



## Human Rights Institute

25 years promoting and protecting  
human rights worldwide

### **IBAHRI Covid-19 Human Rights Monitor**

Release date: Thursday 30 April 2020

**‘This is, above all, a human crisis that calls for solidarity’  
António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, 19 March 2020**

1. **Gender-based violence and women’s health**
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## 1. Gender-based violence

### Domestic violence

As cases of domestic violence continue to rise globally, Latin America has seen a marked increase during the lockdown. In Bogota, Colombia, the city's Mayor said in the first weeks of the lockdown all crime statistics were down except for one: calls to the police's 24-hour hotline to report violence against women had surged by 225 per cent. In addition to this, a report found that 590 police forces in Colombia lacked basic infrastructure, like the internet, to take domestic violence calls, which could lead to a vast amount of cases being unreported.

In Chile, the women's minister said calls to domestic abuse helplines had increased by 70 per cent in the first weekend of quarantine. The government has bolstered counselling channels and looked to keep shelters open for women at risk.<sup>1</sup> Paula Daza, a government Senior Health Official, has highlighted that 'increased alcohol consumption, mental health effects, increased anxiety, depression and violence within families' are further exacerbated by the lockdown measures<sup>2</sup>.

With an ongoing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, a hidden epidemic of gender-based violence has prompted a warning to international organisations and aid groups focusing on gender-based violence in this region. As female Venezuelan migrants displaced in Latin America have been increasingly forced into vulnerable situations, hotlines for migrant women have exploded during the rise of the coronavirus. Research conducted thus far has found that women have been subjected to violence while under government-instructed quarantine measures, with women coming forward claiming that 'my husband is beating me up, but I'm not allowed to leave'. As researchers uncovered these cases, they claimed that migrant shelters and most aid organisations had closed their doors, leaving women quarantined with their abusers with nowhere to go. Human rights defenders have highlighted that imposed lockdown orders without systems or shelters in place to respond to increasing demand puts domestic violence victims at a greater risk.

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<sup>1</sup>NBC news 'Another pandemic': Domestic abuse calls spike in Latin America during coronavirus lockdown' 27 April 2020 [www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/another-pandemic-domestic-abuse-calls-spike-latin-america-during-coronavirus-n1193281](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/another-pandemic-domestic-abuse-calls-spike-latin-america-during-coronavirus-n1193281)

<sup>2</sup>Buenos Aires Times, 'Women suffer as lockdown worsens Latin America's 'domestic hell' 21 April 2020 [www.batimes.com.ar/news/culture/domestic-violence-latin-americas-other-quarantine-emergency.phtml](http://www.batimes.com.ar/news/culture/domestic-violence-latin-americas-other-quarantine-emergency.phtml)

In order to combat domestic violence in Brazil, where there has been a 30 per cent increase in domestic violence in São Paulo, a group of 700 volunteers have formed a 'network of justice' to provide victims with medical, legal and psychological assistance through a WhatsApp messaging service. Similarly, the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria, a network of women's organisations in Plateau State, hosted workshops with local leaders to advise community members and is raising awareness via media on how to prevent the spread of the virus. Rose Faida, whose organisation REFEADES works with survivors of gender-based violence in eastern Congo, said that since many women in their community have little access to media for information, her team has been reaching out to women and girls directly to educate them about safe hygiene and social distancing measures.

In a bid to support victims of domestic violence when transportation means are scarce, Uber has launched a domestic violence service, offering free rides and food to thousands of women facing violence at home during the shelter-in-place era. The company has donated 50,000 free rides to domestic violence organisations in more than 30 cities across 16 countries, in order to safeguard vulnerable people.

## **Femicide**

As of 2019, 3,800 women were murdered in Latin America, an eight per cent increase on the previous year. This statistic, highlighted from preliminary data from the Observatory for Gender Equality at CEPAL, the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, reaffirms that significant attention must be placed on vulnerable women during the lockdown stages. Since the mandatory quarantine instituted by the Argentinian government on 20 March, 18 women have been murdered by their partners or ex-partners, with appeals to helplines up by nearly 40 per cent<sup>3</sup>.

In the United Kingdom, almost three times as many women were killed by men during three weeks of coronavirus lockdown, when compared to the same period over the last decade, according to data compiled by monitoring and advocacy groups. In this period of three weeks,

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<sup>3</sup>Buenos Aires Times, 'Women suffer as lockdown worsens Latin America's 'domestic hell' 21 April 2020 [www.batimes.com.ar/news/culture/domestic-violence-latin-americas-other-quarantine-emergency.phtml](http://www.batimes.com.ar/news/culture/domestic-violence-latin-americas-other-quarantine-emergency.phtml)  
Quntara, 'Coronavirus breeds domestic violence in Turkey', 24 April 2020

starting 23 March when stricter social distancing measures were enforced in the UK, 14 women were killed.

