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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

Shenilla Mohamed

Charles Dickens wrote: *“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”*

Dickens’ book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, is set in the late 18th century against the background of the French Revolution but every single word of the quotation above rings true for the world we find ourselves in today – the COVID-19 world.

As the pandemic tears across the world, we are all worried about the present and the future. In countries where the virus has hit, many have already lost loved ones. Elsewhere, people are bracing themselves for the spread of the virus, wondering how stretched healthcare systems can possibly cope. Even for those who have not yet been directly affected, COVID-19 is disrupting lives in unimaginable ways.

In South Africa, this virus has underscored the inequalities that exist in society and the fact that the majority of the population live in less than favourable conditions makes them even more vulnerable to the pandemic.

The South African Government has taken some swift and positive steps to try to prevent the spread and contain the infection rates. This must be applauded. But it is clear that these plans are being hampered by the many unresolved poverty and inequality issues that haunt the country.

COVID-19 has highlighted the fact that 26 years after apartheid, the majority of the population still live in poverty and do not have access to essential

basic services like water, adequate housing, health care etc. The virus has forced the State to provide water tankers to communities, provide the homeless with shelter, attempt to “de-densify” informal settlements and try to resettle refugee and migrant communities to name just a few.

However, these are issues that should have been dealt with years ago.

Access to quality healthcare for the poor and vulnerable has also been a major challenge over the past two decades. COVID-19 has forced the state to confront the situation head-on and come up with contingency plans.

Of course, had the state tackled issues pertaining to poverty and inequality in a result driven way previously, tackling the virus would have been less layered.

It is sad that it took a virus for government to begin providing water and health care to people – our basic human rights.

We can only hope that once we come through the eye of the COVID-19 storm, that we are left with ‘the best of times’ – a time where the state continues to protect and uplift the poor and vulnerable and seriously work towards the eradication of poverty and inequality.

Life may feel like it is on hold right now – but the fight for human rights will never stop. We have to ensure that we keep fighting till every person living in South Africa enjoys the human rights they are entitled to.

Stay safe and stay kind.

Aluta Continua!

WHAT IS THE SOUTH AFRICA YOU WANT TO SEE POST-PANDEMIC?

Mienke Steytler



This Human Rights Day was like no other. The world is in the midst of a pandemic, President Ramaphosa last Sunday declared a State of National Disaster, we are socially isolated from one another, and fear and panic is everywhere.

It's a challenging time but this doesn't mean that solidarity and kindness can't flourish, or that human rights should fall by the wayside. On the contrary, this emergency should be a call to action for each and every one of us to stand with humanity and united in the fight for human rights.

A crisis like this highlights the inequalities that already exist in South Africa, thrusting access to sanitation, water, healthcare, safe public transport, quality education and service delivery into the spotlight.



This isn't a time to dim the light on other issues facing our country, though. What has become of our gender-based violence (GBV) reduction efforts? How are asylum seekers, refugees and migrants accessing treatment for COVID-19? Where are the homeless going for safety? What about the safety of children?

And the climate crisis is still a reality despite the unfolding events. Like COVID-19, the climate crisis is likely to be the most devastating for the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable.

A pandemic cannot and should not stop action on human rights. If COVID-19 has done one thing other than cause panic buying of loo roll, it has shown the importance of uniting in our fight for human rights and the ongoing struggle for equality, dignity, freedom and climate justice.

We can all wash our hands, not touch our faces, be socially distant, use sanitiser or wear a mask (if we're lucky to find one), but, what if there is no water to wash your hands? What if you are forced to isolate with the person you fear most? What if you are a health worker with no access to the equipment you need?

The government and other actors involved must ensure that all responses to the outbreak are in compliance with international human rights law and standards, and that the specific human rights risks associated with any particular response are addressed and mitigated.

So, in designing responses to COVID-19 and planning for the future, the government must be conscious of the particular impact of the virus on vulnerable and marginalised groups and ensure that their needs and experiences are fully accounted for in plans and strategies.

For example, many people living in poverty, and those who don't have access to sufficient, safe and reliable water, may face additional barriers in being

able to suitably protect themselves against the virus.

How does one fight a virus where hand-washing is key, but there is no water?

With World Water Day yesterday (so close on the heels of Human Rights Day, it's like COVID-19 checked a calendar before striking), Amnesty International South Africa welcomes the promises government has made in light of COVID-19 and we call on them to take further action in order to ensure the right to sufficient, safe and reliable water for all people in South Africa.

The government must be transparent with communication and information regarding where water is being delivered and how much is provided each time. It must also be accountable to the commitments made in light of COVID-19, including water tank deliveries, and to international and national obligations by providing daily updates on the progress of these commitments.

What happens post-COVID-19? Responses designed and updated now must include sustainable long-term solutions to problems that existed before COVID-19, including issues of GBV, refugee and asylum seeker rights, education and poverty.

We can all take action and tell the government what sort of South Africa we want to see post-pandemic.

Let us remember those who sacrificed for our freedoms, stand with humanity and take action. We can get through this together without leaving anyone behind.

You can read Amnesty International's preliminary observations on responses to COVID-19 and states' human rights obligations here.

Use this time to learn about human rights! Check out the Amnesty Academy, we have a course on COVID-19 and human rights too.

This article first appeared on [News24](#) on 23 March.



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HOW CAN HUMAN RIGHTS HELP US?

We are determined not to give into fear or to lose hope.

The way governments decide to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the human rights of millions of people.

