

Human rights in the context of COVID-19:
Analysis of relevant press statements released by United Nations human rights mechanisms and OHCHR

Updated: 30 April 2020

Recent weeks have seen strong and principled statements by UN human rights institutions and actors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on human rights norms and instruments, they are as relevant to refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons as they are to others. They have been compiled below for the use of UNHCR operations, bureaux and others, to reinforce advocacy and engagement with States and other partners in calling for respect for rights of persons of concern in the current context, including where exceptional measures are being put in place to safeguard public health.

These can be used to recall that general calls for respect for human rights in the current crisis are equally applicable to refugees, stateless and internally displaced people. As underlined recently in the [joint press release](#) by UNHCR, OHCHR, WHO and IOM, we are all vulnerable to the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic; but refugees, displaced, stateless as well as migrants are particularly at risk. The below statements provide opportunities to highlight the applicability of basic rights to persons of concern in relevant discussions, including around people with vulnerabilities; detention and restrictions of free movement; and persons of diverse sexual orientation or gender identity, and others.

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Treaty Bodies

Each of the nine core human rights instruments¹ contain provisions that led to the creation of a respective “Treaty Body” mechanism. The [UN Treaty Bodies](#) are Committees of independent experts who are tasked with supervising and monitoring the way State parties respect and implement their treaty obligations. The Treaty Bodies may, where they have identified serious human rights concerns or trends, issue press releases or media statements on these issues. Such statements typically involve one or more of the Chairpersons of the Treaty Bodies.

Press releases

A human rights approach: Extra care for vulnerable groups

- “UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies call for human rights approach in fighting COVID-19” – 24 March 2020
 - o Treaty Bodies: Joint statement of the 10 UN Treaty Bodies²
 - o Summary: The Treaty Bodies “called on States to adopt measures to protect the rights to life and health, and to ensure access to health care to all who need it, without discrimination. They urged governments to take extra care of those particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19, including older people, people with disabilities, minorities, indigenous peoples, **refugees, asylum seekers** and migrants, people deprived of their liberty, homeless people, and those living in poverty.” “States should ensure provision of essential goods and services to the most vulnerable so that no one is left behind”, as well as “take active steps to ensure a sense of solidarity prevails, including through protection against racism and xenophobia or the growth of unbridled nationalism.”
 - o [Full statement](#)
 - o Useful relevant resource: [IASC Interim Guidance on Scaling-up COVID-19 Outbreak in Readiness and Response Operations in Camps and Camp-like Settings \(jointly developed by IFRC, IOM, UNHCR and WHO\)](#)

Persons with disabilities

- “Joint Statement: Persons with Disabilities and COVID-19 by the Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, on behalf of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility” – 1 April 2020
 - o Treaty Body: Joint statement of Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Special Envoy of the UNSG on Disability and Accessibility
 - o Summary: “States should ensure the safety and integrity of persons with disabilities and accelerate measures of deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities from all types of institutions, as well as ensure their access to health services and provide them with the same range, quality and standard of

¹ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; Convention on the Rights of the Child; International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

² The UN Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Committee Against Torture and its Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, the Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Committee on Migrant Workers.

health care as provided to other persons, including mental health services.” “States should safeguard the provision of food, medicine, and other supplies for persons with disabilities during situations of isolation and quarantine.” “All services related to COVID-19 crisis, including remote/telephone medical advice, quarantine facilities, public information, including information on essential supplies and services should be accessible for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others and provided on accessible platforms in various alternative formats, modes and methods of communication.”

- [Full statement](#)

Deprivation of liberty

- “COVID-19: Measures needed to protect people deprived of liberty, UN torture prevention body says” – 30 March 2020
 - Treaty Body: Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT)
 - Summary: SPT has issued the [public advice](#) which “provides measures for authorities concerning all places of deprivation of liberty, including prisons, **immigration detention facilities, closed refugee camps**, and psychiatric hospitals, in order to mitigate the risks to health created by the Coronavirus. The measures include considering reducing prison populations by implementing schemes of early, provisional or temporary release of low-risk offenders, reviewing all cases of pre-trial detention, extending the use of bail for all but the most serious cases, as well as reviewing and reducing the use of **immigration detention and closed refugee camps**. The advice also emphasizes that all detainees, people in quarantine and closed medical settings, their families, and all staff, should receive reliable, accurate and the latest information concerning all adopted measures.”
 - [Full statement](#)
 - Useful relevant resource: [IASC Interim Guidance on COVID-19: Focus on Persons Deprived of their Liberty \(developed by OHCHR and WHO\)](#)