In Turkey, the organisation We Will Stop Femicide has reported 21 killings from the 11 March to 31 March. Turkey is one of the signatories of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe's treaty to prevent and combat violence against women and other forms of domestic violence. The convention obliges states to take preventive measures and prosecute perpetrators. Though Turkey ratified the convention and put it into effect in 2014, the treaty is not always followed in practice by signatories.<sup>4</sup>

### Women's health

Data from the International Planned Parenthood Federation shows that more than 5,600 mobile clinics and community-based centres offering sexual and reproductive healthcare have effectively closed in 64 countries, including Colombia, Pakistan, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The closures and restrictions affect HIV testing, contraceptive care, abortions, and services for gender-based violence victims.<sup>5</sup> Coupled with this, in Zimbabwe, over two million people in the capital city of Harare and the greater metropolitan area have no household access to safe drinking water, or adequate waste and wastewater disposal services.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of women and school-age children may spend eight to nine hours a night in line at crowded boreholes or narrow water wells to get water that may be safe.<sup>7</sup>

In the United States, under the guise of fighting Covid-19, Alaska Governor Michael Dunleavy declared surgical abortions 'non-urgent', ordering procedures to be postponed unless the pregnancy endangered the woman's 'life or physical health'.<sup>8</sup> The governor said the ban would continue through to 15 June.<sup>9</sup> This greatly restricts women's freedom during the crisis,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://en.qantara.de/content/covid-19-pandemic-coronavirus-breeds-domestic-violence-in-turkey>

<sup>5</sup> The New Humanitarian, 'Coronavirus and aid: What we're watching, 23-29 April', 23 April 2020  
[www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/23/coronavirus-humanitarian-aid-response#womens-health](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/23/coronavirus-humanitarian-aid-response#womens-health)

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Zimbabwe: Unsafe Water Raises COVID-19 Risks' 15 April 2020  
[www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/15/zimbabwe-unsafe-water-raises-covid-19-risks](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/15/zimbabwe-unsafe-water-raises-covid-19-risks)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Alaska Issues Covid-19 Abortion Ban' 16 April 2020  
[www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/alaska-issues-covid-19-abortion-ban](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/alaska-issues-covid-19-abortion-ban)

<sup>9</sup> Government of Alaska, 'Covid-19 Health Mandate' 7 April 2020  
<https://gov.alaska.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/04072020-Attachment-C-Elective-and-Non-Urgent-Procedures.pdf>

and impedes great progress in the US on women's freedom to choose whether to have an abortion.

Statistics analysis from the United Nations Population Fund estimates that because of the coronavirus outbreak, there will be significant setbacks on the development of women's health services and support in the next few years. With the suspension of programmes to end female genital mutilation, an estimated two million more cases of FGM may occur over the next decade. Coupled with this, as supply chain disruptions are limiting the availability of contraceptives, this could affect 47 million women in low- and middle-income countries unable to use modern contraceptives, leading to a projected 7 million additional unintended pregnancies.<sup>10</sup>

## **2. LGBTQI+ rights**

On a global scale, the LGBTQI+ community remains at the heart of a rhetoric of blame for the spread of coronavirus, a narrative backed by key figures in politics and religion. Several nations have used the spread of coronavirus as a means to target the LGBTQI+ community, with the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stating that 'an increase in homophobic and transphobic rhetoric' is one detrimental result of the pandemic. In Hungary, under the far-right establishment of Viktor Orban's emergency powers, attacks against trans rights have left members of the LGBTQI+ community fearful of the possibility that additional emergency powers in this period will be used to directly negate their freedoms.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to this, some religious figures have monopolised on the fear of coronavirus to increase the stigmatisation of the LGBTQI+ community and push for the prohibition of same-sex marriage. In Ukraine, Patriarch Filaret, leader of Ukraine's largest Orthodox congregation with over 15 million followers, embarked on a tirade against the LGBTQI+ community on Ukrainian Network Channel 4. Patriarch Filaret stated that coronavirus was 'God's

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<sup>10</sup> UNFPA, 'Millions more cases of violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, unintended pregnancy expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic', 28 April 2020

[www.unfpa.org/news/millions-more-cases-violence-child-marriage-female-genital-mutilation-unintended-pregnancies#](http://www.unfpa.org/news/millions-more-cases-violence-child-marriage-female-genital-mutilation-unintended-pregnancies#)

