



Human Rights Institute

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human rights worldwide

IBAHRI Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor

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On World Human Rights Day (10 December 2020), UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for human rights to be put ‘front and centre’ of the global Covid-19 response in order to achieve a better future for people everywhere. Guterres reinforced how the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, older people, women and girls and minorities. He reiterated the importance of protecting human rights based on solidarity and cooperation.¹

1. Gender-based violence and women’s health

The Norwegian Refugee Council and the UNHCR, Global Protection Cluster (GPC) reported that almost 40 million people who are at an increased risk of discrimination and violence could miss out on humanitarian protection support due to insufficient funding. For instance, in Mali, there were over 4,400 reported cases of gender-based violence between January and September, but only 48 per cent of towns had support services. The Central African Republic reported more than double the number of incidents of gender-based violence including rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage. Niger has reported torture of women for engaging in economic activity outside of the home, without wearing full veil coverings.

South Asia

Nepal’s National Women Commission (NWC) received 885 calls related to domestic violence from April to June on its 24-hour hotline; twice the number compared to previous years. Adolescent girls are facing an increased risk of early marriages, child abuse and human trafficking. Especially since most of their parents are unable to work during the pandemic. According to the National Child Protection Authority, reports of child cruelty have increased by 30 per cent in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal.

Malawi

Following an increased number of gender-based violence cases, President Lazarus Chakwera announced plans for stiffer penalties against perpetrators. The steps to introduce stricter penalties would include amendment to relevant legislation, including the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Code, in order to expedite the disposal of such cases, exert stiffer mandatory penalties and establish a sex offenders registry. There are reports of rape and sexual abuse against women and girls every week in Malawi.²

Lebanon

The Internal Security Forces (ISF) in Lebanon reported a 51 per cent increase in domestic violence calls to its hotline since the start of the pandemic. From February to November, the ISF received 1,120 calls of domestic violence complaints, a rise of 102 per cent compared to the same period last year. The report showed a rise in cases of family violence, especially 14 per cent of abused women to be under

¹ <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/12/12/human-rights-must-be-front-and-centre-of-covid-19-response>

² www.voanews.com/africa/malawi-president-announces-strict-measures-against-perpetrators-gender-based-violence

the age of 18. The lockdowns imposed around the country have only aggravated the situation of women suffering abuse, finding themselves trapped at home with their abusers. 24/7 support centres have seen the number of calls rise from 299 at the start of the pandemic to 938 in May. Since then, the figures have topped 1,000 calls a month. The situation has been gravely affected by the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic. The severe social disparity in the roles of men and women in society is also a contributing factor, where women are generally confined to traditional domestic roles. Due to the personal status laws, women have limited rights to end abusive marriages, gain financial support or protect their children.

India

India has seen a huge surge in gender-based violence during the pandemic. The National Commission of Women (NCW) reported the largest rise in cases in a decade, with a third of 13,410 complaints, including 4,350 of domestic violence, filed during the lockdown. There has been a 99 per cent increase in marital violence during the lockdown compared to before the pandemic. A study conducted during the lockdown found a link between attitudes and domestic violence. For instance, in districts where men justified the use of violence to a National Family Health Survey in 2015-16, the researchers found much higher cases of violence during the pandemic. Whereas, in districts where women justified violence, reporting was the least.³

2. Refugee camps

The number of people displaced around the world at the start of 2020 was 45.7 million. This figure has risen to 80 million by mid-year. This figure encompasses 26.4 million refugees, including 5.7 million under the mandate of the UN Palestinian relief agency UNRWA, 4.2 million asylum-seekers and 3.6 million Venezuelans displaced abroad. The largest group of refugees are from Syria, totaling at 6.6 million.⁴

Sudan

Sudan is seeing a daily increase in the number of refugees arriving in the country from conflict-stricken Ethiopia, including most notably pregnant women and sick elderly, and all of whom face a severe lack of tents, food, toilets, showers or health services. The lack of adequate medical facilities has worsened the situation for people with diabetes with no access to insulin, people suffering from HIV/AIDS and children without parents. The Norwegian Refugee Council has been working in some of the camps to help provide adequate help and services. However, there is a dire need for economic and humanitarian aid in this region, particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵

³ www.nagalandpost.com/covid-19-a-distressing-spike-in-violence/226101.html

⁴ <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/12/12/more-uprooted-fewer-return-pushing-forcibly-displaced-above-80-million>

