

Introduction

During the early stages of the pandemic CSW released a statement underlining the importance of ensuring that limitations of rights and freedoms on legitimate public health grounds were applied in a transparent and “non-discriminatory manner; that they remain in place for no longer than the minimum period necessary to contain the spread of the virus, and that they are not instrumentalised to undermine the future enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms.”

The CSW statement stressed it was “imperative that this crisis is not exploited by authoritarian governments to consolidate power, or to legitimise crackdowns on human rights defenders (HRDs), arbitrary detentions or violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief [or to] undermine transparency and accountability.” It went on to urge States to “adhere to the rule of law, and to promote and protect fundamental rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of religion or belief” through specified measures.¹

There are now clear indications that the pandemic has been and is being weaponised by governments and individuals in several of CSW’s countries of focus to advance political agendas, to cement an invasive control over society and to justify an increase in repression and discrimination targeting specific religious and/or ethnic communities.

The pandemic has also had the unforeseen consequence of highlighting socio-economic disparities worldwide. As a result, in countries where certain religious communities face long-standing harassment, discrimination, mistreatment and even persecution, their situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In addition, the virus has increased the vulnerability of refugees and displaced communities, including those that experienced human rights violations on account of their religious beliefs.

Situation of prisoners of conscience

Overcrowding in prisons during the pandemic poses an additional threat to the welfare of inmates and increases the likelihood of the virus spreading in these locations.

Consequently, the advent of COVID-19 prompted several governments to release long term or nonviolent prisoners. The Islamic Republic of Iran released 54,000 prisoners sentenced to less than five years in prison including several prisoners of conscience either early or temporarily, if they tested negative for the virus and posted bail. While some prisoners were also transferred to less crowded prisons, several high profile political and religious prisoners remained detained in unsatisfactory conditions where the virus was already present. On 31 July, Amnesty International published leaked official documents which revealed the Iranian authorities had ignored pleas from senior prison officials for additional resources to address the spread of the virus.²

A large number of prisoners of conscience are in Evin Prison in Tehran, where conditions are overcrowded and unsanitary. By August at least 25 people in the prison had contracted the virus, and on 10 August several political prisoners staged a sit-in to protest the unsatisfactory conditions, inadequate protection measures and lack of medical care in the prison.

As far as CSW is aware, no prisoners of conscience have been released due to COVID-19 in China. At least one lawyer and FoRB defender was released into ‘quarantine’, which many observers viewed as a means of prolonging his isolation from his family, since he had tested negative several times. Prisoners of conscience in China are still at risk of the virus as there have been reported outbreaks in prisons. Uyghurs, Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners are at particular risk of serious health problems if they are detained incommunicado and are already subject to ill-treatment and torture. There are also reports that Uyghurs were transported for forced labour during the outbreak, despite virus-related travel restrictions.

In Eritrea, tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience continue to be detained in unsanitary and ill-equipped facilities that can be makeshift and where conditions are life-threatening, with insufficient access to water, food or medical facilities. An appeal by the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea for the release of low risk offenders and vulnerable prisoners was firmly rebuffed.³

Releases in August of 101 members of the Muslim community, who had been detained without charge or trial in connection with protests in 2018, which were followed by the releases in August and September of up

¹ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/04/21/feature/4619/article.htm>

² <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-leaked-letters-reveal-coronavirus-prisons-crisis-despite-no-deaths-claim>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25764&LangID=E>

to 64 Christians who had been imprisoned for between two and 16 years are not thought to have been linked to the outbreak of the virus, and were accompanied by further arbitrary detentions, including of five church leaders, around eight Christian women and the entire male population aged 14 and over from one community.⁴

The Eritrean authorities are yet to release long-standing political prisoners, Jehovah's Witnesses and church leaders. Additionally, a stringent COVID-19 related lockdown, enforced often with violence by the armed forces, has provided the government with an additional means of curtailing freedom of movement, which was already severely restricted. Reports of widespread hunger continue to emerge, including from the capital Asmara, as people have been prevented from opening stores, farming or taking food to detained relatives.

In Vietnam, prisoners of conscience were also rendered more vulnerable to health problems and food shortages, as families were prevented from visiting and sending food packages. Although some restrictions may have been in line with genuine concerns about containing the virus, the authorities failed to take measures to reduce the impact, for example by allowing more frequent and longer telephone calls instead of in-person visits, and ensuring alternative sources of food for prisoners, since the normal food ration is not sufficient.

