

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

of Academies & Scholarly Societies



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The International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies (IHRN) is an alliance of more than 90 national academies that works to address global human rights concerns at the intersection of science, technology, and medicine. We, the members of the IHRN's Executive Committee, wish to bring attention to human rights concerns as governments attempt to control the spread of COVID-19 throughout the world. We believe that integration of human rights principles into responses to the pandemic is essential. COVID-19 poses an extraordinary threat to the global community and to the life, health, and well-being of its members. International human rights norms and standards, including those concerning the right to health, provide a vital framework for responding to the pandemic while safeguarding human dignity.

Integrating human rights into COVID-19 responses requires that States work to ensure the availability and accessibility of quality health care to all people, without discrimination. Ensuring that individuals have access to timely and factual information about the pandemic is essential. We are alarmed that some States have used the pandemic as justification for the introduction of overly broad and open-ended restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and have sought to punish peaceful criticism of government responses to the crisis. These actions are inconsistent with a human rights-based approach to the pandemic. International human rights law requires that emergency COVID-19 measures affecting the right to freedom of expression and other human rights be lawful, necessary, proportionate, time-limited, and non-discriminatory.

COVID-19 poses a threat to all members of the global community, but particularly to society's most marginalized and vulnerable members. Identifying and addressing the specific needs of these individuals must be a priority of response efforts. As the pandemic has spread, so have reports of xenophobia, discrimination, and violence. Those affected include, among others, members of minority communities and health professionals who provide care to COVID-19 patients. Recent attacks and scapegoating in response to the public health crisis present grave threats to individuals and to society. States must take a strong stand against such actions.

Academies in the IHRN support and promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, assist unjustly incarcerated nonviolent professional colleagues, address grave science-related human rights issues, and advocate for member institutions whose independence is threatened.

The IHRN is an alliance that has long worked to secure the release of scientists, health professionals, and other colleagues detained in violation of international human rights law, but we are concerned about all individuals deprived of their liberty. Many of these individuals are living in overcrowded prisons and detention centers with restricted access to hygiene and health care, and they are among those most at risk of infection. This poses both public health and human rights concerns. The World Health Organization and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights have asked governments to take immediate steps to ameliorate prison overcrowding and have requested the immediate release of individuals held in arbitrary detention.

As a matter of urgency, we call upon governments and others working to confront the pandemic to make human rights protection a central part of their efforts.

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