Amnesty International is closely monitoring government responses to the crisis. These are extraordinary times, but it's important to remember that human rights law still applies. Indeed, it will help us get through this together.

Here's a quick look at how human rights can help protect us, and what the obligations of governments are in relation to the pandemic.

The right to health

Most governments have ratified at least one human rights treaty which requires them to guarantee the right to health. Among other things, this means they have an obligation to take all steps necessary for the prevention, treatment and control of diseases.

In the context of a spreading epidemic, this means ensuring that preventive care, goods and services are available to everybody.

In Hong Kong, one of the first places to be hit by COVID-19, a local NGO noted that nearly 70% of low-income families could not afford to buy the protective equipment the government was recommending, including masks and disinfectant. If states are endorsing the use of such items, they must ensure that everyone can access them.

Access to information

This is a key aspect of the right to health, but we have already seen governments ignoring it.

In December 2019, doctors in Wuhan, China, where the virus was first reported, shared with colleagues their fears about patients with respiratory symptoms. They were immediately silenced and reprimanded by the local authorities for "spreading rumours".

Everybody has the right to be informed of the threat COVID-19 poses to their health

Meanwhile, in the region of Jammu and Kashmir, authorities have ordered the continued restriction of internet services, despite a growing number of cases. This makes it extremely difficult for people to access vital information about the prevalence and spread of the virus, as well as how to protect themselves.

Everybody has the right to be informed of the threat COVID-19 poses to their health, the measures to mitigate risks, and information about ongoing response efforts. The failure to guarantee this

undermines the public health response and puts everyone's health at risk.

Labour rights

People in precarious forms of labour are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic, which is already starting to have a massive impact on people and the economy. Migrant workers, people who work in the "gig" economy, and people in the informal sector are more likely to see their rights to and at work adversely impacted, as a result of COVID-19 and the measures to control it.

Governments must ensure that everyone has access to social security – including sick pay, health care and parental leave – where they are unable to work because of the virus. These measures are also essential to help people stick to the public health measures states put in place.

Health workers are at the frontline of this pandemic, continuing to deliver services despite the personal risks to them and their families, and governments must protect them. This includes providing suitable, good quality personal protective equipment, information, training and psycho-social support to all response staff. People in other jobs, including prison staff, are also at higher risk of exposure, and should be protected.

Disproportionate impact on certain groups

Anyone can get COVID-19, but certain groups appear to be at greater risk of severe illness and death. This includes older people and people with pre-existing medical conditions. It's also likely that other marginalized groups, including people living in poverty, people with disabilities and people in detention, including migrants and asylum seekers, will face additional challenges in protecting themselves and accessing treatment.

For example, homeless people will find it more difficult to self-isolate, and people who do not have access to adequate sanitation will be at greater risk of contracting the virus.

In designing responses to COVID-19, states must ensure that the needs and experiences of specific groups are fully addressed.

Stigma and discrimination

According to media reports, people from Wuhan have faced widespread discrimination and harassment in China. This includes being rejected from hotels or barricaded in their own flats, and having their personal information leaked online.

This crisis should unite, not divide us

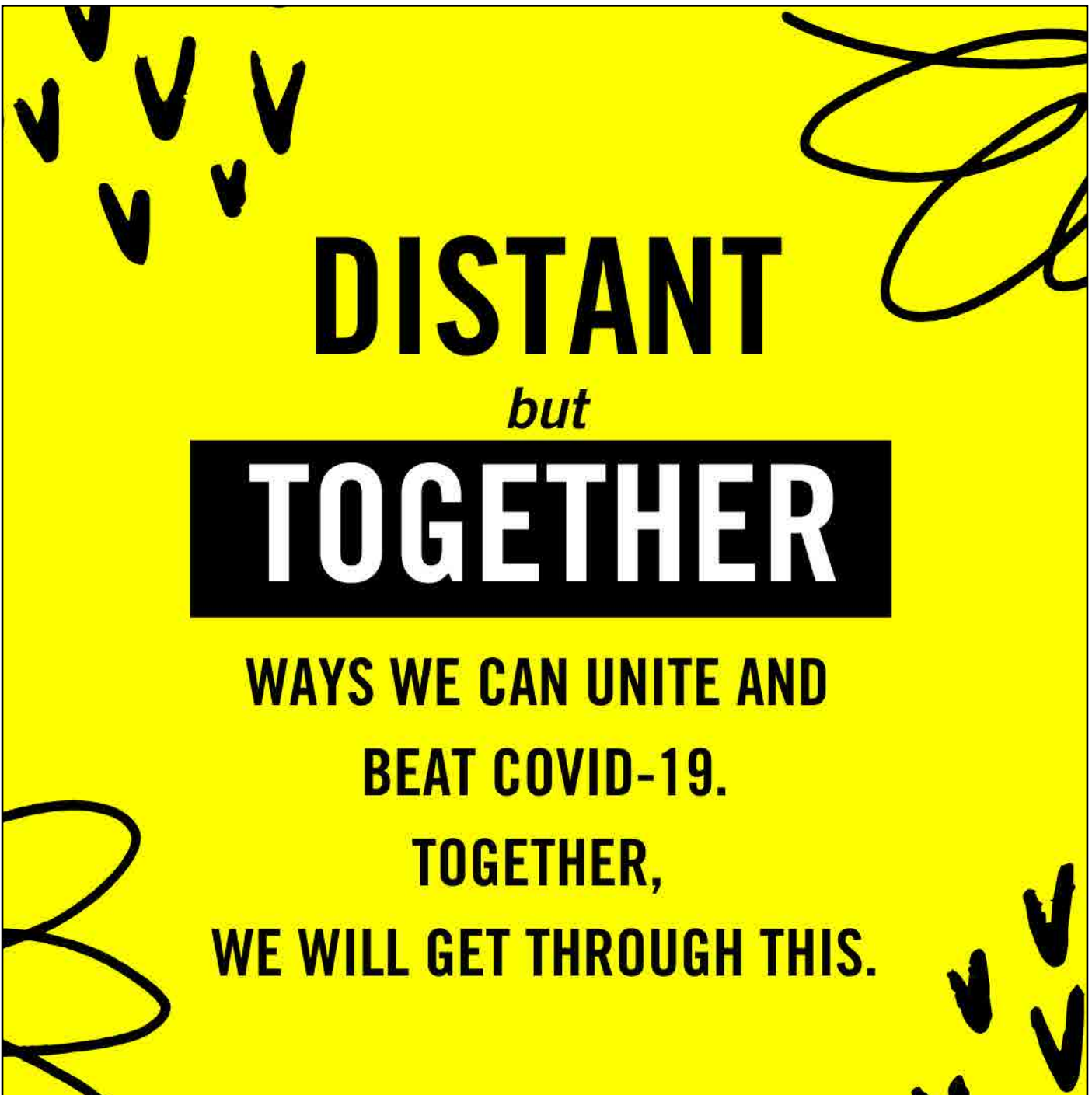
There have also been widespread reports of anti-Chinese or anti-Asian xenophobia in other countries, including US President Trump repeatedly calling COVID-19 a “Chinese virus”. In London, a student from Singapore was badly beaten up in a racially aggravated attack. There is no excuse for racism or discrimination. Governments around the world must take a zero-tolerance approach to the racist targeting of all people.