Discrimination against women

- “Raising women’s voices and leadership in COVID-19 policies” – 22 April 2020
 - Body: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
 - Summary: The Committee called on governments and multilateral institutions “to ensure women’s equal representation in formulating responses to COVID-19 and strategies to recover from the crisis.” It “has issued detailed [guidance](#) on a range of measures that governments should take to uphold women’s rights as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.” “The Committee further recommends targeted strategies for governments to mitigate the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older women, women and girls with disabilities, migrant, **refugee and internally displaced** women, indigenous women and girls and those belonging to minorities, women in detention, as well as lesbian, bisexual and transgender women.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Special Procedures

UN Special Procedures are independent experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council to address thematic or country-specific human rights issues. They include Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts, and Working Groups. Currently, there are currently [44 thematic mandates](#) and [12 country-specific mandates](#). Where Special Procedures are alerted to individual cases or general protection concerns/trends they may issue press releases individually or jointly along with other mandate holders.

Press releases

The right to life-saving interventions

- “No exceptions with COVID-19: “Everyone has the right to life-saving interventions” – UN experts say” – 26 March 2020
 - o Mandate: Joint statement of 42 mandate holders³
 - o Summary: The SPMHs said that “everyone, without exception, has the right to life-saving interventions and this responsibility lies with the government. The scarcity of resources or the use of public or private insurance schemes should never be a justification to discriminate against certain groups of patients.” “People with disabilities, older persons, minority communities, indigenous peoples, **internally displaced people**, people affected by extreme poverty and living in overcrowded settings, people who live in residential institutions, people in detention, homeless people, migrants and **refugees**, people who use drugs, LGBT and gender diverse persons – these and other groups need to receive support from governments”. The UN experts stated that “the principles of non-discrimination, participation, empowerment and accountability need to be applied to all health-related policies.” The SPMHs said that universal human rights “principles and trust in scientific knowledge must prevail over the spread of fake news, prejudice, discrimination, inequalities and violence.” “When the vaccine for COVID-19 comes, it should be provided without discrimination.”
 - o [Full statement](#)

Human rights-based approach to regulating the pandemic

- “COVID-19: States should not abuse emergency measures to suppress human rights – UN experts” – 16 March 2020
 - o Mandate: Joint statement of 17 mandate holders⁴

³ Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health; Special Rapporteur on violence against women; Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons; Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation; Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence; Independent Expert on the situation of Human Rights in Mali; Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity; Independent Expert on the situation of Human Rights in Sudan; Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment; Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery; Working Group of experts on people of African descent; Special Rapporteur on the right to development; Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples; Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar; Working Group on discrimination against women and girls; Independent Expert on the situation of Human Rights in the Central African Republic; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967; Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia; Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus; Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises; Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Special rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia; Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children.

⁴ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health; Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy; Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Special Rapporteur on the right to development; Special Rapporteur on adequate housing; Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation; Independent expert on human rights and international solidarity; Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

- Summary: The SPMHs urged states “to avoid overreach of security measures in their response to the coronavirus outbreak and reminded them that any emergency responses must be proportionate, necessary and non-discriminatory.” “The use of emergency powers must be publicly declared and should be notified to the relevant treaty bodies when fundamental rights including movement, family life and assembly are being significantly limited.” “Moreover, emergency declarations based on the Covid-19 outbreak should not be used as a basis to target particular groups, minorities, or individuals.” “It should not function as a cover for repressive action under the guise of protecting health nor should it be used to silence the work of human rights defenders.” “The SPMHs encouraged states to remain steadfast in maintaining a human rights-based approach to regulating this pandemic.”
- [Full statement](#)

