

## **COVID-19: Prioritise human rights and protect those most vulnerable**

From solidarity to vigilance, FIDH is as committed as ever to our mission. We are alarmed at the repressive practices being carried out in countries throughout the world.

In a matter of weeks, the world has been plunged into the biggest global health crisis it has experienced in nearly a century, shaken by the spread of COVID-19, declared a pandemic on 11 March by the World Health Organisation. To date, there are approximately half a million confirmed cases worldwide and at least 21,000 people have died as a result of infection with the virus in 163 countries (Source: WHO).

Extraordinary crises call for extraordinary measures: compulsory confinement, quarantines, border closures, travel bans, business closures, requisitioning of medical equipment, curfews, etc. Government initiatives are multiplying in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus; such a robust response may be justified to protect the right to health for all, but it means that human rights organisations must be extremely vigilant. Our duty is to ensure that these initiatives are proportionate and justified.

Fighting COVID-19 must not be used as a pretext by authoritarian states to increase the adoption of measures that restrict freedoms and stifle dissenting voices. Nor should it serve as an excuse for states with established democratic traditions to undermine the economic and social rights of their populations through anti-social actions, particularly with regard to labour rights.

### **Rights**

Where such measures are necessary, governments must guarantee the rights to life, health, housing, an adequate standard of living, and access to food and water, especially for those most at risk and for whom the cost of the health crisis is particularly high. Targeted support should be provided to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers as well as homeless people. Low-wage and informal-sector workers should receive priority support. The specific needs of persons with disabilities, the elderly and persons in prison or detention should be taken into account, as well as how the crisis disproportionately affects women and girls.

Human rights must remain at the centre of states' deliberations. This was [affirmed on 16 March](#) by a United Nations human rights expert group, which urged states not to abuse security measures in their response to the coronavirus outbreak.

### **Abuses**

Despite this appeal, alarming abuses have been observed by FIDH and its 192 member organisations. States are showing a flagrant lack of transparency in their management

of the health crisis and are abusively restricting freedom of expression, particularly online, and the right to information, all in an attempt to avoid the dissemination of information of the public interest seen as potentially embarrassing to the government.

In China, where the authorities harassed Li Wenliang, the doctor who raised the alarm about the new virus, all independent information about the situation has been suppressed. One may also question the reality of the situation in North Korea, Myanmar or Laos, for example, where the rate of reported cases is particularly low (no cases identified in North Korea according to official sources) and the serious consequences that a lack of information may have on the spread of the virus. The same situation exists in Russia, which borders China, where the number of officially registered cases was only 658 per 144.5 million inhabitants as of 26 March.

In Honduras, the police took advantage of the government-imposed curfew to [capture an opposition leader](#) on 17 March. In Israel, the state [uses intelligence units](#) to trace those who tested positive for Covid-19.

### **FIDH urges States to adopt an approach of solidarity and respect for human rights in their fight against Covid-19.**

#### **Respect for the exceptional and temporary nature of emergency measures**

Emergency measures that violate or restrict human rights must be publicly announced and must follow a clear framework determined by international law. Restrictions on freedom of movement and quarantine measures may be necessary, but they must be strictly limited to the duration and scale required to control the spread of the virus. States will need to take the necessary measures to ensure that the situation that existed prior to the outbreak is restored once the crisis has passed.

International law provides that any measure derogating from ordinary law must be "in accordance with the law" and "necessary in a democratic society" to protect "national security", "public safety", "public order", "public health or morals" or the "rights and freedoms of others".

#### **This health crisis must not serve to unduly reduce the space for civil society and crack down on human rights defenders**

Human rights defenders can, even in normal times, be the target of large-scale attacks, threats and intimidation. The fight against COVID-19 should not be used as a pretext by some states to commit or reinforce abuses against defenders and reduce the space for civil society.

In this regard, FIDH is concerned that certain measures of surveillance and population control introduced in the context of this crisis are being used to repress dissenting voices and that restrictive measures are being used to undermine the rights of human rights defenders.

China, for example, has asked all its citizens to install an application on their smartphones to monitor their health status, location, and access to public spaces. While

this additional measure of social control does not specifically target human rights defenders at this stage, we are concerned that it could be used in the aftermath of the health crisis to monitor and suppress social movements and human rights defenders.

Similarly, in Russia the authorities have started to install facial recognition cameras to locate people who have violated quarantine measures. Given the Russian authorities' record of human rights violations, there is a risk that these technologies could be used to harass peaceful demonstrators after the health crisis is over.

People who are particularly exposed to or rendered vulnerable by the crisis should receive reinforced, tailored support. Everywhere, containment measures are multiplying and becoming more stringent. While their establishment is often justified from a health perspective, their application can have particularly serious consequences for people experiencing discrimination on the grounds of their background, sex, class, disability, age, among others.

Many people have nowhere to take refuge or are forced to live in crowded and unhealthy conditions. In France, homeless people, who often have no option but to remain on the street, have been [fined and punished](#) as a result, while too little support has been provided to them to protect themselves from the virus and to meet their most basic needs (such as housing and food).

How can isolation measures be observed for [people with disabilities](#), who are often dependent on the help of their relatives or specialised staff?

### **Women and girls disproportionately impacted**

For many women, home isolation increases the risk of being exposed to domestic and/or partner violence. Hospital overcrowding and lack of equipment further limit women's access to abortion, as in the US states of Texas and Ohio, where abortion has been placed on the list of non-urgent operations. States urgently need to develop special mechanisms to combat violence against women, provide adequate support to victims and, as a whole, provide a response to COVID-19 that takes into account the gendered impact of the epidemic.

Businesses must also do their part, ensuring that they protect the integrity of their employees who are at particular risk because of their work in hospitality, contact with the public or caregiving. If companies do not have the necessary equipment or are unable to guarantee a working environment that complies with health recommendations, then governments must provide the means, whether legal or financial, to enable people at risk to exercise their right to health without having to choose between this right and their employment.

In the name of national solidarity, governments must put in place specific measures to support those on the front line.

### **Human rights must not become a casualty of this crisis**

To this end, every measure taken to address the health crisis must be justified and

proportionate, exercised without discrimination and within a reasonable timeframe.

FIDH expresses its support to all workers mobilised to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and joins the efforts of NGOs, collectives and individuals who are committed to ensure that this crisis is not an opportunity to trample on and roll back human rights. Solidarity and vigilance.