Meanwhile, President Trump has used the pandemic to justify racist and discriminatory policies, and is reportedly planning a blanket ban on asylum-seekers crossing from Mexico.

Such an outright asylum ban would go against the government’s domestic and international legal obligations, and would serve only to demonize people seeking safety. A similar 2018 ban was swiftly declared unlawful by every court to have considered it.

Furthermore, during a public health crisis, governments must act to protect the health of all people and ensure everyone’s access to care and safety, free from discrimination. This includes people on the move, regardless of their immigration status.

The only way the world can fight this outbreak is through solidarity and cooperation across borders. COVID-19 should unite, not divide us.



SOUTH AFRICA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM IS BROKEN AND UNEQUAL, AND MUST BE FIXED WITHOUT FURTHER DELAY

Fatima Moosa, Mail & Guardian

Nelson Mandela famously said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” It seemed fitting that the quote was mentioned at the launch of the Amnesty International report, [Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa](#), on February 11. The date marked 30 years since the release of the former president from prison, but there was little cause for celebration at the publication of the report which took place at the latest Amnesty International South Africa and Mail & Guardian Critical Thinking Forum, held at the Mail & Guardian offices in Braamfontein.

“South Africa is failing too many of its young people when it comes to education. Although it has made significant progress since the end of apartheid in widening access, this has not always translated into a quality education for all pupils. The system continues to be dogged by stark inequalities and chronic underperformance that have deep roots in the legacy of apartheid, but which are also not being effectively tackled by the current government,” was the main takeaway from the report.

The launch included a panel discussion which delved into some of the issues raised by the report. The panel was moderated by Robert Shivambu, the media manager for the Southern Africa Regional Office of Amnesty International. Ayanda Makebenge, education activist, Shenilla Mohamed, executive director Amnesty International South Africa, Samantha Brener, attorney at Section 27, Matakanye Matakanya, general secretary of the National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB), and Elijah Mhlanga, spokesperson for the Department of Basic Education (DBE) made up the panel.

Focusing on Gauteng and the Eastern Cape, the Amnesty International report found that the South African government continues to miss its own upgrading targets. They found that many schools in those provinces have poor infrastructure and lack basic facilities. These included badly maintained buildings that have never been renovated. Many of these buildings date back decades to the apartheid era and

were built with unsafe materials. The findings of the report were put together in conjunction with a survey that Amnesty International conducted with the NASGB.

Welcoming the audience to the launch, Samson Ogunyemi, the economic, social and cultural rights researcher and campaigner for Amnesty International South Africa said the report could not be launched without remembering what Nelson Mandela said about education. Ogunyemi also took the audience through the methodology of the report which decided to assess the quality of education in poorer communities by focusing its visits on the no fee schools (quintiles 1-3) that serve these communities in both urban and rural areas.

The report found that 19% of schools in South Africa have illegal pit latrines, 37 schools have no sanitation, 86% of the schools have no laboratories while 239 schools lack electricity.

The research for the report was carried out between November 2017 and June 2019. Desk research drew on reports from international and national non-governmental organisations, the UN, regional human rights bodies, academics and the media as well as government data including public spending on education and education outcomes disaggregated by region. Field research for the report was conducted in Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape. During the field research, Amnesty International visited 12 public schools in Gauteng and 26 public schools in the Eastern Cape.

A video was shown just before the panel discussion delved into the intricacies of the report. An education activist and student spoke about the challenges facing the school system. Panelist Ayanda Makebenge featured in the video as well and spoke about how, as a 13-year-old, she went to the department to demand more textbooks for the learners. The video emphasised the report's point that the state of South African education was in disrepair.