<sup>11</sup> Pink News, 'UN condemns countries that are using coronavirus crisis to persecute and strip away the rights of LGBT+ people' 23 April 2020

[www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/04/23/un-coronavirus-united-nations-lgbt-rights-homophobia-transphobia-hungary-viktor-orban/](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/04/23/un-coronavirus-united-nations-lgbt-rights-homophobia-transphobia-hungary-viktor-orban/)

punishment for the sins of men, the sinfulness of humanity’, further clarifying this as ‘same sex marriage’. Due to these statements, Kiev-based group Insight have taken action against Filaret in a legal battle.<sup>12</sup>

In Iraq, Al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movements and the Saraya Al-Salam Militia, published on his Twitter: ‘One of the most appalling things that have caused this epidemic is the legalization of same-sex marriage’. Moreover, Al-Sadr called on ‘all governments’ to repeal their laws on same-sex marriage ‘immediately and without hesitation’, in a bid to combat the progressions of the LGBTQI+ community worldwide. The highly politicised rhetoric against the LGBTQI+ community is also noted in Northern Ireland, with a Democratic Unionist Party Councilor suggesting that the coronavirus outbreak was God's punishment for the introduction of same-sex marriage and abortion law reform in Northern Ireland.<sup>13</sup>

As the US introduced blanket bans on donating blood during the AIDS outbreak in the 1980s, which have not since been lifted, health experts have called for the discontinuation of the ban which upholds ‘discriminatory practices based on outdated stereotypes’.<sup>14</sup> Under pressure from lawmakers and in light of the coronavirus pandemic, which has ravaged parts of the US and forced thousands of blood drives to cancel, the FDA fast-tracked new guidance in early April to further ease the restriction to three months<sup>15</sup>. However, administrative conflicts and hurdles have meant that most blood banks haven’t yet applied the revision, despite the FDA’s go ahead.<sup>16</sup>

Blaming the LGBTQI+ community for viruses and natural disasters is a frequent dialogue among some radical politicians. Televangelist and former Republican presidential candidate Pat Robertson has blamed coronavirus on same-sex marriage. The politicisation of the global pandemic as a means to target vulnerable communities has taken further steps to prevent the progression of LGBTQI+ rights. Franklin Graham, an avowed opponent of equal marriage, same-sex adoption, transgender rights and civil rights protections is currently facing scrutiny

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<sup>12</sup> Reuters, ‘LGBT+ group sues Ukraine religious figure linking coronavirus to gay marriage’ 13 April 2020  
[www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-ukraine-lgbt/lgbt-group-sues-ukraine-religious-figure-linking-coronavirus-to-gay-marriage-idUSL8N2BI6C7](http://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-ukraine-lgbt/lgbt-group-sues-ukraine-religious-figure-linking-coronavirus-to-gay-marriage-idUSL8N2BI6C7)

<sup>13</sup> The Guardian, ‘Gay men in US still unable to donate blood despite new coronavirus rules’ 18 April 2020  
[www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/18/us-blood-donation-gay-men-coronavirus](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/18/us-blood-donation-gay-men-coronavirus)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> AJMC, ‘FDA's Revised Blood Donation Guidance for Gay Men Still Courts Controversy’, 4 April 2020  
[www.ajmc.com/focus-of-the-week/fdas-revised-blood-donation-guidance-for-gay-men-still-courts-controversy](http://www.ajmc.com/focus-of-the-week/fdas-revised-blood-donation-guidance-for-gay-men-still-courts-controversy)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

over his role in a Covid-19 'relief' effort in New York City that forces volunteers to sign an anti-gay belief statement.<sup>17</sup>

In Germany, for LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum, loneliness and abuse in reception and accommodation camps can be linked to homo/transphobia. However, the continuing pandemic substantially exacerbated the social isolation they had already been facing and disrupted any progress they had made in building a better life for themselves in Germany.<sup>18</sup> According to the Munich-based lesbian rights organisation LeTRa, all attempts to provide safe housing for LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum in Bavaria have now been halted due to the coronavirus lockdown. The organisation says it is very concerned that the strictly enforced 'stay at home' policies in asylum camps across Germany are jeopardising the health and safety of LGBTQI+ asylum claimants.<sup>19</sup>

For many of those who fled their home country because of anti-homosexuality legislations, seeking refugee during a time of unprecedented crisis can cause serious harm. In 2014, many LGBTQI+ Ugandans escaped to Kenya following the introduction of an anti-homosexuality bill, nicknamed the 'kill the gays' bill in western media.<sup>20</sup> Recently, a Ugandan refugee in Kenya was found dead at the United Nations Refugee Agency compound in Nairobi, in an apparent suicide his friends say highlights the strain placed on vulnerable people by the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