⁵ www.nrc.no/news/2020/november/dire-conditions-face-refugees-fleeing-ethiopia-to-sudan

Belarus

The government announced that as of 20 December 2020, Belarusian borders would be closed in an attempt to limit migration due to the Covid pandemic. This decision is seen as an attempt by the authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko to use the pandemic as an excuse to curb immigration and impose restrictions on the movements of activists. According to a government resolution published on 10 December 2020, measures include a ban on Belarusians travelling unless their trip is related to work or study. The duration of the restrictions is still not clear. There have been daily protests demanding for the resignation of Lukashenko and for new elections.

3. Prisoners and detainees

USA

Since the federal death penalty was reinstated by the US Supreme Court in 1988, executions carried out by the Federal Government have remained rare with only three federal executions before President Trump came into office. Another three federal death row inmates are scheduled to die before inauguration day on 20 January.⁶ If they proceed, President Trump will have overseen the executions of 13 death row inmates since July, the most in over a century. President-elect Joe Biden has publicly stated that he will seek to end the death penalty once he is in office.⁷ According to the Death Penalty Information Center, several state executions have been delayed as a result of Covid-19 as they are considered super spreaders due to the number of people involved. The continuation of executions poses a serious threat for the spread of the virus, particularly within the Terre Haute Correctional Centre, where there are already 326 infected inmates.⁸

Pakistan

According to Amnesty International and Justice Project Pakistan's recent report, '[Prisoners of the Pandemic](#)', the number of Pakistani inmates has increased since March. This is despite overcrowding in prisons, with a national overcrowding rate of 134 per cent, and the authorities' stated objective of reducing its prison population to stifle the spread of coronavirus. Between April and August, the prison population increased from 73,242 to 79,603, with at least 2,313 inmates infected with Covid-19; which is a serious infringement on their right to health.⁹ According to the report, key decisions by the Supreme Court and administrative failings by prison authorities led to the increased prison population. Factors that contributed to this include the overuse of arrests and detention for minor offences, frequent pre-

⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/10/politics/brandon-bernard-executed/index.html>

⁷ www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55236260

⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/10/politics/brandon-bernard-executed/index.html>

⁹ www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/pakistan-overcrowding-in-pakistans-prisons-is-a-ticking-time-bomb

trial detention and underuse of non-custodial measures, a backlog of cases in the courts, and the long delays between hearings.¹⁰

4. Informal settlements and homelessness

South East Asia

Pay cuts and stringent regulations to curb Covid-19 have forced Malaysians working in Singapore into homelessness.¹¹ With travel restrictions in place, those who commute daily across the causeway linking the two countries are faced with 14-day mandatory quarantines – one in each state if they choose to cross the borders. However, the Ministry of Manpower has disputed this claim.¹² During the most recent lockdown, over 300 homeless people in Singapore sought assistance from an aid network.¹³ Recently, the Chief Minister of neighbouring Johor announced that food baskets would be delivered to Malaysians stranded in Singapore.¹⁴

United Kingdom

New immigration policies will see Non-British migrant rough sleepers deported.¹⁵ The rules enter into force at a time of great uncertainty in the job market due to the pandemic.¹⁶ The most vulnerable are at risk of being pushed into exploitative work to avoid deportation, especially when they lack other means of legal support. The Home Office has claimed that this policy will be used sparingly only if migrants refuse help from local authorities. However, on two occasions, the High Court has ruled that the Home Office's refusal to grant accommodation to non-asylum seeker migrants was unlawful after they had previously been held at Immigration Detention centres.¹⁷ Local councils including the Greater London Authority have pledged to defy the rules.¹⁸

¹⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-prisons-islamabad-coronavirus-pandemic-prison-overcrowding-47cd61d890b4a6d613cdd461f71e3686>

¹¹ www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/11/643343/homeless-malaysians-singapore

¹² www.straitstimes.com/singapore/no-work-pass-holders-found-sleeping-rough-in-singapore-mom

¹³ www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-300-homeless-seek-help-from-msf-peers-network-during-covid-19-circuit-breaker

¹⁴ www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/11/26/johor-mb-promises-food-baskets-to-malaysian-workers-stranded-in-singapore/1926309

¹⁵ www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-rough-sleepers-foreign-deportation-home-office-b1220933.html