IDPs

- “COVID-19: Do not forget internally displaced persons, UN expert urges Governments worldwide” – 1 April 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that “governments must ensure that all internally displaced persons have access to water, sanitation, facilities for personal hygiene, adequate housing and food. They must be informed about the disease risks, prevention and treatment. Those who require medical treatment for COVID-19 must have access to appropriate health care in a timely manner and without discrimination.” The UN expert also called on states “to include internally displaced people in their decision-making process”, as they “know best the specific challenges they face” and “their participation in identifying these challenges and designing tailored responses to COVID-19 is essential.” “In camps, prevention and response measures must be adopted based on risk assessments involving the camp population. A physical re-planning of camps bearing in mind health imperatives of self-quarantines may be required, while ensuring that physical distancing does not result in lack of support to the most vulnerable.” She welcomed “the adoption of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19” and called “on states to exercise their sovereign responsibility to protect internally displaced persons based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and without diverting from existing delivery of humanitarian assistance.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Racism and xenophobia

- “States should take action against COVID-19-related expressions of xenophobia, says UN expert” – 23 March 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur mentioned that state officials—including the President of the United States—adopt alternative names for the COVID-19 coronavirus with geographic references, typically referring to its emergence in China. This fosters racism and xenophobia and serves to isolate and stigmatize individuals who are or are perceived to be of Chinese or other East Asian descent. The UN expert stated that “to treat and combat the spread of COVID-19 effectively, individuals must have access to accurate health advice and sufficient healthcare without fear of discrimination.” The Special Rapporteur called “on all actors to ensure that their work contributes to a holistic concept of health and well-being, including freedom from racism and xenophobia.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Vulnerable and marginalized groups, including minorities, indigenous people, migrants

- “COVID-19 fears should not be exploited to attack and exclude minorities – UN expert” – 30 March 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on minority issues

- Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that “COVID-19 is not just a health issue; it can also be a virus that exacerbates xenophobia, hate and exclusion.” “Reports of Chinese and other Asians being physically attacked; of hate speech blaming minorities including Roma, Hispanics and others for the spread of the virus; and of politicians calling for migrants to be denied access to medical services, all show that States need to urgently emphasize that the human rights of everyone, in particular of the most vulnerable and marginalized, must be protected.” “The international community and States must work closely together to inform, help and protect the world’s most vulnerable. That includes communicating with them in their own languages where possible to effectively transmit vital public health information and care, as well as enforcing measures for their protection against physical abuse and hate speech.”
- [Full statement](#)

Older persons

- ““Unacceptable” – UN expert urges better protection of older persons facing the highest risk of the COVID-19 pandemic” – 27 March 2020
 - Mandate: Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons
 - Summary: The Independent Expert expressed particular concerns “about older persons with underlying health conditions and those who are already socially excluded, living in poverty, having limited access to health services, or living in confined spaces such as prisons and residential care homes.” “This social exclusion is exacerbated by 'social' distancing measures, such as denying visitors to residential care homes. Social distancing must not become social exclusion. Older persons must be provided with ways to stay in touch online, including those in residential care homes and remote areas.” The Independent Expert also expressed deep concern that decisions around the allocation of scarce medical resources such as ventilators in intensive care units may be made solely on the basis of age, denying older persons their right to health and life on an equal basis with others. Triage protocols must be developed and followed to ensure such decisions are made on the basis of medical needs, the best scientific evidence available and not on non-medical criteria such as age or disability.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Persons with disabilities

- “COVID-19: Who is protecting the people with disabilities? – UN rights expert” – 17 March 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that “reasonable accommodation measures are essential to enable people with disabilities to reduce contacts and the risk of contamination. They should be allowed to work from home or receive paid leave to guarantee their income security. Family members and caregivers may also require reasonable accommodation to provide support to people with disabilities during this period.” “Access to additional financial aid is also vital to reduce the risk of people with disabilities and their families falling into greater vulnerability or poverty.” The UN expert urged states “to establish clear protocols for public health emergencies to ensure that, when medical resources are scarce, access to healthcare, including life-saving measures, does not discriminate against people with disabilities. Public advice campaigns and information from national health authorities must be made available to the public in sign language and accessible means, modes and formats, including accessible digital technology, captioning, relay services, text messages, easy-to-read and plain language.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Domestic violence

- “States must combat domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns – UN rights expert” – 27 March 2020