The launch was well-attended with extra seating brought in. The audience consisted of members of Amnesty International, learners, teachers, parents and people interested in the education sector. It was an engaged audience that listened and participated with the panel.

Amnesty International's Mohamed raised the issue that, in this day and age, a child's education

still depends on the colour of their skin and where they were born. She said the Department of Basic Education has failed by their own admission to meet targets within the education system. “We are robbing many children, particularly from poor communities of a future,” said Mohamed adding that in spite of austerity conditions, funds need to be utilised to make a difference in the system.

“The situation is very bad,” said education activist Makebenge. Following on from the comments she made in the video, Makebenge said the economic situation in the country is no excuse for the government to not fund basic education. She said many students, including herself, were forced to walk for long distances to school. This made it very difficult for learners to concentrate in schools. Another issue was the lack of resources. Makebenge said at certain points during her schooling, seven learners would be forced to use one textbook. That made it difficult for students to study at home for exams and to do their homework.

Representing the school governing bodies, NASGB’s Matakanya said the biggest problem facing the education system in South Africa is quality. He said students should not have to travel long distances to be able to access quality education.

Human rights organisation, Section 27, has worked on the issue of quality in education for a considerable amount of time. The organisation in particular has worked on the case of Michael Komape, the five-year-old learner who drowned in a pit toilet. Berner from Section 27 first explained to the audience what happened to Michael Komape. She said it’s important for people to imagine those conditions and understand Michael’s death as a symptom of the broken system.

Responding last to all the comments that had been made, the department’s Mhlanga said that the department had reportedly not seen the report before the event. He instead chose to respond to the issues of the education system more generally. Mhlanga said while the department is not happy with the progress being made, the issue was complex and that it’s important to understand which arm of government has the power to respond to the issues directly.

The floor was then opened for questions. Many of the audience members raised the point that many of the issues were known, and that there is now a need to create solutions through government, activists and civil society working together.

During her closing statement, Mohamed left the room with a final thought that it was important to remember the children during all the discussions. She said the event might have been a back-and-forth between the civil society organisations and government with defensiveness from both sides. Mohamed said the panelists and audience members have painted the picture of the child, and that if organisations and the government start thinking of the child, then people will start thinking of solutions.

In closing, Ogunyemi encouraged audience members to go through the comprehensive 120 page report. He said that the audience should engage with Amnesty International after reading the report and come up with solutions for dealing with the issue of the “broken and unequal” South African education system.

This article first appeared in the [Mail & Guardian](#) on 25 February 2020.



REMEMBER TO CARRY YOUR TAZER, SIS!

Jaclyn Modise



I wake up and I feel a bit anxious. Preparing for school has become discomfoting over the last year or so... even just leaving the house and walking towards the first taxi I have to take to get me to class...

You see, I'm a young woman in South Africa and acts of violence against women seem to have increased a lot recently. Other women have advised me to always be aware of my surroundings, so as I walk down the street to the taxi rank, I clutch my keys tightly, ready to use them as a weapon at any moment.

"Always watch your drink at events." "Send your location to us all so that we know where you were if you disappear." "Remember to carry your tazer, sis!"

Living in fear has become the norm for women in South Africa, and carrying a tazer just seems so, well... OTT. Or is it?

The government has talked about tackling gender-based violence (GBV) but, from where I'm sitting, this is talk and no action. And it feels like not a day goes by where one doesn't hear of a woman being attacked.

And social media also doesn't make me feel any better. Men don't call out their friends, or any man for that matter.

When I speak to my friends, they tell me that they are scared to go anywhere or even to be around men because, let's face it, the climate in South Africa

isn't exactly woman friendly. We've all become walking targets for men who prey on us. #AmINext is very real. Every day. Any one of us could be the next rape or murder victim, simply for being a woman.

The justice system seems to be enabling men to do as they wish. I think this because whenever a woman goes to a police station to report abuse, she is often treated appallingly.

Examples include "I can't help you because he is your husband/boyfriend/brother", "Are you drunk?", "Were you drunk?", "Dressed like THAT, eh eh, what did you expect?"

Often a male officer is the only one there but even female officers can lack sympathy and sensitivity

Even if a protection order is issued, many women die with protection orders in their handbags. And don't try calling 10 111, I've tried and no-one picks up for a loooooong time. One could be dead in that time...

According to a poll by Ipsos MORI on behalf of Amnesty International in 2019, GBV is the defining issue for South Africa's Generation Z, and with International Women's Day happening today, I'm asking myself if it's the defining issue for those in authority. I think not. The perpetrators of GBV and femicide must face justice. While it is heartening to see a positive response from the President to the anguished calls from women to tackle this scourge, there is still a long way to go.

This begins with ensuring that police officers are properly trained to sensitively and objectively investigate incidents of gender-based violence. The government must also ensure that GBV is taken seriously at every level of the justice system, including by challenging discriminatory stereotypes about victims and survivors.

GBV, corruption and violent crime all run rampant in South Africa and leaders must take strong and decisive action immediately to protect the human rights of all – women, children, men, everyone.

As we (hopefully) live through – I don't think 'celebrate' is the right word – International Women's Day today, let's call again on South Africa's leaders to make 2020 the year where there is meaningful

action to address GBV, corruption and violent crime.

I, for one, will be watching fearfully as I walk back down the street home, after school, tightly clutching my keys just in case.

This first appeared on [Amnesty.org.za](https://www.amnesty.org.za) on 8 March 2020.

