



44th SESSION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

ITEM 2 - Oral update on the human rights implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

44th session of the Human Rights Council– 30 June 2020

Background documentation:

- [A/HRC/PRST/43/1](#) Statement by the President of the HRC “Human rights implications of the COVID-19 pandemic”

Ms. Michelle Bachelet – OHCHR, High Commissioner for Human Rights:

Introduction:

6 months after the first Covid-19 cases were registered, the epidemic now threatens peace and development all around the world. The pandemic must push us to adopt strong measures to **promote and protect human rights**.

There is an urgent need for **leadership**, grounded in clarity and evidence. **Multilateralism** have to be strengthened in this moment of vital importance.

Covid-19 exposes **systemic failures to uphold human rights** and **deepens inequalities**.

The pandemic can end our hope to **achieve the SDGs by 2030** if the world does not react urgently.

Vulnerable Groups:

Data indicated that **vulnerable groups** are more likely to die of Covid-19 and face greater consequences of the economic and social measures.

Indigenous peoples and **people of African descent** are particularly vulnerable. The OHCHR welcomes pandemic response plans in some countries, establishing specific responses to protect indigenous people.

The pandemic is deepening the suffering of **migrants**. Many are detained in unhealthy and crowded facilities. In many countries around the world, ethnic minorities and migrants face rising **discriminations and hate speech**.

The OHCHR welcomed the urgent debate held during the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council, and the opportunity to **promote the human rights of people with African descent**. Recent events showed how systemic **xenophobia and racism** are present in our societies.

There is a strong need to prioritize **older people** in the response plans. Older people are one of the most vulnerable segments of the population. They must have access to health assistance and benefit social protection.

The shocking rate of contagion should be a wake-up call regarding the quality of our **social and health care** systems. We must make sure to put the emphasis on our healthcare systems in the recovery plans.

The OHCHR welcomes the initiatives to **release tens of thousands of prisoners** around the world, in line with the call it issued during the pandemic, to **reduce overcrowding in prisons**.

Women and girls are at the forefront during the pandemic. They lack social protection and tend to be more exposed to the virus. The increase of **gender-based violence** observed during the lockdowns is also very concerning.

The pandemic will have a long-lasting **impact on children**: disruption in schools, **domestic violence**, **child labour**, **child marriage**, female genital mutilations, and surge in online exploitation of children have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Unless urgent action is undertaken, the number of children below poverty could increase by 16%.

Instrumentalization of Covid-19 to reduce freedoms:

Covid-19 is also instrumentalized to **reduce liberties**. In many countries around the world, we observed a **concerning trend of censorship and criminalization**, leading to the silencing of journalists and human rights defenders, reducing freedom of expression and of assembly. The pandemic caused a **global crackdown on civil society** around the world and is threatening democratic institutions.

Disinformation should be combatted. Journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations can **assist authorities in their Covid-19 responses**. It is vital that leaders maintain **transparency** with their people.

Country situations:

The OHCHR reiterates its call for a **global ceasefire** and for the **suspension of unilateral sanctions**.

In **Yemen**, a ceasefire is needed more than ever. The high rate of severe complications from Covid-19 reflects the dire conditions and the weakness of the health system, destroyed by years of conflict.

In **Syria**, access to humanitarian assistance is urgently needed, as the WFP is warning us of a forthcoming food crisis.

In the **Sahel region** the human rights situation is concerning. Extremist groups are extending their influence in **Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad**.

In **South Sudan**, Covid-19 could further heighten vulnerabilities of the population. The pandemic puts South Sudan at the risk of instability.

Haiti is a clear example of a country in which the social and economic impact of Covid-19 can have disastrous effects, erasing years of social and economic improvements.

In **Zimbabwe**, Covid-19 restrictions endanger the human rights situation in the country. However, the response by the government have the possibility to help build a new and transformative path.

Conclusion: a human rights-based response is needed

As stated by the WHO this week, **the worst is just to come in this pandemic**. We need to continue working together to defeat the pandemic.

The **vaccine** must be viewed as a **global public good**. Accessibility to the vaccine must be universal. Any lack of efforts that prioritize political gain will extend cycles of infections.

A **human rights-based approach is the best response to face this pandemic**. The recovery must ensure no one is left behind. Renewable energy, social protection and strengthening of the health system should be the guiding principles of the governments responses worldwide.