¹⁶ www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/07/council-refusing-help-home-office-deport-rough-sleepers-homeless

¹⁷ www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrants-homeless-unlawful-detention-destitute-home-office-high-court-a9695386.html

¹⁸ www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/dec/10/councils-defy-uk-rule-deporting-migrant-rough-sleepers-home-office

5. Disability rights

USA

Autism Speaks, a non-profit organisation advocating for those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, has highlighted the need for law enforcement to be better trained to act as first responders when dealing with people with autism and other developmental disabilities during the pandemic.¹⁹ Separately, lockdown regulations have also prevented individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities from engaging in their daily routines, thus contributing to increased sickness.²⁰ Further, individuals who experience seizures are frequently unable to wear masks as it is unsafe, preventing them from leaving their homes.

Zimbabwe

Up until December, Zimbabwe had recorded over 11,522 cases and 310 deaths due to Covid. Honorable Joshua Malunga, Special Advisor on Disability Affairs in the Office of President and Cabinet (Zimbabwe), said that a disability-inclusive approach is needed for testing, including using sign language or braille to remove barriers to accessing health. The shift in policy attitude comes months after the Development, Deaf Zimbabwe Trust and Zimbabwe National League Of The Blind have sued the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation for publicising official communications in an inaccessible way after announcing a nation-wide lockdown with two days' notice.²¹ In order to implement this, the Capacitated National Disability Board, together with an inter-ministerial task force, will be using its technical and advocacy skills to identify current gaps in the healthcare system.²²

6. Freedom of assembly

Iraq

Local security forces in Northern Iraq have used live ammunition and tear gas to disperse crowds of hundreds of protestors, resulting in the death of eight demonstrators in five cities of the Sulaymaniyah province.²³ The demonstrations are in response to the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) failure to pay employees' salaries since October 2020. More than 1.3 million Iraqis depend on the KRG for their salaries, with many protestors burning government buildings and political parties' headquarters in response to the lack of salary payment and the violent dispersals by security forces. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq condemned 'acts of violence' in the province, saying in a statement that

¹⁹ www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/health/mental-health/coronavirus-just-another-in-a-long-line-of-challenges-for-maine-law-enforcement-and-people-with-disabilities/97-102ffb7a-bac5-4142-9fc2-c96d6e664f31

²⁰ www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/11/29/covid-19-hurting-americans-disabilities-who-need-extra-care/6401174002

²¹ www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/covid19-story-zimbabwe

²² <https://indiaeducationdiary.in/capacitating-the-national-disability-board-to-respond-to-covid-19-in-zimbabwe>

²³ www.ft.com/content/50338358-5e25-4815-a68e-4517903ff3f5

‘the right to peaceful protest must be protected and it is imperative that demonstrations remain peaceful.’²⁴

India

Following the passage of controversial laws pertaining to the agriculture industry by the Modi administration, thousands of farmers have marched to New Delhi. Leaders of the Indian Farmers Union called for a nation-wide protest and a day-long hunger strike on 14 December to increase pressure on the government. Police had initially responded by firing tear gas and using water cannons to disperse the peaceful protestors en route to the Indian capital.²⁵ The new laws seek to deregulate India’s immense agriculture sector by allowing farmers to sell their produce to private buyers beyond government-run wholesale markets, where farmers are assured a minimum price for their crops.²⁶ However, the farmers have stated that the laws threaten their livelihoods and will only benefit big corporations, leaving them vulnerable to the free market. The agriculture industry in India, which employs nearly half the country’s workforce, has already been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, disproportionately harming poorer farmers who have no access to smartphones. Internet access is required to benefit from the government’s programme of electronic registration for sale of their produce to the State. However, as most administrative buildings have been closed due to pandemic regulations, many farmers have been unable to access the programme online and sell their goods.²⁷ The new laws will further exacerbate the livelihoods of farmers amidst the pandemic. The farmers demand complete revocation of the three laws and a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for their produce guaranteed by the government.

²⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/08/middleeast/iraq-protests-covid-19-intl/index.html>

²⁵ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/26/india-farmers-march-to-delhi-against-new-laws

²⁶ www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/14/india-farmer-unions-launch-hunger-strike-call-for-more-protests

²⁷ www.aljazeera.com/videos/2020/5/1/india-farmers-struggle-amid-covid-19-lockdown