Jaclyn Modise is an African who is determined to serve her continent ensuring it prospers. She is currently awaiting graduation in International Communications at Tshwane University of Technology and has been accepted into the Advanced Diploma: Integrated Communication s qualification at TUT (2020). She is a supporter and former intern at Amnesty International South Africa.



IF YOU ARE OR WERE A VICTIM OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, YOU CAN

CONTACT:

Lifeline: 0800 150 150

POWA: 011 642 4345/6

TEARS: SMS *134*7355#

Rape Crisis: 021 447 9762

All the contacts are completely confidential.



DEATHS ALLEGEDLY DUE TO POLICE ACTION ARE CONCERNING – 31 MARCH 2020

In response to reports of deaths during lockdown allegedly due to action by police, Shenilla Mohamed, Executive Director of Amnesty International South Africa, said:

“We are extremely concerned to hear reports of people dying during lockdown allegedly as a result of actions taken by the police. We repeat our call that, while it is urgent and important to ensure that people adhere to the lockdown, resorting to force must only be done when it is strictly necessary and proportionate.

As President Ramaphosa stated last night, it is imperative that security forces act within the law at all times. They should adopt an educational approach, rather than force, to sensitise anyone who is not complying with the rules of the lockdown. And they should treat everyone equally, whether in a township or the suburbs. Everyone is equal under the law.

Investigations by the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) must be transparent and must take national and international human rights laws and standards into account. Further to this, all investigative reports into incidents must be made available to the public.

“Amnesty International South Africa will be monitoring the use of force by security forces during the lockdown, and will continue to call for restraint and accountability.”

Background

The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) investigates complaints against the South African Police Service and the Municipal Police Services (MPS). The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) investigates complaints against its members through the Military Ombud.

President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a 21 day lockdown on Monday, 23 March 2020, in response to COVID-19. The lockdown came into effect at midnight on Thursday, 26 March 2020 and is scheduled to last until 16 April 2020.

A lockdown is an emergency protocol that requires South Africans to stay home except for essential purposes. Grocery stores, pharmacies, banks and other essential industries will remain open. All non-essential activities are suspended.

Anyone breaking the rules could be punished with imprisonment for up to one month or with a fine.

The list of essential services include healthcare providers, pharmacies, banks and petrol stations as well as companies that are essential to the production and transportation of food, basic goods and medical supplies. Newspaper, broadcasting and telecommunication infrastructure and services are also included.

The full list of government-approved essential services can be found [here](#).



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COVID-19 COULD HAVE DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES FOR THE POOR – 18 MARCH 2020

In response to the government’s declaration of a State of National Disaster to manage the COVID-19 outbreak, Shenilla Mohamed, Executive Director of Amnesty International South Africa, said: “This is a challenging time for South Africa and the world, and Amnesty International calls on everyone to stand in solidarity and to be kind to each other, and we welcome the President’s calls for solidarity and compassion.

A crisis like this highlights the inequalities that already exist in South Africa with access to sanitation, water, healthcare, safe public transport and quality education as well as service delivery coming into even starker light than usual.

Amnesty International calls on the government and other actors involved to ensure that all responses to the COVID-19 outbreak are in compliance with international human rights law and standards, and that

the specific human rights risks associated with any particular response are addressed and mitigated.

Many people living in poverty and those who don’t have access to adequate water and safe sanitation, may face additional barriers in being able to suitably protect themselves against the virus.

All responses must consider the specific needs of marginalised groups and people and those most at risk and ensure that everyone has access to timely and meaningful information about the measures being taken. Let’s stand with humanity, leave no one behind, and get through this, together.”

Background

President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a State of National Disaster on Sunday, 15 March 2020, in response to COVID-19. The WHO has designated the disease a pandemic. The President announced he will chair a tri-weekly National Command Council.

G20 LEADERS MUST COOPERATE TO PROTECT THOSE MOST AT RISK – 26 MARCH 2020

Ahead of an extraordinary virtual meeting of the G20 group which is scheduled to take place on Thursday, Amnesty International called on leaders to coordinate responses to help the most at-risk groups and people cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The response to this pandemic must be based on cooperation and sharing of resources, because national strategies will not be enough on their own. Not only is helping the most marginalized the right thing to do, inadequate healthcare in any part of the world is a risk to us all. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has shown how connected we all are,” said Netsanet Belay, Research and Advocacy Director at Amnesty International.

On Thursday G20 leaders need to produce a concrete and coordinated plan for mobilising resources to help people in the global south. They have a lot of financial measures at their disposal and they must consider them all. We will beat this virus together, for everyone, or not at all.”

Background

Amnesty International is calling for the G20 to adopt concrete and measurable policies and plans in order to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic at home and abroad, protect people’s health, and reduce its economic impacts.

Such measures must guarantee access for all to preventive care and good quality and affordable

treatment, including those most at risk or less able to implement preventive measures through poverty, homelessness, or living and working in environments where they are more exposed to the virus.

Transparency in decision-making is essential, requiring access to information, media freedom, and open civic space.

Read the joint statement to the G20 [here](#).



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COVID-19 AS AN EMERGENCY HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

*In homes, streets, public places, radio stations, newspapers and international television news channels, everybody is talking about Covid-19, writes **Deprese Muchena**, Director of Amnesty International's East and Southern Africa Regional Office.*



Overcrowded conditions in one of Madagascar's prisons.

© Amnesty International

Governments around the world have responded to the Covid-19 menace by imposing a raft of measures aimed at containing the spread of the disease, including restricting freedom of movement and ordering social distancing in public places like shopping malls, trains and churches.

