2018, both the then Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban observed unilateral, three-day Eid al-Fitr ceasefires.

1.2.3 Ceasefires defined by the number of actors involved

A ceasefire falls into one of three categories based on the number of conflict parties involved in its negotiation or declaration: unilateral, bilateral or multilateral.

Unilateral ceasefires

As the name suggests, unilateral ceasefires are declared by a single conflict party rather than as a result of negotiations between parties. Such ceasefires may be open-ended or apply for a specific period, with a provision for extension by a single party. The opposing party or parties may declare reciprocal unilateral ceasefires with their own terms and commitments.

Unilateral ceasefires can serve as declarations of good intent and as confidence-building measures. They may be linked to an occasion or activity, such as a festival, religious holiday, harvests, a planned peace process or a recent natural disaster.

In the absence of detail, cross-party coordination, and monitoring and verification procedures, unilateral ceasefires are prone to being viewed with suspicion and collapse. Mediators may encourage parties to consider such a ceasefire as part of an incremental approach, while offering technical support and advice for designing more sustainable unilateral ceasefires, as well as options for expanding those that may already be in place.

In 2004, after Indonesia was struck by a tsunami, the Free Aceh Movement declared a unilateral ceasefire, with the goal of facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid. The Government of Indonesia reciprocated with its own unilateral ceasefire, similarly guaranteeing the safety of aid workers.

Bilateral ceasefires

Bilateral ceasefires, or those between two parties, can be preliminary or definitive and may share characteristics with other ceasefires described in this section.

In 2016, the Government of Colombia and the FARC committed to a definitive, bilateral ceasefire. The agreement specified the manner in which the FARC would move its forces to designated normalization zones and camps.⁹

8. Agreement on a Temporary Ceasefire and the Cessation of Other Hostile Acts on the Tajik-Afghan Border and within the Country for the Duration of the Talks, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/TJ_940917_TehranAgreement.pdf.

9. Agreement on the Bilateral and Definitive Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities, and the Laydown of Weapons between the National Government and the FARC-EP, 2016, <https://peacemaker.un.org/ceasefire-colombia-2016>.

Multilateral ceasefires

Multilateral ceasefires are agreed among three or more conflict parties and can be preliminary or definitive. Considerations for a sustainable multi-stakeholder ceasefire may include the demarcation of geographical areas, arrangements for overlapping areas of control or influence, and the adoption of arrangements for liaison, communication and coordination.

In 2000, 19 parties to the Burundian civil war – 17 political parties and armed movements, the Government of Burundi and the National Assembly – signed the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement with various protocols and annexures. The third chapter of Protocol III (“Peace and Security for All”) contains provisions for a permanent ceasefire and cessation of hostilities.¹⁰

1.2.4 Other ceasefires

Based on their genesis or evolution, the following types of ceasefire may share attributes with some of those listed above.

Informal ceasefires

Informal ceasefires are “handshake agreements” or unwritten arrangements in which parties may agree to minimum prerequisites to avoid clashes, usually for a limited amount of time. They may be unilateral or bilateral and do not necessarily include monitoring.

In 1914, during the first Christmas of World War I, British and German enlisted troops instituted a day-long informal ceasefire, complete with exchanges of gifts and a football match.

De facto ceasefires

De facto ceasefires often refer to “frozen” conflicts in which both sides have obtained what they consider possible from a military standpoint, but there is no clarity on how political negotiations are to take place or how the state of conflict is to be terminated. De facto ceasefires tend to freeze the situation and manage the conflict rather than resolve it.

Since these ceasefires can promote a status quo of “no war, no peace”, parties in such situations are encouraged to adopt enhanced liaison, communication and coordination measures, as well as a monitoring and verification mechanism to build trust and prevent incidents. These steps can facilitate a move towards a more definitive solution to protect the civilian population, which would otherwise continue to bear the brunt of any continuing incidents.

A de facto ceasefire has persisted in Cyprus since August 1974, even though the parties never signed a formal bilateral ceasefire agreement.¹¹ The military status quo, as recorded by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus at the time, became the standard used to assess whether changes constituted violations of a ceasefire.

Imposed ceasefires

Imposed ceasefires are rare. They may be imposed by the UN Security Council or a regional or subregional organization. To ensure the parties feel bound by an imposed ceasefire, the imposing entities usually need to exert leverage over them or constitute a credible deterrent to stop them from violating it. Unless an imposed ceasefire is based on a realistic assessment of the context and an ability to follow up on the state of compliance by parties, it can become unstable and damage the credibility of those seeking to impose it.

Through United Nations Security Council resolution 2401 (2018), the Council demanded that all parties to the Syrian civil war suspend hostilities for a 30-day period to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid. It specified that the ceasefire did not apply to operations against terror groups, including Al-Qaida and the Islamic State.¹²

Through United Nations Security Council resolution 54 (1948), the Council ordered an unconditional ceasefire in Jerusalem, to take effect 24 hours from the time of the adoption of the resolution. It also instructed the Truce Commission to take any necessary steps to make this ceasefire effective, among other actions.¹³

10. Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi, 2000, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/1207>.

11. The Comprehensive Settlement of the Cyprus Problem, 31 March 2004, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Annan_Plan_MARCH_30_2004.pdf.

12. UN Security Council resolution 2401, 2018, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2401>.

13. UN Security Council resolution 54, 1948, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/54>.

KEY GUIDANCE POINTS: TERMINOLOGY AND A TYPOLOGY OF CEASEFIRES

- Ceasefires in intra-state civil wars are normally part of a broader political context. They are rarely stand-alone processes.
- Ceasefires can be preliminary or definitive. Each type is context-specific and involves distinct considerations, activities and mediation approaches.
- Ceasefires can be categorized according to dimensions such as their focus (humanitarian aid, geography, sector, permanence), the number of parties involved and their level of formality.
- The various types of ceasefire described in this chapter are illustrative only; mediators and conflict parties are encouraged to be innovative in adapting these broader frameworks to their respective contexts. This flexible approach is designed to assist mediators in navigating sensitivities around terminology, which may reflect political, regional or cultural preferences, translation-related issues, historical factors or local conflict dynamics.
- An understanding of the objectives and implications of different types of ceasefire can help conflict parties and mediators better identify and develop appropriate options for discussion in a given conflict setting.



Demobilization processes in Burundi

Weapons being burnt during the official launch of the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration process under the auspices of United Nations peacekeepers and observers, 2004.

Credit: UN Photo/Martine Perret