In Morocco, according to Article 489 of the penal code, homosexuality can be punished by up to three years in jail. For the LGBTQI+ community, quarantine measures are met with increased anxieties. As of April, Morocco's LGBTQI+ community say they fear for their lives after a prominent social media influencer sparked an online campaign to reveal their identities. On 13 April, Sofia Talouni, a gay Instagram personality also known as Naoufal Moussa, told 600,000 followers to set up fake accounts on dating apps like Grindr and Planet Romeo to identify gay family members, reported advocacy organisations. As a result, advocacy groups said it was not possible to ascertain how many people had been affected,

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<sup>17</sup> Pink News, 'Anti-LGBT evangelist Franklin Graham thinks coronavirus is caused by sin' 6 April 2020  
[www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/04/06/franklin-graham-coronavirus-caused-sin-fox](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/04/06/franklin-graham-coronavirus-caused-sin-fox)

<sup>18</sup> Aljazeera, 'Coronavirus exacerbates LGBTQI refugees' isolation and trauma' 22 April 2020  
[www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-exacerbates-lgbtqi-refugees-isolation-trauma-200421112957417.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-exacerbates-lgbtqi-refugees-isolation-trauma-200421112957417.html)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> The Irish Times, 'Refugee found dead at United Nations compound in Kenya' 14 April 2020  
[www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/refugee-found-dead-at-united-nations-compound-in-kenya-1.4228978](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/africa/refugee-found-dead-at-united-nations-compound-in-kenya-1.4228978)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

but more than 100 people told them they had been outed. Journalist Hicham Tahir, who has documented some of the death threats the campaign produced, said on Twitter that one person in Rabat had committed suicide out of desperation.

### 3. Refugee camps

As governments continue to battle the widespread effects of coronavirus, the welfare of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) continues to remain at stake. This week has seen a rise in the involvement of regional and international organisations, NGOs and bodies who, together with local government authorities, have sought to help manage the prevention and treatment of coronavirus in refugee and IDP camps. In countries such as Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan and Nigeria, where local governments are already struggling to grapple with the effects of coronavirus on their national populations, the work of the international community has shed light on the largely unattended needs of vulnerable displaced communities in developing nations.

Last week, more than 500 Rohingya refugees were left stranded on the Bay of Bengal in a bid to reach Bangladesh. As the Foreign Minister, Abdul Momen, denied entry to hundreds of stranded Rohingya refugees claiming that ‘Bangladesh is always asked to take care of the responsibility of others’, numerous organisations have called for the Bangladeshi government to open their ports in order to supply urgent medical care, food and water to those most vulnerable.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Bangladesh government’s new Covid-19 restrictions on access to aid puts Rohingya refugees at a greater risk. As lockdown measures cut humanitarian workers in refugee camps by 80 percent, severe risk of food and water shortages and disease outbreaks are still a prominent fear for refugees. As vital services provided by aid workers are a necessity for camps in Rohingya, Human Rights Watch has reported that harassment at camp checkpoints and stigma in Cox’s Bazar’s camps has increased during the pandemic.<sup>23</sup>

With coronavirus cases increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa, fears over the virus being spread by international aid workers has caused controversy and backlash in Sudan. As of 23 April, all four

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<sup>22</sup> The Guardian, ‘Bangladesh urged to open ports to allow in Rohingya refugee boats’ 27 April 2020  
[www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/bangladesh-urged-to-open-ports-to-allow-in-rohingya-refugee-boats](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/bangladesh-urged-to-open-ports-to-allow-in-rohingya-refugee-boats)

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Bangladesh: Covid-19 Aid Limits Imperil Rohingya’ 28 April 2020  
[www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/bangladesh-covid-19-aid-limits-imperil-rohingya](http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/bangladesh-covid-19-aid-limits-imperil-rohingya)



cases of coronavirus in South Sudan were UN staff members. As a result, in mid-April, South Sudanese soldiers surrounded UN peacekeeping bases and humanitarian hubs in Juba and Malakal when the news broke of the coronavirus cases. Following a rise in social media-driven xenophobic sentiment, the UN authorised only essential movement by staff.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, local organisations are attempting to give Sudanese people vital information and equipment to protect themselves against the virus, with activists from MANSAM in Sudan mobilising throughout different regions of the country. In Port Sudan City, activists enacted a 'Sudan Against Corona' campaign. This involved making masks, donating needed supplies, distributing posters with essential information, and raising awareness about the virus via social media.

