

## COVID-19: Diplomacy and the New Normal

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### Pandemic Diplomacy Series



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***In this EDA Reflection, the UAE ambassador to Nigeria highlights the vital role that 'humanitarian diplomacy' has played during the COVID-19 crisis and how the UAE and Nigeria have maintained their cooperation during the pandemic. He also posits that there will be an increased use of 'digital diplomacy' even after the virus has been defeated.***

The impact of COVID-19 in our world has been widely felt. There is hardly any aspect of everyday life not disrupted by this ravaging virus. Without much notice, we were ushered into a new, strange order. Individuals, organizations and countries had to sharply adjust to what many believe to be a paradigm shift. The typically predictable routines in our homes and workplaces were replaced by lockdowns, anxiety and uncertainty. But even worse, death tolls were mounting in different parts of the world from a truly devastating virus.

Diplomacy's age-long role in defining global politics and development is widely known, and yet it is also recognized for being a complex process. Diplomacy as we know and practice it isn't limited to formal engagements. If anything, diplomacy naturally thrives best when it also involves shaking of hands, exchange of informal remarks over tea breaks and the affective face-to-face conversations on sidewalks and lobbies. Sometimes, that is when the real decisions are made. Regrettably, COVID-19 has put an abrupt stop to such engagements. However, the place of diplomacy, even in a pandemic, remains paramount. Borders may be shut, but we cannot turn our gaze away from those who suffer or need help the most. The abiding principles of our diplomatic relations with other countries are to be

trusted friends and supportive allies in times of wars, famine, natural disasters, migration crisis, and definitely in times of viral outbreaks. The diplomatic network we have laboriously forged over the years remains an opportunity to better our conditions.

As health workers put their lives at risk to care for the infected and scientists' battle against time to find a cure, diplomats also have to seek innovative ways to extend aid, advice and all kinds of support to a truly needy world.

The pandemic has become a true test for human resolve, and how much we can adapt innovatively to problems. More than ever – especially in recent times – there seems to be a unanimity of purpose; one world against one enemy. With over 200 countries affected by the virus, there is a need for world leaders to show courage, resilience, and foster cooperation towards medical and humanitarian assistance as well as to find a vaccine or cure.

COVID-19 has thrust us into an era of 'humanitarian diplomacy.' We are charged to seek ways of spreading awareness about this peculiar pandemic, not only to ordinary citizens of the world, but also to policy stakeholders who need to make informed decisions that will save lives.

As a very important strategy for working together in this crucial time, diplomacy is adopting novel measures. Physical borders may be closed, but the world has developed efficient technologies with which we can communicate and assist one another. Thanks to digital platforms, high-level meetings like the G20 ministerial summit, G7 meeting, and other meetings organized by the United Nations, UN Security Council, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) to name a few are all taking place, virtually.

In Nigeria, we have to keep our engagement with local and international partners as well as with the Federal Government agencies going. We have and continue to hold virtual meetings and participate in virtual

conferences as well, to collectively seek solutions to common problems.

We have been able to have virtual interactions with various UN agencies and the International Organization for Migration; with discussions focused around strategies for response plans and relief efforts to address safety concerns of vulnerable people, especially Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in the northeast of Nigeria, as COVID-19 continues to spread across the country.

This informed our partnership with UNICEF during this period to donate 2,500 cartons of therapeutic food for malnourished children in northeast Nigeria to help them recover. As acknowledged by UNICEF, 'during a health crisis like this, nutrition is even more important than ever, helping to build immunity to disease.'

Participating in webinars and virtual meetings has become an integral part of our duties at the embassy. Recently, I was the keynote speaker at the 1st Forbes Nigeria Summit-Demo Day Finale, where I highlighted the continued efforts of the UAE to support and promote entrepreneurship in Nigeria. This initiative was sponsored by Forbes Magazine and the Global Startup Ecosystem, which enables top companies from Nigeria to help build and scale their respective businesses, giving Nigeria an even greater competitive advantage in the global arena.

In my virtual media interviews, I have highlighted the tremendous efforts the UAE has taken to support various countries affected by the Covid-19, and the need to do more. Although the platform for delivering the message has changed, the message remains the same.

Nigeria currently has over 40,000 cases since its first case was recorded on February 27, 2020. This has not stopped diplomatic engagement between both countries as we have continued to work or devise various means to boost our cooperation even more. Through a successful joint diplomatic engagement between various officials of both countries, we have so far repatriated up to 1,280 Nigerians from the UAE via several flights operated by Emirates Airlines.

In collaboration with the Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation and the Zayed Foundation, we were able to distribute Iftar meals to underprivileged communities during Ramadan, and also provided various COVID-19 safety kits to over 5,000 vulnerable households in Nigeria to help prevent the spread of the virus. These included UAE-branded reusable facemasks and hand sanitizers. We also commissioned 6 borehole projects to provide clean and portable drinking water across five states in the country with over 25,000 beneficiaries, while strictly adhering to various COVID-19 prevention and safety guidelines.

The UAE, through its actions, has given credence to the notion that this is the time diplomatic relations are

needed the most. The UAE has obviously proven itself a leader in this light. By the end of June, it had provided over 1,000 tons of medical supplies to 70 countries worldwide, reaching 60 million direct beneficiaries from UAE aid.

As aptly stated by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the UAE, speaking at a virtual meeting hosted by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Youth Council: "We live in a humanitarian dilemma which has verified the vital importance of scientists, scholars, researchers, doctors, nurses and medical personnel, whom we must wholeheartedly salute on account of the sacrifices they and their families are providing in order to perform their duty in the best way."

The UAE aid reaches a million medical workers worldwide, affirming the UAE's commitment to extending a hand of co-operation to the world, regardless of religion, race or ideology. This consolidates the fact that our diplomacy is built on desirable values like inclusion and tolerance. The role the UAE has played in all of this has been very commendable. Of course there is still more to be done, but we can be proud of how we have stuck with our friends, irrespective of the seas and oceans between us. We have employed the strength of diplomacy to reach out, even when it is difficult to do so. This signals the level of our diplomatic culture and leadership.

These and many more actions prove that diplomacy remains a veritable tool for not only enabling global friendship but for fighting a pandemic like COVID-19. In Nigeria, we have put on our thinking caps to enable diplomatic activity to continue as much as possible. As the lockdown eased, we gradually began to have some physical meetings, only where it is the best option, and we make sure to abide by all safety measures including wearing protective gear, engaging in proper social distancing and frequent personal sanitation, among others.

Sometimes, the significance of a crisis are the lessons we can take away from them. While COVID-19 makes physical meetings almost impossible, we have realized that it is necessary to adopt and even retain some of the virtual communication technologies and strategies in a post pandemic world. Virtual meetings may not be most appropriate for negotiations, especially on sensitive issues, but they are very important for discussing routine issues in a way that will save time and costs.

The lesson from this pandemic borders on the need to constantly preempt what may happen without necessarily slipping into pessimism, but with a positive mindset of adapting, improvising and overcoming. Everything, including diplomacy is evolving, and we must have the right tools, as well as mindset for these changes. By the time we announce the last case of this virus, it will also be registered that diplomacy played no small role in that victory.