



INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

Virtual informal conversation of the Human Rights Council with the United Nations

High Commissioner for human rights on the human rights implications of the Covid-19 pandemic

9 April 2020

Introductory remarks:

Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger of Austria, *President of the Human Rights Council*:

The “world premiere” virtual conversation takes place in the midst of the biggest challenge of our generation. The crisis forced societies to make excruciating trade-offs: saving lives vs. livelihoods, health vs. and privacy, freedom of movement and the right to peaceful assemblies.

Increased risks for vulnerable groups: older people, persons with disabilities, detainees, people living in poverty, women. Fake news is as frequent as ever, putting lives in danger; hate speech specific to this pandemic has the potential of increasing discrimination and scapegoating.

Michelle Bachelet, *United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*:

Areas of concern: the need for global solidarity (including new financial mechanisms to fund it), damaging impact of inequalities, universality of the threat from the virus, the need to build more inclusive and sustainable economies. The impact of the epidemic on women, children and on vulnerable groups: people in places of detention and other institutions, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples and minorities, migrants, refugees, IDPs, people in conflict zones and older people. Adoption of emergency powers that are unlimited and not subject to review. Restrictions on media freedom and freedom of expression. The protection of health workers and their adequate remuneration. Nationalism and scapegoating, including of migrants and minorities.

Areas of action:

- devise effective and humane policies and extensive measures needed to absorb the economic and social shocks of this epidemic;
- the need to ensure that the efforts of the WHO are fully resourced and that the collapse of any country's medical system is avoided;
- the need to increase access to accurate information and statistics and end any blanket Internet and telecommunication shutdowns;
- efforts to be made to involve NHRIs, civil society activists and human rights defenders;
- the duty of all States of international cooperation and assistance under Article 2 of the ICESCR;
- the continued funding to civil society organizations is particularly important;
- vital to ensure access to justice in this time of crises and to ensure adequate functioning of the courts.

Recovery from the crisis: the 2030 Agenda, fully mapped and universally approved, remains the strongest tool. Protecting the environment and ensuring biodiversity is the best way to protect human health and wellbeing, including from pandemics.

Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger: Updates on the work of the Council: while hopeful that the 43rd session will be resumed, and the 44th session will be held in person, this cannot yet be confirmed. The Bureau met virtually on 1 April, and will continue meeting every two weeks. It is very likely that when the Council is able to meet again in person, it will be under measures such as social distancing, and it might be necessary for the Council to meet again in the Assembly Hall, as opposed to room XX. Hope to organize more informal meetings, ideally virtual panels with Special Rapporteurs. Ngohrc@ohchr.org is the contact email for the NGOs wishing to speak during the Virtual meetings.

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE:

Participants – States: Western States: European Union, Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, United Kingdom, Australia. Eastern European States: Russia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Slovenia, Armenia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan. Asia & the Pacific: China, Republic of Korea, Iran, Philippines, Iraq, India, Marshall Islands, Syria, Malaysia, State of Palestine, Pakistan, Japan, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives. Latin American States: Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba, Chile. African Group: South Africa, Egypt, Tunisia.



INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

Main topics raised: need to protect the right to life and health, multilateral solutions (including financial solutions), impact of unilateral coercive measures, impact of digital surveillance. Responses to the pandemic to be proportional, time-bound, transparent and regularly reviewed. Parliaments, the media and civil society should be able to play their role. Commending the work of the medical workers worldwide. Expulsions of foreign correspondents, criminalization of alleged misinformation. The situation of refugees and the poorest people. The prominence of domestic violence and child abuse during the crisis people in precarious forms of labour, including migrants and women, must have access to social protection services.

Participants – NGOs (joint statements): World Alliance for Citizen Participation, International Network for the Protection against Elder Abuse, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, and International Service for Human Rights.

Main topics raised: the rule of law, freedom of expression, need to release human rights defenders and prisoners of consciousness, age-based discrimination, the need to uphold human dignity and ensure access to healthcare without any discrimination. Deep concerns about waves of xenophobic and racist rhetoric. Need to support the health workers (information, equipment, psycho-social support). Emergency accommodation for the homeless. Right to food to be guaranteed. Support for precarious labour workers. Need to provide innovative and accessible ways to access the education. In situation of conflict - to ensure access to humanitarian aid. Need to ensure civil society participation. Human Rights Council to convene a special session on impact of COVID19 on human rights.

Michelle Bachelet, *Responding to Questions and Comments:*

On the work of the OHCHR: the Office continued to deliver a number of activities online and to engage with partners (States, civil society organizations and NHRIs). The Office had identified 6 key priority areas to respond to the crisis, including the engagement and support for vulnerable individuals and groups, engaging on the impact on social and economic rights, and supporting the UN human rights system to respond to COVID-19 concerns.

The Office was monitoring the situation globally to identify key human rights concerns; it was gathering data and providing advocacy and specific support to States. The Office was collecting *good practices* of States in responding to the crisis, which would be published on the website, and keeping track of *emergency measures* adopted by States. OHCHR is contributing to developing the *UN COVID-19 response guide* and is also completing the *drafting of a framework of human rights indicators* that UN country teams could use in monitoring the situation.

The OHCHR is developing a guidance note on integrating gender considerations into the COVID-19 responses, while a guidance note on protecting the rights of detainees had already been issued.

The Office had documented the arrests of dozens of citizens in several countries and the expulsion of foreign reporters. The Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression would submit a report on this issue to the Human Rights Council at its 44th session.

Human rights treaty bodies: the President of the General Assembly was consulting with UN Economic and Social Council on the election of members of treaty bodies. The report of the Secretary-General on the treaty bodies review process was published and the President of the GA had announced the appointment of Morocco and Switzerland as co-facilitators of the GA's consideration of the status of the treaty bodies system.

Concluding Remarks by Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger: The meeting had touched on a wide range of very pertinent questions, many of which could not be fully discussed. This crisis is almost like a large-scale social experiment with a tremendous impact on human rights. The solidarity witnessed, regardless of the usual ideological or political positions, gives hope.