



## INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

### HUMAN RIGHTS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Centre for Democracy and Development - 14 May 2020

Panellists:

**Ms Anietie Ewang**, Research and Advocacy Officer, Human Rights Watch, Nigeria

**Ms Osai Ojigho**, Country Director, Amnesty International, Nigeria

**Mr Tony Ojukwu**, Executive Secretary, National Human Rights Commission, Nigeria

Moderator: **Kemi Okeyodo**, Executive Director, Partners West Africa Nigeria

Anietie Ewang opened the panel by stating that the pandemic has created tremendous problems of uncertainty in Nigeria, in terms of loss of livelihoods and human rights violations by law enforcement agents, including extortion, bribery to get around travel restrictions, and even extra-judicial killings. This is shocking, for the restrictions imposed and their enforcement are meant to protect the lives of civilians from the virus. There currently exists an all-pervasive lack of trust and public support, flowing from the arbitrary and excessive use of force. There is therefore urgent need of the following measures: bring all stakeholders – enforcers and beneficiaries – to the table for a transparent and constructive dialogue; examine mid to long-term solutions to reinstate the rule of law; provide clear directives and accord limited discretionary powers to law enforcement agencies, in accordance with international legal standards; and, establish mechanisms for internal oversight, monitoring, accountability, and disciplinary measures.

Osai Ojiho addressed the issue of accountability parameters that need to be put in place, linked to respect for human rights. This has become critical as the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing problems in this domain. The accountability gaps are deepened by a rising culture of impunity, absence of dissuasive sanctions, lack of reliable public information, resulting in widening distrust between law enforcement agents and the citizens they have the responsibility to protect. There is a pressing need for independent assessments, and oversight mechanisms, to ensure respect of national obligations with regard to international human rights instruments.

Tony Ojukwu dealt with the question of how and which human rights are affected by the lockdown and what are the opportunities for adequate policy responses. The affected rights were those of movement, assembly, in particular religious group activities. The Nigerian National Human Rights Commission had vigorously attempted to prepare the minds of people to face these restrictions and cope with them, but they had equally feared human rights violations by law enforcement officials, cited by the first panellist. There was therefore need to garner public support, through the establishment of hotlines, to monitor violations and rebuild trust. The briefings to law enforcement officials need to be very clear, with directives on how to handle specific situations while safeguarding the protection of human rights. These implementation measures have to be made to work if they are to become credible and not remain pure rhetoric.

#### Q&A Session

A question was asked on why there was insufficient emphasis on the duties of citizens, as against that placed on their rights. In the view of the panel, the answer was to be found in a reinforcement of the bonds of solidarity, both horizontally between citizens themselves, and vertically between the citizens and the authorities.