

44th session of the Human Rights Council
Global update on human rights and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

30 June 2020

Distinguished President of the Council,

Excellencies,

Colleagues and Friends,

I am honoured to discuss with the Council the report on the work of my Office in 2019, including our more than 80 field presences (report A/HRC/43/3). The report outlines our efforts to assist States to uphold all human rights, at a time of increasing challenges.

Those challenges are rising sharply today. I am glad to have this opportunity to update the Human Rights Council on our human rights concerns related to COVID-19, which continues to gather pace – including many countries with limited medical, social and economic capacity to cope with its consequences.

Six months after the first cases were detected, it is clear that this epidemic threatens both peace and development – and that it calls for *more* civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, not less.

The pandemic should spur us to adopt strong, transformative measures to heighten the powerful protections that human rights based-policies can provide – by promoting public health, public confidence in official guidance, and greater social and economic resilience.

It urgently calls for leadership grounded in clarity, evidence and principle to protect the most vulnerable members of society, and to address the profound **inequalities** that are accelerating the pandemic's incidence and impact.

Wherever they exist, disaggregated data indicate that members of **racial and ethnic minorities** and **indigenous peoples** are both more likely to die of COVID-19 and are hit the hardest by its socio-economic consequences. This is particularly true of **people of African descent**, who – across every area of the Afro-descendant diaspora – continue to face unequal education; inadequate services and access to health-care; and intersecting forms of structural discrimination that put them on the front lines in so-called “essential” jobs that deepen their vulnerability.

Indigenous peoples are also particularly vulnerable. Inadequate access to health-care and other key facilities exacerbates their risk from the pandemic, while the absence of disaggregated data hinders the adoption of tailored measures to address their needs. It is time for this neglect to end.

I note that pandemic response plans in **Australia** and **Costa Rica** lay out specific efforts to protect the health of indigenous peoples, while **Panama** is implementing a long-term project to improve basic services and infrastructure, including health care, in its 12 indigenous territories. The **Russian Federation** has reported that it is using remote technologies to improve medical services for indigenous nomadic groups in the context of the pandemic.

COVID-19 aggravates the exclusion and discrimination suffered by **women and girls**: their lack of social protection, stemming from their concentration in informal, low status and low-paid jobs; their burden of care for children and the elderly; and the continued exclusion of women from decision-making. Pervasive gender-based violence has also grown in the last few months, with increased number of users of 24/7 hotlines for domestic violence. This situation risks rolling back hard-fought gains for women's health, economic participation and equal rights.

Older people are suffering the highest death tolls and worst medical harms. The shocking rates of contagion, and deaths, in **residential care homes** suggest profound shortcomings in the approach taken by some national authorities to the pandemic's impact on the care home sector, as well as the quality of medical surveillance and services they provide. I join the [Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#) in calling for social care reforms that prioritise individualised support to older people, and promote their full inclusion in their communities. The provision of vital services for [people with disabilities](#) should also be significantly strengthened.

[Places of detention](#) require upgraded health care, and non-custodial alternatives should be expanded. I welcome action taken by numerous Governments to enable the release of tens of thousands of prisoners, in line with our calls to address contagion and over-crowding. I urge a stronger focus on releasing women and children who are deprived of their liberty, in light of the low numbers released globally, as well as action to uphold foreign detainees' rights to consular assistance.

The pandemic is also likely to generate profound and long-lasting impacts on **children**. UNICEF has reported that unless there is urgent action to protect families from the economic impacts of the pandemic, the number of [children living below national poverty lines](#) could increase by 15 per cent in 2020, reaching 672 million. The World Food Programme estimates that the number of young children suffering [acute malnutrition](#) could increase by 10 million this year. Disruption to schools and training programmes heightens the risk of the poorest children falling behind and increases children's exposure to the threat of domestic violence, [child labour](#), [child marriage](#), and [female genital mutilation](#). We are also seeing signs of a surge in online sexual exploitation of children.

The closure of training programmes, higher education and jobs also creates heavy burdens on **young people under the age of 25**: globally, over 75% of young people work in informal jobs, often in very hard-hit sectors, such as restaurants and entertainment services. This will have a profound impact on many countries, as well as on **migration** trends: young people under the age of 30 account for around [70 per cent of international migrant flows](#). Already,

the pandemic's interlocking health, socio-economic and protection impacts are deepening the suffering of **migrants** . In particular, many migrants are detained in overcrowded and unsanitary centres – such as in **Greece, Honduras, Malaysia, and Panama**– where they are at risk of infection, as well as forced return to fragile health systems.

I am dismayed by reports indicating that in many countries, members of minority communities and migrants face increasing stigmatisation – including, in some cases, by officials. In **Sri Lanka** and **India**, members of the Muslim minority are being targeted by stigma and hate speech associating them with COVID-19. In **Bulgaria**, Roma people have been stigmatised as a public health threat, with some local authorities setting up checkpoints around Roma settlements to enforce lockdowns. In **Pakistan**, hate speech against religious minorities remains virulent. Stigmatization and threats against people presumed to be infected by COVID-19 have also been reported in **Haiti, Iraq** and many other countries.