- Mandate: Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences
- Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that restrictive measures adopted worldwide to fight COVID-19 intensify the risk of domestic violence and urged governments to continue to combat domestic violence in time of COVID-19. Measures to protect victims must remain available or be adopted during the crisis. That includes ensuring access to protection by restraining orders and maintaining safe shelters and help lines for the victims. The police should increase their efforts for rapid action. The UN expert also said that “as making phone calls might be dangerous in a context of home confinement, helplines can facilitate access by providing online chats and texting services for victims, states should also come up with new and creative solutions to support them.” She expressed particular concerns about women at higher risk of domestic violence, such as women with disabilities, undocumented migrant women and victims of trafficking.
- [Full statement](#)
- Useful relevant resource: [IASC Interim Guidance: Gender Alert for COVID-19 Outbreak \(developed by the IASC Reference Group for Gender in Humanitarian Action\)](#)
- Useful relevant resource: [IASC Interim Technical Note: Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(PSEA\) during COVID-19 Response - Version 1.0 \(developed by WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, IOM, OCHA, CHS Alliance, InterAction and the UN Victims’ Rights Advocate\)](#)

Women and girls

- “COVID-19 measures must factor in specific needs of women, say UN experts” – 20 April 2020
 - Mandate: Working Group on discrimination against women and girls
 - Summary: The Working Group said that “measures to mitigate the risks to health and life posed by COVID-19 must consider the specific risks faced by women and girls, based on factors such as their sex, gender, age, disability, ethnic origin, and immigration or residence status among others.” “As well as providing universal health care for all women and girls, including uninterrupted access to a full range of sexual and reproductive health services, states must ensure access to support services, emergency measures and legal assistance for those at risk of or who are subjected to domestic and sexual violence.” “Some women already enduring discrimination are at particular risk of being further marginalised. Indigenous, migrant and elderly women, as well as women with disabilities lack inclusive information on prevention strategies and on how and where to get health services.” The UN experts stated that “states must ensure that policy decisions are taken with the equal and meaningful participation of women from diverse groups.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Access to information; surveillance technologies and the right to privacy

- “COVID-19: Governments must promote and protect access to and free flow of information during pandemic – International experts” – 19 March 2020
 - Mandate: Joint statement of Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; OSCE Representative on freedom of the media; IACHR Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression
 - Summary: The experts said that “governments everywhere are obligated to provide reliable information in accessible formats to all, with particular focus on ensuring access to information by those with limited internet access or where disability makes access challenging.” Tools of surveillance technology are used to track the spread of the coronavirus, but “it is crucial that such tools be limited in use, both in terms of purpose and time, and that individual rights to privacy, non-discrimination, the protection of journalistic sources and other freedoms be rigorously protected. States must also protect the personal information of patients.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Water and sanitation

- “COVID-19 will not be stopped without providing safe water to people living in vulnerability – UN experts” – 23 March 2020
 - Mandate: Joint statement of 11 mandate holders⁵
 - Summary: The SPMHs said that “as washing hands with soap and clean water is vital in the fight against COVID-19, governments worldwide must provide continuous access to sufficient water and sanitation to their populations living in the most vulnerable conditions.” “People living in informal settlements, those who are homeless, rural populations, women, children, older persons, people with disabilities, migrants, **refugees** and all other groups vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic need to have continuous access to sufficient and affordable water. Only this will allow them to comply with the recommendations of health institutions to keep strict hygiene measures.”
 - [Full statement](#)
 - Useful relevant resource: [Global WASH Cluster COVID-19 Resources](#)

The right to food

- “COVID-19: Economic sanctions should be lifted to prevent hunger crises – UN expert” – 31 March 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the right to food
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that “the continued imposition of crippling economic sanctions on Syria, Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, and, to a lesser degree, Zimbabwe, to name the most prominent instances, severely undermines the ordinary citizens' fundamental right to sufficient and adequate food.” “As the world exhibits new bonds of solidarity in response to the pandemic, it is now a matter of humanitarian and practical urgency to lift unilateral economic sanctions immediately.” The UN Expert “also urged the international community to pay particular attention to the situation of civilians trapped in conflict settings, and notably those already experiencing acute violations of their rights to food, such as in Yemen, South Sudan, Gaza, Syria and **in refugee camps** worldwide.” She said that “food assistance must reach the population in conflict zones without discrimination and to the maximum available resource.”
 - [Full statement](#)
 - Useful relevant resource: [Global Food Security Cluster COVID-19 Resources](#)
 - Useful relevant resource: [UNICEF and Global Nutrition Cluster Joint Statement on COVID19 and Wasting](#)