In eastern and southern Africa, some governments, such as Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, have imposed national lockdowns, which include school closures, restricted movement of people and restricted operating times or closures for pubs and restaurants. The number of people who can gather at churches, funerals and other public spaces has been curtailed. In some places, such as South Africa, these measures will be enforced by the security forces patrolling the streets.

Covid-19 is confirmed in more than 195 countries and territories around the world, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Neither rich nor poor have been spared. The death toll, and the number of people testing positive for the virus, rises every day.

The situation has been declared a national disaster in countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe – after it became clear it would have devastating consequences for poor and marginalised people, especially in high density areas with insufficient water, sanitation and healthcare infrastructure.

So far, South Africa has recorded the highest number of confirmed cases at more than 1,000

There have been two reported deaths, but there are early indications that some patients are recovering.

In Zimbabwe, Covid-19 has claimed its first victim, a prominent young broadcaster, Zororo Makamba, who succumbed to the disease after being allegedly isolated at Wilkins Hospital in Harare – the government's designated health facility for Covid-19 – without being offered treatment earlier this week. Reports indicate the health facility lacks intensive care equipment, including ventilators and personal protective equipment for health workers.

In the context of a spreading epidemic, states

have an obligation to ensure that preventive care, goods, services and information are available and accessible to all persons.

Also in Zimbabwe, there were reports of a patient who was kept in isolation for days at Thorngrove Hospital in Bulawayo last week, without being tested apparently due to the lack of the necessary medical diagnostic kits.

In Angola, about 280 economy class passengers disembarking a flight from Portugal on 22 March were taken to a forced quarantine site about 50 kilometres from the airport in Luanda. Reports indicated that another 20 passengers traveling in first class were taken to a local hotel for quarantine.

According to reports, passengers were not informed where they were being taken, with men and women being separated.

In Madagascar, which as of 26 March had 23 confirmed Covid-19 cases, thousands of people were detained in deplorable prison conditions, with many yet to be tried. There is a disaster waiting to happen if Covid-19 finds its way in. For example, in 2018 Amnesty documented how the overuse of pretrial detention had resulted in severely overcrowded prisons, with many people detained for petty offences such as stealing a chicken, which means preventative steps such as washing hands and observing social distancing are going to be impossible to adhere to.

Malagasy authorities should consider releasing some pre-trial detainees to mitigate the likely disastrous impact of Covid-19 – especially to elderly or already sick inmates who do not pose a risk to society. Some of these inmates could be considered for release.

The African Commission on Human and People's rights has already raised its concerns about the spread of the pandemic across the continent, including the limited testing capacity in most states. It also noted its worry that the disease will have distressing consequences on people at risk including, among others, older people, homeless and people living in inadequate housing such as informal settlements, refugees and people with weak immune systems due to underlying health conditions.

While some countries have adopted securitisation measures to combat the spread of the virus, including social distancing through confining people to their homes, in the context of a spreading epidemic states have an obligation to ensure preventive care, goods, services and information are available and accessible to all persons. This includes the dissemination of accessible, accurate and evidence-based information about how people can protect themselves, as well as ensuring that any goods necessary to ensure prevention are available and affordable for all persons.

Countries that are unable to meet the demand must appeal to the international community for help

At this time, international cooperation and solidarity is crucial. All countries that can respond should do so as swiftly as possible. The response must itself be rights-respecting and should take account of long-term as well as immediate needs, keeping in mind the particular needs of specific, marginalised groups.

This article first appeared in the [Daily Maverick](#) on 28 March 2020 some figures would have since changed.

OVERCROWDING AND THE RISK OF UNMITIGATED SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN MADAGASCAR'S PRISONS

Tamara Léger

On 10 March, 33-year-old Domoina was sent to Antanimora prison, in the Madagascan capital, Antananarivo, to be held in pre-trial detention on charges of 'corruption of minors'. She was arrested on suspicion of having a same-sex relationship with her 19-year-old girlfriend, Fyh. This followed a tip off to the police by Fyh's mother. In Madagascar, the penal code severely punishes 'anyone who has committed an indecent or unnatural act with an individual of the same sex, under the age of 21

years'. She should be released from prison immediately and unconditionally, as the law which put her there is discriminatory – consensual same sex relations should not be criminalized. Unless the government releases her, it is likely that she will spend many more months behind bars: her trial, initially planned for 10 April, has now been postponed indefinitely because of the country's lockdown against COVID-19. Following the confirmation of the first cases of COVID19 on

20 March, the government announced measures to curb the spread of the virus. As a result, she can no longer receive visits from her lawyer, family or friends – in a context which is extremely challenging both physically and mentally.

Domoina is worried that with the COVID 19 outbreak, she could become another statistic in those lost to the pandemic. And it's understandable. If the government fails to protect detainees, Madagascar's prisons could easily become hotspots for the transmission of the virus.

Since 2018, Amnesty International has documented and reported on the inhumane conditions of detention in Madagascar's prisons, caused primarily by the country's excessive use of pre-trial detention. The lack of attention over a prolonged period given to ensuring that prisons are well maintained, and cases are heard within a reasonable time, has resulted in highly overcrowded prisons. The country currently has twice as many detainees as its overall capacity – in some prisons, the population is at ten times capacity. Pre-trial and sentenced detainees are crammed in together – in violation of international and national law – in dark cells, without sufficient ventilation. Most detainees sleep on the floor without any blankets or mattresses.