In its urgent debate two weeks ago, this Council rightly highlighted the importance of **principled and non-discriminatory policing** in upholding human rights. I welcome the opportunity to intensify our work relating to justice for people of African descent and other discriminated communities at a time when people across the globe are demanding change – not just with regard to police violence. Too often, unjust and violent actions by law enforcement personnel reflect systemic racial discrimination that is deeply embedded in institutions across society, and as recent events, including COVID-19, have shown, it is time for urgent and deep change in many States.

Discrimination kills. Depriving people of their social and economic rights, kills. And these deaths and harms damage all of society. COVID-19 is like a heat-seeking device that exposes, and is fuelled by, systemic failures to uphold human rights.

Without rapid and decisive national and international action, the pandemic will **put an end to hopes to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030** .

Particularly in the world's poorest countries, the high toll of death and medical harms; massive loss of jobs, especially in the informal economy; disruptions to education; rising food prices; and deepening poverty are likely to drive tens of millions of people into extreme poverty, undoing a decade or more of development gains. The Secretary-General has warned of an imminent global food crisis, with long-term repercussions for "hundreds of millions of children and adults."

I urge all world leaders to grasp the vital importance of this moment, and to take immediate action to support the work of multilateral institutions that are struggling to assist countries and people in this crisis.

Across the world COVID-19 is also being instrumentalised to limit people's rights to speak, to express opinions and to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. In the **Russian Federation, China, Kosovo** [\[1\]](#), **Nicaragua** and many other countries, I note reports of threats and intimidation against journalists, bloggers and civic activists, particularly at the local level, with the apparent aim of discouraging criticism of the authorities' responses to COVID-19.

In **Egypt**, I am concerned by restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly – including with respect to online discussion of the spread of COVID-19 – as well

as crackdowns on civil society, with asset freezes, intimidation and arrests targeting human rights defenders, journalists, political activists and their family members.

El Salvador 's pandemic response has led to numerous reports of excessive and arbitrary enforcement of measures, as well as announcements that undermine the authority and independence of the country's institutions – disregarding rulings made by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and legislation adopted by the Legislative Assembly.

Censorship and criminalization of speech are likely to suppress crucial information needed to address the pandemic. And only respect for their rights - including the right to participate in transparent and accountable decision-making – will inspire people to trust the policies adopted by their Governments. Harmful disinformation should be countered by efforts to provide credible, accurate information from authoritative sources and promote social media literacy. Journalists, human rights defenders and civil society activists can assist the authorities to identify and resolve shortcomings in their COVID-19 responses – and crackdowns are not only unjust violations of their rights; they damage the effectiveness of policies to prevent and mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

Madam President,

It is vital that leaders maintain consistent, credible and fact-based communication with the people they serve.

I am encouraged by the **Republic of Korea**'s open and communicative approach to leaving no one behind in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government acknowledged early on the need for comprehensive policies that reach the most vulnerable in Korean society, including older people, the homeless, the LGBTI community and undocumented migrants. I commend the authorities for exempting medical institutions from reporting the undocumented migration status of their patients, and for recently enabling anonymous testing, after issues which resulted in increased stigmatisation of LGBTI people. I encourage consideration and swift adoption of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, building on the lessons learned from its response to the pandemic.

In contrast, in **Belarus, Brazil, Burundi, Nicaragua, Tanzania** and the **United States** – among others – I am concerned that statements that deny the reality of viral contagion, and increasing polarisation on key issues, may intensify the severity of the pandemic by undermining efforts to curb its spread and strengthen healthcare systems.

Madam President,

COVID-19 is deepening local and regional threats to peace. People in States where health and essential services have already been devastated by **conflict and crises** are acutely vulnerable to the pandemic's multidimensional harms. I reiterate my call for the easing or suspension of **sectorial sanctions**, in order to ensure that medical care and aid is accessible to all; and I reaffirm my strong support for the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire to enable effective pandemic action.

In **Yemen**, armed clashes continue across the country, despite initial encouraging responses to the Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire. The current rapid spread of COVID-19 – as well as cholera, malaria and dengue fever – make it imperative to allow **unhindered delivery of**

humanitarian aid. The very high rates of severe complications and deaths from COVID-19 reflect the widespread destruction of Yemen's health and sanitation infrastructure, and the poverty and vulnerability of civilians generated by five years of conflict. Many health workers in the country have no protective equipment, according to reports, and most are receiving no salaries. My Office has also verified cases of intimidation and arrests of people suspected of having COVID-19, and health workers who discussed the epidemic in the North.

Access to humanitarian assistance is also of critical importance in **Syria**, where healthcare centres repeatedly bombed during almost a decade of war could be swiftly overwhelmed. OCHA estimates that 80% of people in Syria live below the poverty line, and WFP has already documented rising food insecurity. Continued and increased cross-border access is essential, and I urge extension of the **authorization of cross-border aid** by the Security Council, as well as the reopening of the **Al-Yaroubiya border**.