With 5.6 million refugees and 6.5 million internally displaced persons currently living in overcrowded and unsanitary camps in Syria, the ability for Syrian authorities to adequately maintain the inevitable spread of coronavirus has come under international scrutiny. With only 550 health centres and hospitals currently operating in the northeast, less than 2,000 hospital beds available in Idlib and some 100 ventilators available nationwide, Syria is struggling to meet the basic health needs of its permanent population, let alone IDPs and refugees. Further, an inability to access testing kits in refugee camps and informal settlements, in addition to the population struggling to practice social distancing or frequent handwashing, makes the ability for local authorities to manage a potential coronavirus outbreak unfathomable.

Although Syria has only reported 42 cases of coronavirus to date, Médecins Sans Frontières has warned that an increase in cases could be fatal, should Syria's current healthcare system and facilities remain unchanged. Screening services have been implemented by NGOs in large-scale refugee and IDP camps, with the United States assisting with a \$1.2 million supply of medical equipment to the coalition-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. However, as the imminent increase of Covid-19 cases approaches, the existing efforts of the international community will likely fall short. Earlier this month, NGO Syrian Relief launched a global campaign for the protection of Syrian refugees and IDPs. Meanwhile, the World Health Organization has expressed particular concern for the 900,000 IDPs and asylum seekers who fled Idlib and Aleppo for the Turkish border prior to the coronavirus outbreak. With the recent decision of the Turkish government to largely

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<sup>24</sup>The New Humanitarian, 'Coronavirus and aid: What we're watching, 23-29 April', 23 April 2020  
[www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/23/coronavirus-humanitarian-aid-response#south-sudan](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/23/coronavirus-humanitarian-aid-response#south-sudan)

disregard the commitments of the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal, IDPs and refugees seeking to enter Turkish territory have gathered en masse at the border, in turn being held in makeshift camps lacking basic needs such as shelter and running water.

At the beginning of this month, Afghanistan temporarily re-opened its borders, resulting in an exponential increase of Afghan citizens and refugees from Pakistan and Iran entering Afghanistan. An average of 15,000 persons are arriving per day and more than 150,000 Afghans have now returned from Iran since March. Because of this increase, Afghanistan's healthcare system continues to struggle to meet the needs of citizens and refugees, with only 300 ventilators currently available nationwide in addition to a shortage of protective equipment.

In turn, the already overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in Afghan refugee camps and IDP communities has further plummeted. This month the World Health Organization donated 15,000 testing kits to Afghanistan. With countries like the US refusing to revoke a \$1 billion cut to aid donations in Afghanistan in light of the pandemic, the UNHCR has also called for greater international support. The UNHCR has played a large role in assisting the Afghan government in managing coronavirus so far. In the past month, the organisation has provided additional staff to help manage border control facilities, assisted with local awareness raising campaigns, donated masks, hygiene kits and cleaning supplies to be shared among refugee camps and IDP communities, and provided protective gear to staff at the frontline. Nevertheless, with the total cases of Covid-19 in Afghanistan rapidly escalating, an increased effort from the international community is needed to protect vulnerable IDP and migrant communities.

With two million internally displaced persons currently living in squalid conditions in overcrowded camps, Nigeria is on the verge of a public health emergency. With national refugee and IDP camps lacking the necessary conditions to prevent the spread of a coronavirus outbreak, and major northeast states like the Borno State being equipped with only ten ventilators, medical experts have warned that many lives will be lost unless local authorities take immediate action to increase the availability of healthcare and sanitation.

Last month, Human Rights Watch sought to encourage Nigerian authorities to ensure that access to health services is provided on an 'equitable basis' to all, including IDPs and other

vulnerable migrant communities. This month the UNHCR announced that it will increase its support to governments in West and Central Africa in order to better ensure access to basic facilities and manage the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Local UN authorities in Nigeria, in partnership with the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) have already begun working with local state authorities to develop emergency response plans which reduce the effects of potential Covid-19 outbreaks in overcrowded refugee and IDP camps. Nigeria's UN Humanitarian Coordinator, Edward Kallon, has noted that various humanitarian NGOs have installed hand-washing stations in camps and are distributing soap and supplies, as well as teaching migrants and IDPs how to make their own. However, although Nigeria has yet to report cases of Covid-19 in IDP or refugee camps, in a country already struggling to grapple with the effects of civil unrest and the Boko Haram insurgency, the future wellbeing of IDP and refugee communities remains uncertain.