Arbitrary detention and delayed legal proceedings

The pandemic has highlighted weaknesses and biases in legal systems and criminal proceedings. It has also underlined the degree to which religious discrimination is institutionalised in several legal systems.

Nigeria has tens of thousands in pretrial detention, primarily due to an inability to meet bail either due to poverty, or to a deliberate effort to penalise individuals by ensuring bail stipulations are impossible to meet.

Among the latter is Professor Solomon Musa Tarfa, who set up 'Du Merci Children Development Ministry' orphanages, and who remained unjustly detained even as the pandemic spread rapidly in Kano state. Professor Tarfa was arrested without a warrant on 25 December 2019. The initial reason communicated to him, namely, that the orphanage was operating illegally, was hastily

altered to criminal abduction when documentation was produced proving it was duly registered with several relevant bodies in the state. Excessive bail terms were subsequently set, and hearings to review these terms were deferred repeatedly, until a COVID-19 lockdown closed the court system, facilitating a legitimate extension.

A date was set for the case to be heard in the High Court on 15 October; however, as the month began the judge assigned to the case effectively recused herself and the Chief Judge went on leave without reassigning the case. Meanwhile, the Kaduna state government issued a demolition order on the Du Merci building in which Professor Tarfa's wife, Mercy Tarfa was living following the closure of the Kano centre, rendering her homeless. In October news emerged that the Kaduna state Du Merci centre building had been bulldozed.

Mubarak Bala, leader of the Nigerian Humanist Association, has been detained in Kano state since 29 March for allegedly insulting the Prophet Mohammed in Facebook posts, and his case has also been marked by needless delays in court proceedings. Mr Bala was initially denied access to his legal representatives in violation of a June court ruling, and the closure of courts due to COVID-19 has legitimised further delays in proceedings and the extension of pre-trial detention. Rumours circulating in September indicating Mr Bala may have been murdered in prison were allayed in October when he was finally allowed to meet with his lawyer after 162 days in incommunicado detention. Following his arrest UN Special Procedures issued a joint appeal for his release which so far has gone unheeded.⁵

In Sudan, the legal system all but ground to a halt on account of the virus. Cases involving churches, church leaders and church property that have been proceeding slowly through the system faced further delays, and travel bans imposed on Christian activists in February also could not be reviewed for public health reasons. However, CSW has been informed that the reopened case of the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) leaders,⁶ who were arrested in 2017 for alleged criminal trespass on church property, may resume in October.

Religious leaders and FoRB defenders continue to report harassment, threats, arbitrary detention, and false charges being issued against them. This is particularly the

⁴ <https://hrc-eritrea.org/arbitrary-punishments-incommunicado-detention-and-other-injustices-against-the-people-of-kuazien-are-a-continuation-of-the-eritrean-regimes-inhuman-actions/>

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26123&LangID=E>

⁶ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/07/25/press/4420/article.htm>

case in Cuba, where in April a religious leader from an unregistered protestant denomination was summoned and placed in an overcrowded prison cell with ten other detainees for around one hour. During the interrogation, he was falsely accused of holding illegal church services and informed that he had been detained for the crime of "spreading disease."

Members of the Ladies in White, a non-violent women's protest movement, continued to face harsh treatment at the hands of State Security, despite suspending their activities and participation in Sunday services in line with COVID-19 restrictions. Several members were threatened and informed they were not allowed to leave their homes because there was no "truce" between the Ladies in White and the authorities. One woman was placed in a cell for four and a half hours before she was released and had to make her own way home.

Closure of places of worship and disregard for religious custom

The temporary closure of places of worship is a necessary measure adopted by several countries to curtail the spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately, in some instances these closures caused unease among religious communities, some of whom chose to deliberately contravene legitimate public health guidelines.

The prospect of unrest on account of the closure of places of worship arose in several countries, including in Salé, Morocco, where in mid-April the closure of mosques during Ramadan threatened much wider popular resentment and disruption.

In Iraq, many Shia clerics defied the government's instructions to close mosques and shrines and invited congregations to gather en masse, claiming Imam Hussein would protect them from the virus. This caused the pandemic to spread widely, creating divisions among Shia politicians and clergy which further impeded official efforts to contain it. The main division was between those following the guidance of Ayatollah Sistani, who issued a fatwa permitting the closures, and those loyal to Iran who rejected the closure and encouraged their followers to

challenge and breach all public health measures and advice.