Child protection

- “UN experts call for urgent action to mitigate heightened risks of violence against children” – 7 April 2020
 - Mandate: Joint statement by the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on violence against children
 - Summary: The UN experts said that “globally, confinement measures and the disrupted provision of already limited child protection services exacerbate the vulnerability of children living in psychiatric and social care institutions, orphanages, **refugee camps, immigration detention centres** and other closed facilities, as cases of violence, sexual abuse and exploitation of children confined in these premises are likely to go undetected.” The experts “urged governments to ensure that adequately staffed and equipped child protection services and law enforcement are available and accessible to all

⁵ Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation; Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities; Special Rapporteur on the right to development; Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living; Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons; Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity; Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights.

children. This includes toll-free 24-hours hotlines, free texting services, remote psychological and social services, and mobile shelters for minors.”

- [Full statement](#)

Inclusive decision-making

- ““Leave no one behind” – Don’t forget your commitments in your response to the COVID-19 crises, UN expert urges States” – 9 April 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the right to development
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur noted that “at national level, women, minorities, indigenous and rural communities and **internally displaced persons** are once again not found at the negotiation table on issues which will have profound and long-lasting impact on the world economy and cause a major setback in the sustainable development agenda.” He called on “all governments to enable disadvantaged and marginalised and vulnerable individuals and groups to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.” “This is essential to overcome structural inequalities and discrimination, to ensure their place as key actors in the development of countries, and to ensure the equal sharing of benefits.” The UN expert “urged States and international financial institutions to ensure that participatory approaches, reaching all concerned segments of the society, are developed and adequately financed, to make certain that every decision on recovery measures hit the right target and live-up to the commitment to leave no one behind.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Right to peaceful assembly and association; civil society organizations

- “COVID-19 restrictions should not stop freedom of assembly and association, says UN expert” – 14 April 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the right to peaceful assembly and association
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur called “on States not to use state of emergency declarations during the COVID-19 crisis to impose wholesale restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and released [detailed Guidelines](#) governments and law enforcement agencies must follow to avoid human rights abuses.” Of particular interest is the guideline on ensuring inclusive participation, which notes that “civil society organisations are key in helping States to frame inclusive policies, disseminate information, and provide social support to vulnerable communities in need.” “States must ensure the right to freedom of association is fully respected, including by registering associations without constraint.” “States should provide financial support to civil society organizations delivering vital social support, including in particular organizations which support and advocate for persons with disabilities and vulnerable communities. States must ensure that the ability of such organizations to access the communities they serve is not inappropriately limited.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Environment

- “COVID-19: “Not an excuse” to roll back environmental protection and enforcement, UN rights expert says” – 15 April 2020
 - Mandate: Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment
 - Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that “the global pandemic highlights the vital importance of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.” “As COVID-19 is demonstrating, pandemics can undermine the rights of billions of people, especially those who are already vulnerable to environmental harm including people living in poverty, minorities, elderly, indigenous peoples, women and children.” “Governments need to accelerate efforts to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, because a healthy environment is an effective way to prevent pandemics and protect human rights.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Use of force in the context of emergency measures

- “COVID-19 security measures no excuse for excessive use of force, say UN Special Rapporteurs” – 17 April 2020
 - o Mandate: Joint statement of 37 mandate holders⁶
 - o Summary: The Special Procedures mandate holders said that “persons in vulnerable situations such as people living in poverty and those living in slums, homeless persons, minorities, individuals in detention, women and children victims of domestic violence, migrants and **refugees**, trans women and all those who defend their rights, are already affected disproportionately by the virus. No-visitor policies in nursing homes and home care exacerbate the risk of violence, maltreatment, abuse and neglect of older persons and others living in institutions.” “It is important that law enforcement agencies take into account the local context, the needs and vulnerabilities of particular groups of people, and exercise caution when resorting to the use of force to see to it that it is necessary and proportionate.”
 - o [Full statement](#)