#### **4. Prisoners and detainees**

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to affect the prison population, the global pandemic provides the clearest illustration that prison health is public health. WHO guidelines indicate that 'the risk of rapidly increasing transmission of the disease within prisons or other places of detention is likely to have an amplifying effect on the epidemic, swiftly multiplying the number of people affected'. Realistically, in order to decrease fatalities from the pandemic, whilst simultaneously abiding by international law, a reduction in the prison populations worldwide is paramount.<sup>25</sup>

In the UK, the Ministry of Justice reported that, as of 17 April, the prison population was 81,454. By 22 April, 300 prisoners across 69 prison facilities had tested positive for coronavirus. Given that 70 per cent of prisons in England and Wales are overcrowded, with nearly 18,700 people held in overcrowded accommodation, The Prison Governor's Association and Public Health England has estimated that at minimum 15,000 prisoners need to be released in order for the prison estate to be able to properly cope with the crisis. As part

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<sup>25</sup> World Prison Brief, 'COVID-19 in prisons – a major public health risk' 26 March 2020  
[www.prisonstudies.org/news/covid-19-prisons-%E2%80%93-major-public-health-risk](http://www.prisonstudies.org/news/covid-19-prisons-%E2%80%93-major-public-health-risk)

of emergency measures to combat the spread of coronavirus, some prisoners qualified for early release were due to be released in high figures in order to safeguard those incarcerated and staff members. On 4 April, the Ministry of Justice announced a plan to release 4,000 prisoners early on license, who were due for release in the next two months. However, ten days later, just 14 prisoners had been released and after six men were released prematurely, the scheme was suspended. Various political figures have reached out to demand that this error does not punish those who do qualify, and that the procedure should continue in light of these circumstances.

In China, with a population of over 1.8 million Uyghurs detained in extra-judicial internment camps, heightened human rights abuses of the Uyghur Muslims have been reported since the outbreak of coronavirus. Numerous reports have detailed the increased forced organ harvesting of the Uyghur Muslims to save the lives of coronavirus-infected Han population and the use of Uyghur healthcare workers in highly infected regions. In order to tackle the 13.5 per cent decline in industrial production, Chinese authorities sent more than 400 Uyghur youth to the provinces of Jiangxi, Zhejiang and Hunan.<sup>26</sup> On 26 February, an additional 135 workers were sent for summer work and another 242 detainees from Kashgar were sent to Changsha. Radio Free Asia said: 'There is no guarantee that these Uyghurs will come home alive. China must stop forcing Uyghurs to go to the mainland and work as cheap labour under the threat of the coronavirus.'<sup>27</sup>

Prisons and immigration detention centres in Australia have yet to legislate the release of detainees and prisoners, with the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, public health experts and medical bodies calling for the urgent release of those who remain incarcerated. A chronically ill refugee held in a detention facility in Australia has launched a case to the high court pleading to be released in light of the ongoing pandemic. His case, put forward by the Human Rights Law Centre in Melbourne is being seen as a test case for other women and men living in close confines in immigration detention and at risk of severe health complications as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, with his case likely to be 'the first of many'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Observer Research Foundation, 'COVID-19 in Xinjiang: Uyghurs pushed to the frontlines by Beijing' 8 April 2020 [www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/covid-19-in-xinjiang-uyghurs-pushed-to-the-frontlines-by-beijing-64290/](http://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/covid-19-in-xinjiang-uyghurs-pushed-to-the-frontlines-by-beijing-64290/)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> The Guardian, 'Refugee brings court case over threat of Covid-19 in Australian detention' 22 April 2020 [www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/apr/22/sick-refugee-at-risk-of-covid-19-launches-high-court-bid-for-release-from-australian-immigration-detention](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/apr/22/sick-refugee-at-risk-of-covid-19-launches-high-court-bid-for-release-from-australian-immigration-detention)

Brazil has the world's third largest prison population, according to the World Prison Brief. On account of the overcapacity average in Brazilian prisons being 168 per cent, in conjunction with overcrowding and poor sanitation, Brazilian judges have approved thousands of early release petitions. However, senior Justice Ministers have said it would be a mistake to release a vast amount of prisoners as this could pose risks to public safety. Nonetheless, prisoner advocates say it is riskier for the inmates to remain in prisons. With rioting and calls for the imminent release of prisoners by family members and legal professionals, the case for prisoners in Brazil remains ignored. Drauzio Varella, a medical doctor and expert in healthcare in prisons states that 'prisons in Brazil often have double or triple the capacity they were built for, with people sleeping on the floor', furthering this with: 'one person coughing can infect everyone else'. A wife of a prisoner reported receiving a handwritten note from her husband, who described running a high fever and having body aches. The lack of food, he told her, had prompted him to eat clumps of toilet paper and toothpaste. 'I'm scared I will die in prison', the note said. 'I'm starving in this damn place'. Andreлина Amelia Ferreira, who heads the Mothers of Jail Movement in São Paulo, said she had received hundreds of messages from women alarmed about the bits of information they have gleaned from prisons that are now inaccessible.