Defiance of closure orders also occurred in Burma and Indonesia.

On 24 May 2020 the Chief Minister of Yangon, together with other senior government officials, including the Chairman of the COVID-19 Control and Emergency Response Committee, attended a religious ceremony at the Botataung Pagoda, in breach of their own regulations.⁷ On several other occasions large Buddhist gatherings took place, in breach of the regulations, including a large Buddhist wedding in Pyin Oo Lwin in March, and the funeral of a Buddhist monk in April.

While the government initiated legal prosecutions in some instances - particularly against a Buddhist communal donation ceremony in the Sagaing Region's Khin-U Township, the funeral of an influential Buddhist monk in the Tanintharyi Region's Yebyu Township and Buddhist events in Mon State - the penalties have usually been lenient. In the case of the funeral of a Buddhist monk, although over 200 people reportedly attended, the organisers faced a fine of only 100,000 Burmese Kyats (\$70). Only in one case, in Mon State, was the person who violated the regulations sentenced to nine months in prison.⁸

In contrast, at least five Christian pastors faced three-year prison terms for violating the regulations. Pastor David Lah, a Canadian citizen, and his colleague U Wai Tun were arrested after holding a small gathering in a private home in April.⁹ On 6 August both men received three month sentences, but were released on 14 August after a judge took into consideration the length of the time they had already spent in prison prior to their hearing. Pastor Lah was subsequently allowed to return to Canada.

In April, twelve Muslims in Mandalay were arrested for holding prayers in their homes and jailed for three months.¹⁰

In June, Kyaw Win Thant, a medical doctor, was jailed for 21 months on charges of insulting religion, while the large group of Buddhist monks in Meiktila who organised a

⁷ <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/nlds-chief-minister-for-yangon-slammed-by-own-party-for-disobeying-covid-19-restrictions>

⁸ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-covid-19/eight-cases-opened-religious-gatherings-violating-covid-19-restrictions-govt.html>

⁹ <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/canadian-pastor-david-lah-pleads-not-guilty.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-muslims-jailed-covid-19-rules-breach.html>

gathering to demand his arrest, in breach of COVID-19 regulations, faced no charges.¹¹

With regard to breaching religious custom, the Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka issued guidelines requiring all victims of Covid-19 be cremated. Consequently, Muslims who died were cremated, rather than being buried in accordance with their religious rites, and in some cases, cremation even occurred when a person had not died of the virus. The Ministry's instruction contravened the World Health Organisation's guidelines on Infection Prevention and Control for the safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19, which states explicitly that "the dignity of the dead, their cultural and religious traditions, and their families should be respected and protected throughout."¹² Four UN Special Rapporteurs criticised the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health, arguing the decision breached Articles 18(3) and 27 of the ICCPR, and the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.¹³

Disinformation and lack of transparency

There have been notable occasions when authorities have misinformed and/or concealed information from the public in a bid to portray a more positive national image, or to create conspiracy theories that have adversely affected certain religious communities.

In Turkey, government officials, Muslim clerics and pro-government media outlets engaged in spreading anti-Western sentiments that impacted the Christian community (which is equated with the West despite its ancient roots in the country and region), and disinformation about the pandemic, including claims that Muslim Turks have superior genes and better personal hygiene than non-Muslims.

In Iran, most restrictions have now been lifted, including on 40,000 mosques, shops and offices. Many observers believe the government conducted a massive cover-up,

releasing fabricated numbers relating to infection levels, deaths, and other relevant public health statistics.

The Cuban government was slow to implement restrictions, and borders were still open to tourists towards the end of March. Whilst it has been alleged that the government underreported the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, Cuba's Institute of Tropical Medicine reported many new cases of acute respiratory illness,¹⁴ which may be attributable to COVID-19.

The full impact of COVID-19 in North Korea, the world's most closed country, remains unknown, but should not be underestimated. Claims by the ruling regime that there are no cases in the country seem unlikely, given South Korea has seen over 11,000 cases and 263 deaths, despite being praised for its handling of the virus.