I am also concerned that the current grave human rights situation in the **Sahel** region may further deteriorate, as the impact of COVID-19 increases people's suffering, poverty and grievances. Already, armed extremist groups are strengthening their influence over local communities in central and northern Mali, northern Burkina Faso and parts of the Lake Chad basin. Several communities in Burkina Faso and central Mali have created armed community-based groups – in some cases with the support of state authorities – with growing reports of their involvement in killings, abductions, forced conscription of children and adults, and extortion. Increasing human rights violations by the armed forces have also been documented in several countries, and displacement is rising sharply across the region, heightening people's vulnerability to contagion by COVID-19. I urge all G5 States to step up efforts to ensure accountability for allegations of human rights violations by security forces, and to strengthen as much as possible the presence of civilian authorities and their provision of services. The Office will continue to strengthen our field presences, and our work with the compliance framework of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

In **South Sudan**, COVID-19 could further heighten the extreme vulnerability of its population. Many, if not most, South Sudanese do not benefit from adequate health-care systems, as a recent report by my Office confirmed. In addition, the slow pace of implementation of the revitalized peace agreement, including the appointment of Governors, and failure to address root causes put the country at significant risk of renewed generalized violence. Community-based militias and self-defence groups are being armed with military-grade weapons and used as proxy fighters by all parties, and these localised and inter-communal attacks are already causing very high numbers of casualties.

Haiti, where almost 60% of the population lives under the poverty line, is a clear example of countries where, after years of crises, the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 is likely to be devastating – further fuelling social grievances, criminality and unrest.

Zimbabwe is yet another country where COVID-19 is exacerbating severe challenges. Last month three women from the main opposition party were reportedly abducted and tortured in the context of enforcement of COVID restrictions – and were later charged with "false allegations" and incarcerated. However, recent decisions by the country's courts could indicate a pathway towards greater justice and a more sound foundation of governance. These include rulings that the Government must make provisions for access to water as a right, and must provide protective equipment to frontline workers; that people with disabilities have a right to information about the pandemic in accessible formats; and that law enforcement must

respect human rights and the work of journalists while enforcing lockdown measures. Action in this direction could help build a new and transformative path for many countries.

Excellencies,

The pandemic is not over yet. Yesterday Dr Tedros told us that "the worst is yet to come" – and we need to continue working together to defeat the pandemic and its social and economic consequences.

To ensure that the suffering of peoples is ended as swiftly as possible, and to enable effective recovery, policies must address the inequalities and protection gaps that have made societies so vulnerable. They must look ahead, strengthening human rights protections, to prevent such crises in the future. The Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights is a strong and principled framework for coordinated action to realise a rights-based recovery, including the human right to a healthy environment.

The **European Commission's** proposal for a multi-year response to the pandemic that tackles action for renewable energy together with public health and socio-economic support, committing to leave no one behind, is an example of sound leadership. I note that in some countries, the recession sparked by the pandemic is already leading to calls by industries for regulations to be relaxed – including in sectors where human rights abuses are often reported. Such calls should be resisted.

We need to build a new economy that is environmentally sustainable, equitable and fair and inclusive. I encourage all States to ensure that economic aid and stimulus packages for businesses stipulate that **beneficiary companies should follow the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights** . This conditionality has already been included in business aid measures adopted by **Denmark**.

The pandemic, and its impact, must be addressed with coordinated and global work – including for a vaccine, which must be viewed as a global public good. A person's wealth, gender or migration status should not determine accessibility to a vaccine that may save individual lives, but also the future of economies and societies. **Any lack of international cooperation, and any effort that prioritises private profit or political gain over public health** , will extend repeated cycles of infection and hinder economic recovery.

Swift and effective measures have been taken by many developing countries, including in Africa, drawing from the region's expertise in contact tracing and community-based public health. But the epidemic is spreading, and to hold it back, many countries will require sustained international support, including debt relief and direct financial investment to shore up health systems and ensure fulfilment of the right to development.

To facilitate effective responses that address the human rights impacts of COVID-19, my Office has issued detailed guidance regarding [emergency measures](#) , the [civic space](#) , [detention](#) , indigenous peoples, [migrants](#) , [minorities](#) , [women](#) , [racial discrimination](#) , [LGBTI people](#) , older people and [people with disabilities](#) . We have also developed a framework of [ten human rights indicators](#) – building on the data frameworks of the SDGs and the Global Humanitarian Response Plan – to enable clarity in identifying especially hard-hit and vulnerable groups, and assist the implementation of effective policies

to avert these harms. These key indicators have been appended to the [framework document](#) that guides all UN socio-economic responses to COVID-19.

To further advance this vital work, and ensure that human rights are at the heart of the response to the pandemic, we need support. Global socio-economic forecasts predict at least two years of dramatic decreases in human development indicators across the world. We have accompanied and shared your determined efforts to maintain the health, safety and well-being of your peoples, at huge cost – on every level. But without close and targeted attention to social cohesion, to inclusion and to fairness, these efforts cannot offset the deprivation that has swept up entire communities.

We must all acknowledge that human rights are critical to the recovery. At this crucial time, we also need to be able to count on steady, predictable resources and firm political will in the months and years ahead. The risks are already enormous. A strengthened partnership can mitigate them. Your engagement can and will make the difference – now and in the days to come.

Thank you Madam President.