## **5. Asylum procedures**

In light of the global pandemic, many states have closed their borders and enforced travel restrictions, thereby negatively affecting all those seeking asylum or in the asylum process. As highlighted in last week's monitor, countries in Europe, such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, have halted their refugee resettlement pipelines. Consequently, on the 27 April, UNHCR released a statement encouraging European states to 'safeguard the many good practices and redouble their efforts to strengthen asylum systems in Europe in these trying times'. UNHCR also noted that significant measures to deter any further delays in the asylum system are currently being conducted by some European states via medical screenings at borders, health certification or temporary quarantine upon arrival.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> UNHCR, 'Coronavirus: UNHCR offers practical recommendations in support of European countries to ensure access to asylum and safe reception' 27 April 2020

In Greece, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has extended the lockdown would until 4 May, thereby postponing the planned removal of hundreds of asylum seekers from overcrowded migrant camps on the Greek islands, with elderly and chronically ill migrants greatly affected by the delay. Local officials in Lesbos noted that one of the largest transfers of migrants, involving 1,500 people from the island's largest camp, Moria, and another 900 others from elsewhere on Lesbos, will now be delayed and scaled back in size.<sup>30</sup>

In the beginning of March, Kenya had 52,864 asylum seekers waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. However, because of the coronavirus outbreak, ensuing border closures and the halting of new applications has resulted in only 764 asylum applications being processed this year. As highlighted in the 1951 Refugee Convention, signatory countries are prohibited from expelling incoming asylum applications, however in these unprecedented times, this convention has been largely ignored.<sup>31</sup>

On 22 April, the Trump Administration announced further immigration restrictions under the Presidential Proclamation, suspending the entry of many immigrants to the US. The Proclamation causes significant harm to immigrant family members waiting years for reunification. As a result, an emergency motion for a temporary restraining order to prevent further restrictions on immigration was filed on 25 April by the Justice Action Center, the American Immigration Lawyers Association, and Innovation Law Lab and with a pro bono counsel, Sidley Austin LLP.

It is clear that, given the spread of coronavirus, with extraordinary powers being granted to political leaders, the use of populism during a time of crisis increases the already detrimental position of vulnerable people. The Department of Homeland Security in the US released a report on 21 April highlighting that one preventative measure to stop the spread of coronavirus is to block all asylum attempts, as 'alien subjects will not be held in congregate areas for processing by CBP and instead will immediately be turned away from ports of entry'. The statement continues to highlight that the 'stretched healthcare system' and US medical professionals are needed to attend to US citizens and legal residents, instructing that

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[www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/4/5ea68bde4/coronavirus-unhcr-offers-practical-recommendations-support-european-countries.html](https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/4/5ea68bde4/coronavirus-unhcr-offers-practical-recommendations-support-european-countries.html)

<sup>30</sup> Info Migrants, 'Migrants on Greek islands told to wait as Greece extends lockdown' 24 April 2020

[www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24339/migrants-on-greek-islands-told-to-wait-as-greece-extends-lockdown](https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24339/migrants-on-greek-islands-told-to-wait-as-greece-extends-lockdown)

<sup>31</sup> Daily Nation, 'Covid-19: authorities impose restrictions in refugee camp' 13 April 2020

[www.nation.co.ke/news/Covid-19-authorities-impose-restrictions-refugee-camps/1056-5522754-u2c7dsz/index.html](https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Covid-19-authorities-impose-restrictions-refugee-camps/1056-5522754-u2c7dsz/index.html)

'migrants should shelter-in-place in their homes and communities, rather than attempting a long and dangerous journey to the United States borders at the hands of traffickers and smugglers'.<sup>32</sup>

## 6. Disability rights

As the pandemic continues, the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities remains largely ignored. As 1.3 billion people across the world are living with some form of disability, 17 percent of the global population, this is the largest minority group worldwide. The World Economic Forum highlights that, given resource scarcity and limited access to healthcare services, a significant proportion of persons with disabilities are left in an increasingly vulnerable position<sup>33</sup>.