Reports indicate that "thousands have been quarantined and categorized as 'under medical observation.'"¹⁵ A news site run by North Korean escapees has claimed 180 soldiers had died of the virus, and 3,700 were in quarantine.¹⁶ Additionally, in May the Chinese president had expressed concern regarding the threat the virus posed to North Korea, and offered assistance.¹⁷

All indications are that the virus may have reached North Korea. What remains unclear is the extent to which it has affected the country's elite, its general population, and its infamous prison camps.

The government's contention that the nation is virus-free was thrown into further doubt by the publication of a report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which analysed the impact of COVID-19 on access to food in 47 countries, including North Korea. According to the report, North Korea has suffered substantial food shortages this year,¹⁸ while the country's borders remain closed despite claims of no infections.

In several countries the freedoms of information and expression have been further curtailed. In China, Laos and Vietnam people have been arrested for circulating information or 'rumours' about the virus online, and in some cases, simply for questioning official figures or for

¹¹ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1929436/myanmar-jails-doctor-for-insulting-monks>

¹² <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331538/WHO-COVID-19-IPC-DBMgmt-2020.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹³ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25175>

¹⁴ <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article242382316.html> Pedro

Kourí Institute of Tropical Medicine March Bulletins: <https://files.sld.cu/ipk/2020/03/>

¹⁵ <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1441/north-korea-s-deadly-culture-of-secrecy>

¹⁶ <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sources-almost-200-soldiers-have-died-covid-19/>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-52597749>

¹⁸ <http://www.fao.org/3/cb0209en/CB0209EN.pdf>

wondering why their respective governments have not done more to contain the outbreak. In Sri Lanka, the police and the Central Investigation Department were ordered to arrest anyone who criticised officials for their handling of the COVID-19 response.¹⁹

Online crackdowns and targeting of religious communities

While many have benefitted from the internet and virtual calls during a time when social distancing has become the norm, several governments have made use of technology to police gatherings of targeted religious communities and individuals. They have also failed to address online abuse directed at such communities or individuals.

In China, some church members who tried to meet for online worship were detained or had police stationed at their homes to prevent them joining the service.

In Sri Lanka, online abuse against minorities is rampant, but no legal action has been taken against its perpetrators. A particular case in point involves a pastor from Switzerland who visited Sri Lanka in March, and who subsequently tested positive for COVID-19. As a result, hostility against Christians increased on social media. One Sinhala language paper referred to the pastor as the brother-in-law of the devil. The Chief of the Sri Lankan Army, Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva, who heads the COVID-19 Task Force, even stated on mainstream media that the pastor was the reason the virus spread to the northern province of the country. There have also been instances when Muslims were portrayed as carriers of COVID-19, including a viral video clip of a prominent news anchor and the current Minister for Agriculture suggesting they are vectors of the disease.

Discrimination in humanitarian relief and healthcare

When governments fail to provide adequate social services, humanitarian relief and healthcare, civil society, and most notably religious organisations and individuals, invariably attempt to fill the void. However, this can cause them to be viewed with suspicion, occasioning discrimination and even violence. Conversely, where governments or pro-government organisations or religious institutions fulfil this role,

non-majoritarian religious communities are often deprived of assistance.

Reports have emerged from China of Christian unregistered, or 'house', churches that have attempted to engage in humanitarian assistance for people affected by the virus being blocked by the authorities.

There have been several incidents in Pakistan in which Christian and Hindu communities have been denied food aid by organisations which stated that the relief materials were only for members of the majority faith. Such discriminatory distribution of relief materials has been reported in the Sindh and Punjab provinces, along with posters on mosques and madrassas stating that food distribution is only for Muslims.

In a positive development, following strong criticism from civil society via social media to raise awareness of this discrimination, the government of Pakistan responded with its own relief programme, which enabled all minority groups to access aid, provided they satisfied the government criteria. Unfortunately, domestic and contractual workers, who are often Christian women who work as cooks, maids, domestic workers, and cleaners, do not qualify for this aid because the criteria applied by the government disqualifies them from receiving assistance.

According to the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) in Pakistan, more than 60% of frontline nursing staff are from the Christian community and they do not have protective equipment. Confidential local sources suggest that sanitation workers make up 70 – 80% of the workforce and, due to discrimination in the employment policy, only Christians are sought for this work. They work without any safety kit or protective equipment, rendering them susceptible to contracting the virus. Their salaries have also been delayed due to the lockdown, making it even more difficult for them to survive. With an easing of the lockdown, daily wage workers who return to work remain vulnerable because they are not given proper protective gear.

