



**Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (Third Committee)  
United Nations General Assembly, 75<sup>th</sup> Session**

**Overview of Thematic and Country Discussions: Quick Summary**



*Photo: UN WebTV (8 October 2020)*



During the **75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly**, the Third Committee, tasked with addressing human rights issues and concerns, ran from 5 October – 20 November at UN Headquarters in New York, and online. The following summary focuses exclusively on **interactive dialogues and general debates** that took place from 5 October to 3 November 2020 and does not include the adoption of draft resolutions and the ensuing debates.

63 mandate holders and other experts, representing **55 thematic mandates and 8 country-specific mandates**<sup>1</sup>, presented their reports, including **thematic presentations** by the **Working Groups** on the issue of discrimination against women and girls; on enforced or involuntary disappearances, on the use of mercenaries; on the right to development; and on people of African descent. **Special Rapporteurs** on violence against women; on the sale and sexual exploitation of children; on the rights of indigenous peoples; on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the independence of judges and lawyers; on countering terrorism; on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures; on the right to development; on the situation of human rights defenders; on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; on the human rights of migrants; on freedom of religion or belief; on the human rights of internally displaced persons; on the right to education; on extreme poverty; on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation; on adequate housing; on the rights of persons with disabilities; on cultural rights; on human rights by persons with albinism; on the right to freedom of opinion and expression; on minority issues; on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; on the right to healthy environment; on hazardous substances and wastes; on the right to food; on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; on contemporary forms of slavery; on the right to privacy; on the right to health; and on discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. **Independent Experts** on human rights and international solidarity; on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; on the effects of foreign debt. **Country-specific presentations** by the **Special Rapporteurs** on the situations of human rights in Myanmar; in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; in the Islamic Republic of Iran; in Eritrea; in Belarus; in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967; in Somalia; and by the Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi. Chairpersons of all the **Human Rights Treaty Bodies** took part in the discussions.

Also taking part in the discussions were the President of the General Assembly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the President of the Human Rights Council, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, the Deputy Executive Director of the UN-Women, the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, the Director of the New York Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar, and Senior Advisor on Policy to the Secretary-General, among others.

Among the **issues raised** where those related to:

**Women's rights.** States should take modified measures to secure women's peace and safety at home, including e-helplines and the use of hotels as shelters. There is a big need for data collection, including on femicide and other critical issues. Governments should work on prevention and treatment strategies of obstetric fistula. UNDP and UN Women's newly launched [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#) shows the social protection and jobs response to the pandemic has largely overlooked women's needs.

**Children's rights.** 2019 had witnessed an alarming rise in grave violations of children's rights, including a 400% increase in cases of denial of humanitarian access to children. Positive developments: the efforts to hold parties of conflict to account had led to a record number of 27,000 children being released. Due to the lockdown and travel restrictions brought on by the pandemic, children are spending more time online, hence the need to tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children announced an upcoming report detailing the many ways that the pandemic has impacted children, featuring the responses of 30,000 children from 130 countries.

---

<sup>1</sup> Full list of can be found here: <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/75/docs/dialogues.pdf>



**COVID-19 and human rights:** a number of Special Rapporteurs have dedicated their recent reports to the COVID-19 impacts.