From the offset of the coronavirus pandemic, it has been clear that people with disabilities would be greatly hit by measures within healthcare to prioritise those infected with the virus. With healthcare services and carers in short supply, those with disabilities are increasingly lacking the necessary support. In Wuhan, at the epicentre of the outbreak, a Chinese boy with cerebral palsy died after his father and brother had been quarantined to undergo testing for coronavirus. Unfortunately, this is not a novel situation, as often those with disabilities are reliant on family carers. Under strict quarantine measures, being unable to interact with family members or external carers prevents access to vital support.

On 24 April, a Canadian woman with non-verbal cerebral palsy died after she was admitted to hospital in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak. At hospital, she was placed in palliative care without the consent of her family, was refused support worker and visitation rights and subsequently died whilst in hospital.<sup>34</sup> For care homes and facilities for persons with disabilities, this continues to be a testing time. With the sixth recorded death in Canada's Participation House, a developmental and physical disabilities facility, data provided by York

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<sup>32</sup> U.S Department of Homeland Security, 'Fact Sheet: DHS Measures on the Border to Limit the Further Spread of Coronavirus' 21 April 2020

[www.dhs.gov/news/2020/04/21/fact-sheet-dhs-measures-border-limit-further-spread-coronavirus](https://www.dhs.gov/news/2020/04/21/fact-sheet-dhs-measures-border-limit-further-spread-coronavirus)

<sup>33</sup> World Economic Forum, 'COVID-19's isolated world is the norm for people with disabilities' 7 April 2020  
[www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-isolation-disabilities/](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-isolation-disabilities/)

<sup>34</sup> Global News, 'B.C. woman with disability dies alone in hospital due to COVID-19 visitor restrictions' 24 April 2020  
<https://globalnews.ca/news/6866586/bc-woman-disability-dies-covid-19/>

Region Public Health shows that 40 of the 42 residents at Participation House have tested positive for Covid-19, including deceased patients. As an increase in emergency legislation ensues, medical ethics integral to the global pandemic should be equipped to prevent an influx of such cases and thoroughly protect the fundamental rights of those under government care.

Examples of governmental neglect can also be seen in the UK, as although a government register to assist vulnerable people has been set up, almost one hundred people with severe disabilities and chronic illness say they have been rejected due to the stringent benefit criterion. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has written to the British Retail Consortium to ask members to do all they can to support disabled people not on the government's list, while the Royal National Institute of Blind People is campaigning for visually impaired people to be included.<sup>35</sup>

On 1 April, the International Disability Alliance (IDA) issued an open letter to the World Health Organization in response to the coronavirus outbreak. In this open letter, the IDA highlighted that governments should ensure immediate action condemning any form of disability-based or age-based prioritisation in providing Covid-19 medical care, that no person is denied access to Covid-19 vital medical care and that decision-making criteria is in full compliance with the principles of humanity, equal dignity and non-discrimination for all. However, in the US, the Centre for Public Integrity analysed 30 states' policies on the prioritisation of healthcare resources, concluding that those with disabilities are pushed further back. Evidence suggests that these policies assess the need for ventilators via details such as the patients' expected lifespan, need for resources (such as home oxygen) or specific diagnoses (such as dementia). Some even permit hospitals to take ventilators away from patients who use them as breathing aids in everyday life and give them to other patients.<sup>36</sup>

With significant barriers entrenched by discriminatory attitudes towards persons with disabilities, Human Rights Watch released a report calling for the Afghan government to

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<sup>35</sup> The Guardian, 'Disabled people left off coronavirus vulnerable list tell of struggles' 27 April 2020

[www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/27/disabled-people-left-off-coronavirus-vulnerable-list-tell-of-struggles](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/27/disabled-people-left-off-coronavirus-vulnerable-list-tell-of-struggles)

<sup>36</sup> Center for Public Integrity, 'State policies may send people with disabilities to the back of the line for ventilators' 8 April 2020

<https://publicintegrity.org/health/coronavirus-and-inequality/state-policies-may-send-people-with-disabilities-to-the-back-of-the-line-for-ventilators/>



protect women and girls with disabilities.<sup>37</sup> More than four decades of conflict have left millions of Afghans with amputated limbs, visual or hearing disabilities, depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. With one of the world's largest population of people living with disabilities per capita, increased hostilities mean that people with disabilities face significant obstacles to education, employment, and health care rights guaranteed under the Afghan constitution and international human rights law.

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<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Afghanistan: Women with Disabilities Face Systemic Abuse' 27 April 2020 [www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/27/afghanistan-women-disabilities-face-systemic-abuse](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/27/afghanistan-women-disabilities-face-systemic-abuse)