The majority of detainees interviewed by Amnesty International complained about the lack of hygiene, malnutrition caused by insufficient and poor-quality food, and they told us that they had fallen ill since their incarceration with very little access to healthcare.

Thinking of Domoina in those unhygienic conditions raises concerns about what could happen to her, and the thousands of other women, children and men held in Madagascar's prisons, should the coronavirus reach the prisons' walls. Because of the appalling conditions they are kept in, detainees are unable to take preventative steps to protect themselves against COVID-19, such as washing their hands regularly, and remaining at a safe distance from one another, when they don't even have enough space to sleep on their backs.

The government announced a few measures to protect detainees from COVID-19, such as temporarily stopping all prison visits, taking the temperatures of detainees and prison personnel regularly and disinfecting the prisons. However, given the unprecedented rate at which the virus is spread, coupled with its high mortality rate and the overcrowding in prisons, it seems difficult to imagine how they will prevent the pandemic from spreading within the walls of the prisons, with dramatic consequences. This is why the government must

urgently consider measures to reduce the prison population. The first step is to release immediately those who should not be detained at all, like Domoina, who is imprisoned simply for exercising her human rights. The government should also urgently consider the release of other prisoners – especially pre-trial detainees and those who may be more at risk from the virus, such as older prisoners or those with serious medical conditions. In any case, the authorities must take necessary measures to protect the health of all prisoners.

In November, President Rajoelina committed to tackling the country's excessive use of pre-trial detention and severe overcrowding, and to improve conditions of detention. The present health crisis provides the opportunity for Madagascar to reduce its excessive use of pre-trial detention. According to international human rights law and standards, there is a presumption of release pending trial – in accordance with the presumption of innocence and right to liberty – so pre-trial detention should only be used as an exceptional measure, yet it is applied routinely in Madagascar, leading to severe overcrowding in prisons.

Domoina should not have spent a single day in prison. Now, every additional day she is behind bars increases the risks to her mental and physical well-being, particularly as she no longer has access to her lawyer or relatives, and given the conditions of detention. In this context of a worsening pandemic such as the COVID-19, she is unable to protect herself by exercising social distancing and taking other preventative measures. The provision of healthcare for prisoners – to the same standards that are available in the community – is a state responsibility, including when it comes to testing, prevention and treatment of COVID-19. The current condition of Madagascan prisons makes it near impossible to provide such standards of care. If no measures are taken to urgently decongest the prisons, where around 50% of inmates are pre-trial detainees, Domoina and thousands of others face grave risks to their health, and lives.

[Take Action](#) and join our call for the immediate and unconditional release of Domoina and for the Government of Madagascar to effect immediate measures to ensure that the health and safety of detainees is a priority in the fight against COVID-19.

- *Domoina's family name is withheld to protect her.*

**WATCH. THIS. SPACE.
COMING TO YOU ON
TUESDAY, 14 APRIL 2020**

**KEEP YOUR EYE ON
OUR SOCIAL MEDIA AND ON YOUR EMAIL INBOX.**



TAKE OUR ONLINE COURSE ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

As fear and anxiety around COVID-19 continues around the world, many people are starting to ask difficult questions about how the pandemic will impact our human rights. Aren't border controls necessary for containing the virus? Do quarantines or government enforced curfews impose on our right to move freely?

In times like these, it is even more important for us to be able to speak confidently about what states are obligated to do to protect human rights. That's why we created an online learning course to help you navigate COVID-19.

The [course](#) outlines the many human rights implications of a global pandemic, including limitations on right to health, right to free speech

and an increase in discrimination and xenophobia. It also clearly outlines states' human rights obligations and what they should and should not do when responding to a pandemic.

Information is powerful, so at the end of the course we'll give you a list of things that you can do to share what you've learned and help amplify a message of hope and solidarity around the world.

States are not responsible for COVID-19, but they are responsible for how they respond to it. The virus cannot be used as an excuse to roll back on fundamental human rights. World leaders should know that even in times of uncertainty, Amnesty and its supporters will continue to call out human rights violators wherever we see them.

Click [here](#) to take the course.



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6 THINGS TO DO DURING LOCKDOWN

In times of coronavirus and social distancing, many of us are staying at home. Here are some free things you can do from home to empower yourself to develop skills that promote equality and respect in your community and worldwide. Why not use your time wisely?

1. Share something hopeful and positive

It can be difficult to deal with all the news right now. Why not share something positive, like a video of people showing solidarity during this pandemic or a good news story that you found online?

You can also help limit the spread of misinformation online by only sharing advice from experts and reliable sources, like the World Health Organisation. This will help stop people around you from panicking.

2. Educate yourself

Use your time wisely - there are loads of educational materials on human rights that you can study. We have a whole [Human Rights Academy](#) dedicated to exactly that. Join it.

On our Academy, you can:

- Take an introduction course on the core concepts of human rights.
- Turn yourself into an agent of change with our new online course on the UDHR.
- Learn how to protect yourself online and promote digital security.
- Come face-to-face with human rights activists in this course on Freedom of Expression.
- Learn what a human rights defender is, and become one yourself.

Find all of our free courses [here](#).

3. Get involved on [Amnesty.org.za/Action](#) and take action!

Human rights abuses are still happening. Use this time to take action and have your say.

- [The government must eradicate pit toilets in schools once and for all.](#)
- [Call for the rights of asylum seekers to be protected.](#)
- [Help release a young woman from prison.](#)

4. Learn from our [YouTube tutorials](#)

We have tried to digest some serious human rights issues into easily viewable videos. Teach yourself how to spot fake news or protest peacefully.