<p>Special Rapporteur on the rights of <b>indigenous peoples</b> <a href="#">A/75/185</a> – Impact of the coronavirus disease on the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples, including increased health risks, as well as the sources of resilience of indigenous peoples, State and indigenous responses to the pandemic and the adverse and disproportionate impact of confinement and emergency measures observed on indigenous peoples.</p>	<p>Indigenous people feel particularly forgotten and left behind, and are especially vulnerable to COVID-19, largely due to inadequate access to health care, escalating numbers of evictions from their lands, and high rates of poverty.</p>
<p>Special Rapporteur on <b>extreme poverty</b> and human rights <a href="#">A/75/181</a> – The “just transition” in the economic recovery: eradicating poverty within planetary boundaries.</p>	<p>Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, between 150 million and 175 million more people will fall into extreme poverty. Most of them are workers in the informal sector or in precarious employment conditions; most of them are women.</p>
<p>Special Rapporteur on <b>adequate housing</b> <a href="#">A/75/148</a> – COVID-19 and the right to adequate housing: impacts and the way forward</p>	<p>More than 1.8 billion people do not have decent habitation or live in informal settlements where physical distancing is difficult or impossible. Millions risk losing their home due to the economic impact of the pandemic. In this context, lacking access to adequate housing is also a health issue — even a life and death issue.</p>
<p>Independent Expert on the effects of <b>foreign debt</b> <a href="#">A/75/164</a> – Addressing, from a human rights perspective, the debt-related problems of developing countries caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic</p>	<p>“Debt standstill”, including extension of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative, as well as more international cooperation is needed to prepare for a robust, sustained and inclusive global economic recovery.</p>
<p>Special Rapporteur on the <b>right to privacy</b> <a href="#">A/75/147</a> – Preliminary evaluation of the privacy dimensions of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic</p>	<p>The main privacy risk lies in the employment of non-consensual methods — such as hybrid surveillance — which can be used for other purposes. Technology-driven contact tracing has become disturbingly close to incessant and omnipresent surveillance.</p>
<p>Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on <b>sexual orientation and gender identity</b> <a href="#">A/75/258</a> – Violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.</p>	<p>While following recommendations to stay at home, LGBTI persons are forced to endure prolonged exposure to unaccepting family members, which aggravates rates of domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse. The reallocation of health resources has also intensified shortages of antiretrovirals for those living with HIV and impacted the ability of trans men and women to receive hormonal therapy or gender-affirming care.</p>
<p>Special Rapporteur on <b>contemporary forms of racism</b> <a href="#">A/75/239</a> – An increase in antisemitic incidents and conspiracy theories since the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19)</p>	<p>COVID-19 has exposed interlinking crises — a public health disaster, along with ethnonationalist rhetoric and politics — laying bare how dangerous intolerance, racialized and religious suspicion and fear can be to the social fabric that sustains prosperous and safe communities. With populist regimes and extremists exploiting anxieties about the pandemic, the ethnonationalism affects the very structures that are supposed to promote and protect human rights.</p>
<p>Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of <b>peaceful assembly</b> and <b>association</b> A set of <a href="#">10 guiding principles and indications</a> was launched by another Special Rapporteur with an aim to give States and other key stakeholders recommendations to ensure their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic do not infringe upon the rights to peaceful assembly and association.</p>	



Special Mandate holder reports on **thematic issues** covered a range of topics:

<b>Torture and ill-treatment</b> from the perspective of <b>neurobiology</b> and <b>social psychology</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/179</a> , Special Rapporteur on Torture).
<b>Contemporary populism</b> and the enjoyment or lack thereof of human rights-based <b>international solidarity</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/180</a> , Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity).
<b>Disciplinary proceedings against judges</b> for alleged misconduct in the exercise of their functions ( <a href="#">A/75/172</a> , Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers).
Celebrating <b>women in activism and civil society</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/184</a> , Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association).
<b>Economic policies and good governance</b> at the local level ( <a href="#">A/HRC/45/28</a> , Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order).
Ending <b>immigration detention of children</b> and providing adequate care and reception for them ( <a href="#">A/75/183</a> , Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants).
Elimination of all forms of <b>religious intolerance</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/385</a> , Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Report presented).
<b>Internal displacement</b> in the context of the slow-onset adverse effects of <b>climate change</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/207</a> , Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons).
<b>Right to education</b> and the rights to <b>water and sanitation</b> , including hygiene and menstrual health and hygiene ( <a href="#">A/75/178</a> , Special Rapporteur on the right to education).
Effective <b>promotion of the Declaration</b> on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic <b>Minorities</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/211</a> , Special Rapporteur on minority issues)
Human rights and the <b>privatization of water and sanitation services</b> (A/75/208, Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation).
<b>Climate change</b> , culture and <b>cultural rights</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/298</a> , Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights).
<b>Academic freedom</b> and freedom of opinion and expression ( <a href="#">A/75/261</a> , Special Rapporteur for the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression).
Aspects of adopting a <b>gender perspective</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/174</a> , Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence).
<b>Mass graves</b> , highlighting the multitude of sites of mass killings and unlawful deaths across history and the world ( <a href="#">A/75/384</a> , Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions).
The need for urgent action to conserve, protect and restore the <b>biosphere</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/161</a> , Special Rapporteur on environment).
25 years of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of <b>hazardous substances and wastes</b> : an analysis of its evolution, <b>current challenges and the way forward</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/290</a> ).
The <b>right to food</b> in the context of <b>international trade law and policy</b> ( <a href="#">A/75/219</a> , Special Rapporteur on the right to food).
<b>Business</b> , human rights and <b>conflict-affected regions</b> : towards heightened action ( <a href="#">A/75/212</a> , Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises).



