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TOP LINE

Scientific models predict the likelihood for abnormally severe hurricane and wildfire seasons this year. Additionally, last week's 5.5 magnitude earthquake in Puerto Rico served as a reminder that earthquakes are unpredictable in their timing and severity. Yet, singular focus on COVID-19 has often left traditional disaster response planning on the back burner. Furthermore, the existence of COVID-19 has changed our views of what measures constitute appropriate disaster response. By their nature, evacuations during natural disasters involve moving large numbers of people to shelters or other safe locations where they often live in very close proximity to others. A large-scale example is the mass evacuation of New Orleans, LA, residents to the Superdome during Hurricane Katrina. Life-saving in many instances, such methods could be viewed as irresponsible amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, other options for housing, feeding, and protecting large numbers of victims without putting them in one location would be very challenging, to say the least.

Natural disasters combined with the current pandemic environment creates the potential for a compounding effect. COVID-19 has stretched health and emergency response systems and natural disasters will exacerbate that strain. Areas already struggling to manage the pandemic may reach the breaking point when faced with another unpredictable set of emergency circumstances. As such, updated disaster response guidance is essential to allow businesses and populations to prepare for when COVID-19 and natural disasters inevitably collide. COVID-19 cases, along with social distancing measures, are likely to continue through the summer in most areas; this highlights the importance of evaluating how to admit evacuees who have, or are suspected to have, COVID-19 into the shelters essential for their protection without placing others at undue risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic is creating the 'context' in which daily life will progress until a vaccine is produced and distributed to enough of the population to create herd immunity. It is important for business leaders to remember other disasters can and will occur this year. The potential for geopolitical hotspots across the globe to erupt is high, as preexisting fault-lines are further stressed by the pandemic. Additionally, skyrocketing unemployment will lead to increased homelessness and resource scarcity including food and shelter, without massive federal assistance. These variables and others will only exacerbate social unrest if either the health or economic disasters drag on too long.

Organizations should focus some of their crisis management bandwidth on creating clear and consistent crisis management systems, procedures, policies, and guidelines to account for COVID-19 social distancing measures, PPE, delays in material and funds, and other necessary considerations this pandemic will force on current response plans. Such planning is particularly critical amid COVID-19 caused travel restrictions and supply chain disruption, which will only be exacerbated by other crises.

Questions to Consider: As the U.S. approaches hurricane and wildfire season, how has the COVID-19 pandemic changed our approach to traditional risk management and disaster response planning?

What is the duty of care for safeguarding a remote or dispersed workforce in a natural disaster or other threat environment?

COVID-19: THE HIGHLIGHTS

Entering May 2020, confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide have resulted in over [3.6 million](#) people infected and over [250,000](#) dead. In the U.S., confirmed COVID-19 cases topped [1.2 million](#), with over [71,000](#) dead. Declining death tolls throughout much of Europe are leading to [easing](#) of quarantine restrictions as companies and parks begin to reopen; however, many small shops remain closed as owners remain focused on meeting strict health guidelines. U.S. death tolls appear to have leveled slightly; however, they remain on an upward trend with [projections](#) indicating the possibility of approximately 200,000 confirmed infections and 3,000 deaths per day by early June. Additionally, COVID-19 infection and mortality rates have not slowed in emerging markets such as Russia, India, and Brazil. Meanwhile, mortality rates in the [U.S.](#) and [worldwide](#) are well above typical averages, raising questions of the true COVID-19 caseload. As the pandemic continues and the virus overwhelms some places, while leaving others nearly untouched, the data paints an [uncertain](#) picture. Contrasts span the globe, from Iran and Iraq, to the Dominican Republic and Haiti, to Indonesia and Malaysia. High virus rates in New York, London, and Paris contrast the relatively low in New Delhi, Bangkok, and Lagos despite already overwhelmed healthcare systems and subpar hygiene in the latter cities. Researchers hope investigation into demographics, culture, environments, and government responses will provide a window into the virus's varying effects; these insights have the potential to inform mitigation strategies and aid in the reopening of global commerce.

BEYOND THE NOISE

Extreme weather: This year is predicted to be one of the most [active](#) Atlantic hurricane seasons on record with at least four major [hurricanes](#), highlighting the need to [plan](#) for hurricane response in the context of a pandemic. Additionally, abnormally warm temperatures in the [Gulf of Mexico](#) have the potential to intensify the strength of tornados in Tornado Alley. Increasing [temperatures](#) and lower rainfall during California fire season has resulted in a [doubling](#) of the frequency of autumn days with

extreme fire weather conditions. These conditions have resulted in the two largest fires in California state history occurring in the past three years, emphasizing the importance of advance planning.

- Secure planning: Promote advance planning for seasonal natural disasters in the context of COVID-19. Consider alternatives to traditional evacuation and sheltering options to account for social distancing measures.

Unpredictable disasters: Puerto Rico has yet to recover from Hurricane Maria which devastated the country in 2017; last week's 5.4 magnitude [quake](#) reinforced the unpredictability of such disasters. Rebuilding economically depressed areas after natural disasters requires collective community response, a task made particularly difficult during COVID-19 quarantine [measures](#). Further compounding such challenges, researchers predict the economic contraction caused by COVID-19 could push an additional 500 million people into [poverty](#). Additionally, deaths from secondary impacts of COVID-19, such as poverty, hunger, disease, and violence exacerbated by the virus, are expected to dwarf the number of those who die from the virus itself.

- Secure stability: Consider ways to partner with local resources to provide assistance in insecure and uncertain environments. Ensure clear and consistent communication in preparation for unpredictable events and potentially violent situations.

Changing landscape: Social distancing brought about by COVID-19 has dulled the appeal of crowded [urban](#) metropolises. Empty city streets feel apocalyptic in places where the sense of vibrancy often came from diverse populations packed together. Additionally, some businesses with large workforces packed in [skyscrapers](#) or central headquarters are considering permanently moving their workforces to smaller offices or other locations to account for social distancing measures.

- Secure location: Consider how COVID-19 social distancing measures may alter workforce location strategy in the long term. Evaluate which elements of a workforce may be permanently relocated from crowded hubs or transitioned to permanent remote work.

TRUSTED RESOURCES: for numbers & guidance

[Johns Hopkins University](#) – Coronavirus Resource Center

[World Health Organization](#) – COVID-19 Pandemic

[Center for Disease Control](#) – Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Please contact Secure Source International at info@securesource.com to schedule a leadership roundtable with our intelligence and security experts to dive into these topics and discuss security and safety related best-practices.