



REFERENCE:

31 March 2020

Excellencies,

The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted us all in extraordinary ways, and I want, firstly, to express my solidarity and deep condolences for the loss of life and livelihoods, and the pandemic's serious impact on development and other key issues affecting your peoples.

COVID-19 is a test of societies, of Governments, of communities and individuals. This is a time for solidarity and cooperation to tackle the virus and to mitigate the effects, often unintended, of measures designed to halt its spread. Respect for human rights across the spectrum, including economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights, will be fundamental to the success of the public health response.

Today, I am reaching out to share information about my Office's initial action plan, as we work with our partners within the UN system and externally, to embed human rights at the heart of the global response to the pandemic.

Our starting point has been to ensure the protection of our staff and their families from the spread of COVID-19 while making certain that we maintain business continuity and remain operational through remote connectivity and telecommuting. We immediately established a Crisis Response Team to support our staff globally and ensure full alignment with the guidance to UN staff members here in Geneva, New York and across our field presences.

My Office is working with Member States, UN partners, civil society and the private sector to identify human rights trends, risks and the impact of national responses as we assess good practice and raise awareness of specific concerns.

Our engagement globally and at the field level will focus on areas where OHCHR has significant capacity, expertise and experience; where we are most needed; and where we can have the greatest impact in mitigating the potentially negative consequences of new national measures. With this in mind, our current focus is in five areas: supporting vulnerable people and groups; supporting participation, inclusion and access to information; engaging on the economic and social rights impacts of the crisis; supporting the UN system through the integration of human rights; and addressing specific human rights issues that may be less visible or more sensitive.

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In implementing this strategy, my Office is playing an integral role in UN system-wide efforts to respond to the pandemic, in close cooperation with our UN partners, particularly the World Health Organization, to mainstream human rights. At Principals level we are participating in UN coordination meetings in the humanitarian, development and peace and security fields to ensure a coherent response across the UN system, informing core policy documents and supporting the harmonisation of key messages and approaches. With this in mind, I take this opportunity to urge you to support the Secretary-General's COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

Examples of our work to date within the UN system include our development of a framework to assist the UN system in monitoring critical human rights indicators in the course of their work. We have also released specific guidance, with a note on the situation of persons in detention released at the end of last week. We will continue to provide focused guidance on issues of concern, including the rights of women, LGBTI persons and migrants.

In addition, I have made some targeted public interventions in areas where I feel my voice can be particularly valuable: for example, last week I called for the re-evaluation of sectoral sanctions that may affect the provision of health-care. Human Rights Council special procedures mandate holders have also been active in making statements of a variety of issues within their fields of expertise. These and other public statements can be found on the dedicated web space we have created:  
[www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID-19.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID-19.aspx)

Our field presences are advising national response strategies, undertaking monitoring of the specific human rights impact of the pandemic, to facilitate targeted advocacy, interventions and support to States. The field teams are working, in collaboration with UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams, and contributing to the development and implementation of effective National Response plans that are grounded in human rights. We have reached out to Government officials, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations in every region to support their efforts and ensure that crucial human rights concerns are prioritised. The short annex (attached) provides an overview of some of the work we are carrying out in the context of the UN response.

The approaches that I have outlined above will certainly evolve as this crisis develops - I intend therefore to maintain close contact with you, the Member States, regarding the continuity of our programmes, the implications for our operational capacity and for the profile of our engagement across the thematic and geographic areas of joint commitment that we share.

In this regard, we are also coordinating with the President of the Human Rights Council about an informal briefing to be organised shortly.



At this very challenging time, your support is even more critical – in the words of the Secretary-General to the meeting of G20 leaders last week, “... only international cooperation can avoid a worst-case scenario”. We look forward to your continued leadership and support for the world’s most vulnerable in order that we can still make good on our promise “to leave no one behind”.

In that spirit, Excellencies, please accept my warm wishes for your continued health, and the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Michelle Bachelet".

Michelle Bachelet  
High Commissioner for Human Rights