## Treaty Bodies updates:

<b>Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</b> Has adopted a new <a href="#">Guidance note</a> on the rights of women in the specific context of COVID-19.
<b>Committee on the Rights of the Child</b> Over the last year, no States ratified or acceded to the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, or the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The Committee held its 48th extraordinary session in Samoa (2 to 6 March 2020). Draft General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment has been issued.
<b>Human Rights Committee</b> The Committee issued the <a href="#">statement</a> to provide guidance to States parties on the requirements and conditions laid down in article 4 of the Covenant concerning derogations from the Covenant. The Chairman suggested that the Covenant, that was adopted 60 years ago, must be updated with new developments, such as the inclusion of climate change and the environment to the right to life enshrined in Article 6, for example.
<b>Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</b> The Committee issued a <a href="#">statement</a> on the most important impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic, social and cultural rights, with recommendations to States parties on a response consistent with their obligations. The Committee continues to face a general situation of non- and late reporting, with numerous States being more than 10 years late.
<b>Committee on Enforced Disappearances</b> The Committee issued <a href="#">guidelines</a> on COVID-19 and enforced disappearances were jointly adopted by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances. A campaign was launched in 2018 to double the number of ratifications of the Convention. While Oman ratified the Convention in June 2019, only 63 of the 193 UN Member States have ratified the treaty. 66 States have accepted recommendations regarding ratifications of the Convention.
<b>Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination</b> In its <a href="#">Statement</a> , the Committee called on States to ensure that the development of vaccines as well as access to an eventual vaccine against COVID-19 occurs in a non-discriminatory manner. Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Elaboration of Complementary Standards to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination detailed progress and the work of the legal expert consultation during its meetings in October 2020. The issues and possible elements to be included in a draft additional protocol to the International Convention were considered, namely the dissemination of hate speech, racial cybercrime, discrimination based on religion or belief, and preventive measures to combat racist and xenophobic discrimination.
<b>Committee against Torture</b> The COVID-19 pandemic is leading to an escalation of torture and ill-treatment worldwide, and torture survivors are especially in danger of getting infected by the lethal virus due to their vulnerable situation.
<b>Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture</b> The Subcommittee has issued an <a href="#">Advice</a> of the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture to States parties and national preventive mechanisms relating to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. No visits have taken place since last year, because of the failure of the United Nations to provide the funds necessary to permit the Subcommittee to carry out its Convention mandate.
<b>Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families</b> The <a href="#">joint guidance note</a> by the Committee and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants highlights the serious and disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and their families and their valuable contributions on the front lines of the responses to COVID-19. Drawing attention to the measures adopted by States to protect migrants and their families, the guidance note offers recommendations to strengthen the protection of migrants, regardless of their status.
<b>Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities</b> A noteworthy case called for the transformation of the education system to make it inclusive of children with disabilities, and making public its inquiry report into alleged grave or systematic violations by the State party concerned of the rights of persons with disabilities to equal recognition before the law. A new draft General Comment is being considered on the right to work and employment for persons with disabilities.