In India, the lockdown was announced speedily, but with very little time for people to prepare themselves for its impact. Millions of people are suffering as a result. Approximately 122 million people had no jobs, food or money for rent. Hundreds of thousands of people were obliged to walk thousands of miles home from the cities to rural areas. Instances reportedly occurred in which

¹⁹ http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Strict-action-against-those-criticise-state-officials-on-social-media/108-186028

Christians in different states who walked for hundreds of miles to Madhya Pradesh state were denied government rations and were informed they would not have access to assistance. Moreover, Muslims continue to be targeted as a perceived source of COVID-19 and in many cases have been denied medical treatment as a result of this rhetoric.²⁰

Many Sri Lankan low-income and daily wage earners lost their source of income, and there have been anecdotal reports of discrimination in government relief, although this has not been fully corroborated. Moreover, The Presidential Task Force monitors the delivery of services provided by charities. Civil society organisations have been closely monitored, and even harassed by law enforcement personnel demanding the personal information of staff.

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in Cuba, the island was already experiencing chronic shortages of food, medicine, and hygiene supplies, as well as a weak medical infrastructure and rundown, overcrowded housing. COVID-19 has made these problems more acute and churches have sought to be of assistance to struggling families and individuals. However, when churches have attempted to distribute food and other basic necessities to the population they have experienced opposition from the government, ranging from the confiscation of food, to threats and being charged for the crime of 'spreading disease'.

An increase in violence

Several religion and belief communities have experienced an increase in violence, including those from targeted religious communities. There has also been a worrying rise in domestic violence worldwide.

Nigeria's individual states instituted lockdowns – most of which were lifted in mid-June. However, during the lockdown period several non-Muslim communities in central states, which have experienced attacks by well-armed assailants of Fulani ethnicity since 2010, effectively became sitting target while obeying lockdown stipulations.

Attacks continued in Plateau and Kaduna states during their respective lockdowns, with assailants seemingly

able to operate at will. In southern Kaduna state, these attacks increased markedly. CSW Nigeria documented that between 25 March, when the lockdown came into effect and 15 June, when it was lifted, Fulani militia carried out 17 attacks across five local government areas. They killed 78 people and burnt down approximately 165 houses, while hundreds were displaced from their villages into makeshift internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.²¹ While assailants were able to move around without being detected, villagers attempting to tend their farms were regularly intercepted, detained, and fined.

Similarly, violence continues in Burma's Rakhine and Chin states, where the exclusion of these two areas by the Burmese Army from a nationwide ceasefire proposed due to COVID-19 raises serious concerns.

COVID-19 lockdowns have also been linked to an increase in gender-based violence worldwide. "Reports confirm that domestic violence against women and girls has increased by as much as 30% in some countries."²² Sources in India report that some Christian women have become particularly vulnerable to domestic violence during the lockdown.²³ According to a local source in Tamil Nadu, women who usually attend house churches without their husbands now have to remain in their homes, where some have experienced violence at the hands of families and their husbands

Another problem to emerge during the lockdown in India involves mob vigilantism, violence, and surveillance of home churches by non-state actors. For example, on 21 March, a private prayer meeting in Tamil Nadu state was disrupted by Hindu Munani (a Hindu nationalist group from the South of India) and members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Between 15 and 20 men entered the house and threatened to kill the Christians who were present.²⁴ In June, a school in Haryana owned by a Christians organisation was illegally occupied, and a Hindu altar was erected by the Bajrang Dal (a militant wing of the RSS).²⁵

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Refugees and IDPs generally live in overcrowded conditions that would render them particularly vulnerable in the event of an outbreak of COVID -19.

²⁰ Source: Tehmina Arora of Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) Delhi

²¹ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/10/05/feature/4835/article.htm>

²² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31927-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31927-9/fulltext)

²³ <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece>

²⁴ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/03/26/press/4592/article.htm>

²⁵ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/06/30/press/4707/article.htm>

Many are from religious communities that have experienced rights violations that occasioned their displacement. In some cases, those assisting them, some of whom are religious actors, have also been rendered vulnerable.

In Burma, there are two principal concerns related to COVID-19. The first is the impact of the pandemic on some of the most vulnerable communities, particularly those in refugee camps along its borders, and in IDP camps. Many displaced communities are ethnic and religious minorities who have fled Burma's decades-long armed conflict. The second concern is the wider impact on freedom of religion or belief.