Freedom of religion

- “UN expert warns against religious hatred and intolerance during COVID-19 outbreak” – 22 April 2020
 - o Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief
 - o Summary: The Special Rapporteur expressed concern about “the upsurge in incitement to hatred, scapegoating religious or belief communities, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims for the spread of virus.” “Migrants, **refugees and asylum seekers** from different minority groups have also been similarly stigmatised.” “Those targeted also have faced verbal abuse, death threats, physical attacks and experienced discrimination accessing public services, including denial of vital health services.” He urged “civil society and faith-based organisations to widely communicate and assist those in vulnerable situations, regardless of their belief or ethnic background.” “States must also be non-discriminatory in assisting those in need and ensure that everyone has fair access to all public and health services.”
 - o [Full statement](#)

Poverty

⁶ Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity; Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar; Special Rapporteur on minority issues; Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia; Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery; Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967; Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment; Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers; Working Group on discrimination against women and girls; Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health; Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members; Independent Expert on the situation of Human Rights in Mali; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Independent Expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; Independent Expert on the situation of Human Rights in the Central African Republic; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities; Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons; Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Working Group of experts on people of African descent; Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination; Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia; Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights; Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism.

- “Responses to COVID-19 are failing people in poverty worldwide” – UN human rights expert” – 22 April 2020
 - o Mandate: Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights
 - o Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that the current “crisis that disproportionately affects poor people, who are more likely to have health complications, live in crowded housing, lack the resources to stay at home for long periods, and work low-paid jobs.” “While some States have taken important initiatives such as direct cash payments, suspension of evictions and coverage of furloughed employees’ salaries, for the most part support measures have been utterly inadequate and the most vulnerable populations have been neglected.” “Despite the availability of alternative options, many States continue to detain vulnerable people in jails, prisons and **immigration detention centers** in crowded conditions and without adequate healthcare. For some, this will be a death sentence.”
 - o [Full statement](#)

Judicial independence

- “UN expert outlines urgent steps to ensure justice systems are not paralysed by COVID-19” – 22 April 2020
 - o Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers
 - o Summary: The Special Rapporteur “released [seven key guidelines](#) to ensure judges, justice workers, prosecutors and lawyers maintain functioning judicial systems.” Among them are the following: “Matters oriented to protect rights, when serious crimes are committed (including corruption connected to this crisis) and cases of domestic violence should receive prior attention and space.” “Where and how to report abuses, using current online technologies must be addressed and urgently implemented.” Regarding detention, he said that “the pertinent responsible bodies review the situation of persons imprisoned for political reasons, minor offenses or that are close to finish their conviction terms.”
 - o [Full statement](#)

Business and human rights; vulnerable workers

- “COVID-19: State and business respect for human rights critical to resilience and recovery, say UN experts” – 28 April 2020
 - o Mandate: Working Group on human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises
 - o Summary: The Working Group said that “governments and business must prioritise the wellbeing and rights of all in society, and particularly vulnerable workers.” “The workers who sew our masks in factories, who staff essential services and transport, and who farm the land, or care for the sick, amidst the crisis, are essential to our survival.” “Yet, they are often the ones most vulnerable and at-risk of human rights abuses – often on temporary or abusive contracts, with low wages and few or no safety nets, and exposed to health and safety risks.” “Companies have an independent responsibility to treat all with dignity and respect human rights and must ensure the health and safety of workers during the health crisis. Guarantees, such as paid sick leave and providing safety gear and equipment, are fundamental.” The UN experts mentioned the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), which “already offer guidance for government and business responses during COVID-19.”
 - o [Full statement](#)

Prisoners convicted of crimes against humanity, genocide or war crimes

- “COVID-19: “No excuse for impunity for those convicted of crimes against humanity” – UN expert on transitional justice” – 29 April 2020
 - o Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence
 - o Summary: The Special Rapporteur said that “urgent measures to protect against COVID-19 in overcrowded jails should not lead to impunity for persons convicted in many countries for serious

violations of human rights, crimes against humanity, genocide, or war crimes.” “Measures such as amnesties, pardons, exemptions from criminal liability, and benefits in the enforcement of sentences are null and void, and have no legal effect”. He mentioned newly published [detailed guidelines to Governments](#) on the issue. He also stated that “if the problem of possible overcrowding of persons imprisoned for committing such crimes persists, it is recommended to relocate them to another prison facility where they have safe and healthy detention conditions.” “If this is impossible, temporary house arrest should be granted, with appropriate controls.”