5. Help others with technology and social media

If you are good at using technology and social media, you can help those who may not be. Guide people through using messaging apps and social media. Call them to show them remotely how to look for help, find reliable sources and advice online. Help them find communities and people online they can talk to.

6. Show solidarity and care for others

At times like this, there are so many ways you can help those around you. For instance:

- Follow health workers' advice and social

distancing guidelines if you've been advised to do so. It helps protect people most vulnerable in your communities and eases the burden on carers and hospitals.

- Provide emotional support for people via phone calls or messages. This can be an extremely lonely time for many. Call people and provide them with support.
- Help limit the spread of misinformation and create awareness about basic dos and don'ts by promoting advice from experts and reliable sources.
- Share scarce resources, be considerate when shopping and offer help to people who are less able to access protective necessary goods that are in high demand. And remember, whatever you do: Stay safe.

WILL YOU PLEDGE YOUR SOLIDARITY?

It's during crises that something new can emerge and we get a chance to reshape our current path. We're in this together and we all want the same thing so, let's spread hope instead of fear and kindness instead of hate.

Incredible things happen when we come together.

Will you pledge to show solidarity during this time of uncertainty?

Click [here](#).



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NEWS FROM OUR UNIVERSITY CHAPTERS

The Amnesty International South Africa University Chapters have been very busy in the first quarter of the year!

CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

CPUT recruited new supporters.

UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE

Fort Hare held a recruitment drive during O-Week and they managed to recruit 200 new supporters.

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

NMU held an activation and managed to recruit 67 supporters on the day.

WALTER SISULU UNIVERSITY

Walter Sisulu held several education activations and managed to get over 100 supporters from the petitions.

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

UP had its AGM event on the 9th March with over 75 supporters present.

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

UCT had it's opening event focusing on the climate crisis as well as the role that youth can play in climate activism.

UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

Stellenbosch has recruited over 100 supporters during O-Week. This is Stellies when they had a sandwich drive to end student hunger on campus.

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

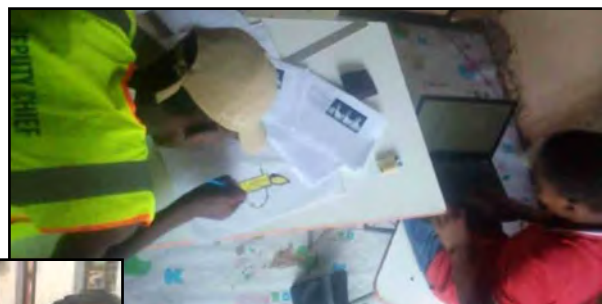
The UKZN Chapter managed to recruit over 100 new supporters during O-Week.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

Wits had an AGM in February with over 50 supporters present in the meeting.

UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

UJ were active during O-Week and managed to get over 1 000 supporters.



All photos © Amnesty International

UNIVERSITY CHAPTERS: 2020 TRAINING

The Community and University Chapters attended a training that aimed to assist chapters to better engage their constituencies on human rights.

The training sessions were facilitated by Shenilla Mohamed who provided an overview of AISA's way of Working.

Rejoyce Makhetha engaged the chapters on how to conduct offline activism.

Alicia Jooste spoke on how to conduct online activism.

James Jairos spoke on financial reporting by Chapters.

And Saskia Westfeld facilitated a number of sessions and energizers that kept the chapters engaged and helped them design a clear work plan for the year.



All photos
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COMMUNITY CHAPTERS STARTED THE YEAR ON FIRE

The Cape Town Community Chapter has been raising awareness of GBV and COVID 19 on social media. The Durban Group ran a Gender-Based Violence Action on International Women's Day and the Vaal Group launched a social media campaign against pregnancy shaming and continued to raise awareness on women's and LGBTQI rights.



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WE CAN'T DO WITHOUT OUR AMAZING VOLUNTEERS!

AISA put out a call for volunteers to join the movement and a number of interested individuals, all across Gauteng, responded to the call to serve under the Outreach Team, which is responsible for offline activations and community engagements as well as the admin team that is responsible for providing administrative duties in the office. Both teams came to the office for an official induction and continue to support AISA's social media initiatives during the COVID 19 epidemic.



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DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE TO FIGHT COVID-19 CAN ONLY BE JUSTIFIED IF IT RESPECTS HUMAN RIGHTS

With governments across the world rapidly expanding the use of digital surveillance in an attempt to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, Amnesty International and other leading NGOs have set out strict conditions that must be met to safeguard human rights and prevent surveillance overreach.

More than 100 civil society groups joined Amnesty in signing the statement, including Access Now, Human Rights Watch and Privacy International.

“Technology can play an important role in the global effort to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, however, this does not give governments carte blanche to expand digital surveillance. The

recent past has shown that governments are reluctant to relinquish temporary surveillance powers. We must not sleepwalk into a permanent expanded surveillance state now,” said Rasha Abdul Rahim, Deputy Director of Amnesty Tech.

“Increased digital surveillance to tackle this public health emergency, can only be used if certain strict conditions are met. Authorities cannot simply disregard the right to privacy and must ensure any new measures have robust human rights safeguards.


Wherever governments use the power of technology as part of their strategy to beat COVID-19, they must do so in a way that respects human rights.” The joint statement is available [here](#).





STAND WITH HUMANITY


Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who #takeinjusticepersonally. We are campaigning for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

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