In May, it was confirmed that COVID-19 had reached the Rohingya refugee camps on the Bangladesh-Burma border. The confirmation of at least two cases in the world's largest refugee camp²⁶ led aid organisations to warn of an impending humanitarian disaster. CSW has visited the Rohingya refugee camps twice²⁷ and it is clear from first-hand observation that social distancing, self-isolation and even regular hand washing are an impossibility in camps where families live cheek by jowl, with a limited supply of clean water, poor sanitation and rudimentary healthcare.

Similar concerns exist for IDPs in Kachin and Shan States in particular, although no reports have emerged so far of an outbreak of the coronavirus in either of these areas.

For migrants and asylum seekers with no right to remain in Mexico, the pandemic has highlighted the poor living conditions that put them at greater risk of contracting the disease. US policies to return asylum seekers to Mexico while they await the results of their asylum application have exacerbated this problem. Reductions in the numbers of volunteers working in migrant shelters, due to travel restrictions or to reduce the spread of the disease, has left camps vulnerable to criminal groups who see some asylum seekers as a lucrative target. Religious leaders who run migrant shelters have often been targeted for kidnapping, assault, and extortion. There are now serious concerns that religious leaders working in the shelters are highly vulnerable to COVID-19.

The pandemic has made it even more difficult for North Koreans to flee their country, with borders officially closed and increased security making it harder to cross illegally. According to the Ministry of Unification in South

Korea, only 12 North Koreans reached Seoul between April and June this year – seven in April, two in May, and three in June. Last year, 320 North Koreans made it to South Korea during the same period.

In addition, the journey for North Koreans fleeing to South Korea via China, which can involve travelling through Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, or Mongolia, will also have become more difficult due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions and lockdowns in many of these nations.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has had far-reaching impacts around the world. At the start of the pandemic CSW emphasised the risk that governments and non-state actors might exploit this global health crisis to violate human rights. Sadly, this risk appears to have been realised, with numerous examples of religious and belief communities having their right to freedom of religion or belief curtailed across the 26 countries on which CSW works. The issues are wide-ranging, from violence continuing unabated, to COVID-19 restrictions being used as a fig-leaf to legitimise delays in the justice and to justify limitations on freedom of worship.

This report has also highlighted worsening living conditions for those in prison and in refugee or IDP camps, the biased distribution of humanitarian relief materials, and the spread of misinformation targeting specific religious or belief communities. During this period of unprecedented global uncertainty, it is imperative that governments are vigilant in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that they urge states that are not already doing so to adhere to their human rights commitments, regardless of the prevalence of COVID-19.

²⁶ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/covid-19-sows-panic-in-rohingya-camp/88034>

²⁷ <https://forbinfull.org/2018/08/24/the-rohingya-crisis-one-year-on-burmas-work-of-healing-cannot-be-postponed-any-longer/>

Recommendations

To the international community:

- Promote and protect fundamental rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, regardless of COVID-19.
- Ensure that any emergency powers that are introduced are necessary, proportionate, and applied indiscriminately.
- Combat disinformation and ensure authorities are providing accurate and transparent information to their citizens and the international community.
- Adhere to the rule of law, ensuring that there is access to justice, and that legal systems are functioning properly and without bias.
- Condemn in the strongest terms the use of violence by governments and non-governmental actors against religious communities and ensure accountability for any violent attacks.
- Immediately release all prisoners of conscience detained in connection with their religion or belief, and investigate cases of wrongful imprisonment.
- For countries hosting refugee and/or IDP communities, ensure that any emergency measures that are instituted do not compound existing vulnerabilities and cause further suffering
- Ensure that humanitarian aid is distributed whenever and wherever it is needed, and that its distribution is not marred by bias or discrimination.
- For diplomatic missions, demonstrate an ongoing interest and concern by being in regular contact with human rights defenders and religious and/or belief communities in host countries, and by making representations to governments if violations occur.
- Address any rise in religious hate speech or discrimination as a matter of urgency, while Diplomatic Missions are urged to monitor any increase in such abuses, and to raise concerns with governments of host countries if they are left unaddressed.
- Ensure that when introducing measures that impact women and children from specific religious communities disproportionately to introduce mitigating actions to lessen their effect on vulnerable groups.