- [Full statement](#)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet

Human rights-based approach to combating COVID-19

- “Coronavirus: Human rights need to be front and centre in response, says Bachelet” – 6 March 2020
 - Summary: The High Commissioner said that the efforts to combat COVID-19 “won't work unless we approach it holistically, which means taking great care to protect the most vulnerable and neglected people in society, both medically and economically.” “Lockdowns, quarantines and other such measures to contain and combat the spread of COVID-19 should always be carried out in strict accordance with human rights standards and in a way that is necessary and proportionate to the evaluated risk.” “To effectively combat the outbreak means ensuring everyone has access to treatment, and is not denied health care because they cannot pay for it or because of stigma. Governments need to ensure all relevant information reaches everyone without exception, including in readily understandable formats and languages, and adapted for people with specific needs.” She also urged “authorities in countries affected by COVID-19 to take all necessary steps to address incidents of xenophobia or stigmatization.”
 - [Full statement](#)

Places of detention and other closed facilities

- “Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 “rampaging through places of detention” – Bachelet” – 25 March 2020
 - Summary: The High Commissioner said that “Covid-19 has begun to strike prisons, jails and **immigration detention centres**, as well as residential care homes and psychiatric hospitals, and risks rampaging through such institutions’ extremely vulnerable populations.” “Bachelet urged governments and relevant authorities to work quickly to reduce the number of people in detention.” “Measures taken amid a health crisis should not undermine the fundamental rights of detained people, including their rights to adequate food and water. Safeguards against ill-treatment of people in custody, including access to a lawyer and doctor, should also be fully respected.” The High Commissioner also expressed deep concern that “some countries are threatening to impose prison sentences for those who failed to obey” the measures of “physical distancing” and stated that “Imprisonment should be a measure of last resort, particularly during this crisis.”
 - [Full statement](#)
 - Useful relevant resource: [IASC Interim Guidance on COVID-19: Focus on Persons Deprived of their Liberty \(developed by OHCHR and WHO\)](#)

LGBTI

- “COVID-19: Targeted actions needed to protect LGBTI people amid pandemic – Bachelet” – 17 April 2020
 - Summary: The High Commissioner said that “LGBTI people are among the most vulnerable and marginalised in many societies, and among those most at risk from COVID-19.” Michelle Bachelet stated that “states need to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people do not face discrimination or fear retribution for seeking healthcare amid the COVID-19 crisis.” And in this regard

OHCHR published a new guidance note for states and other stakeholders on [COVID-19 and the human rights of LGBTI people](#).

- [Full statement](#)

Independent media

- “Bachelet alarmed by media clampdowns, says public has right to know about COVID-19” – 24 April 2020
 - Summary: The High Commissioner said that “This is no time to blame the messenger. Rather than threatening journalists or stifling criticism, States should encourage healthy debate concerning the pandemic and its consequences. People have a right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives, and an independent media is a vital medium for this.” “The UN’s human rights chief echoed concerns raised by the Secretary-General about the “dangerous epidemic of misinformation” around the pandemic which generated confusion and more ill-health, and paid tribute to the journalists working in the independent media whose fact-checking provided truth and clarity.” She said that it is necessary to protect journalists from harassment, threats, detention or censorship.
 - [Full statement](#)

Exceptional measures and human rights

- “COVID-19: Exceptional measures should not be cover for human rights abuses and violations – Bachelet” – 27 April 2020
 - Summary: The High Commissioner called on governments “to ensure human rights are not violated under the guise of exceptional or emergency measures.” “The restrictions need to be necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory. They also need to be limited in duration and key safeguards against excesses must be put in place.” “Certain rights, including the right to life, the prohibition against torture and other ill-treatment, and the right not to be arbitrarily detained continue to apply in all circumstances.” “Exceptional measures or a state of emergency should be subject to proper parliamentary, judicial and public oversight.” “To help States in their response to COVID-19, the OHCHR issued [new policy guidance](#) on emergency and exceptional measures.”
 - [Full statement](#)