States’ reaction to COVID-19 will shape the discourse on human rights for years to come

(Bangkok, 8 May 2020) – As COVID-19 intensifies inequalities, the way Governments respond to the pandemic now will alter and shape the human rights discourse for the years to come, experts and civil society leaders said in a webinar today.

Although COVID-19 poses unprecedented challenges, there are also unparalleled opportunities for states to address long-standing human rights issues, concluded speakers who shared on-the-ground experiences in Myanmar, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Discussions in the webinar ‘Will Human Rights Survive COVID-19? Navigating Human Rights During and After the Pandemic’ revealed an alarming tendency for Governments across the Asian region to use COVID-19 as a pretext to undermine human rights. Most countries adopted measures that include nationwide lockdowns, restrictions on movement and emergency laws — many of which have had troubling impacts on human rights.

One month after the pandemic was declared, a number of negative trends were documented by the CIVICUS Monitor. ‘We saw a rise in unjustified restrictions on access to information and censorship. Activists were detained for disseminating information about COVID-19 and their Government’s response to the pandemic, crackdowns on human rights defenders and media outlets grew harsher, and people’s right to privacy was violated as emergency powers were broadly implemented,’ said Susan Wilding, Head of Geneva Office of the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS).

In the Philippines, parallels can be drawn between the country’s implementation of enhanced community quarantine and the ‘war on drugs.’ ‘The use of war as a framework or metaphor in combating COVID-19 is very dangerous, as seen in the experience with the “war on drugs”,’ said Dr. Nymia Pimental Simbulan, Chairperson of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA).

’Like the ‘war on drugs,’ the COVID-19 response has relied heavily on the use of state violence, threats and harassment, and the stifling of criticism and opposition,’ she added.

Those most affected are from marginalised and deprived communities who have little choice but to violate lockdown measures in a bid for survival. In implementing the enhanced community quarantine, the police have allegedly been linked to a myriad of violations, including cases of sexual assault, unwarranted detentions, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Accountability for these alleged state-sponsored violations remains elusive.
In Myanmar, the freedom of expression has continued to deteriorate in the face of the pandemic. ‘Myanmar was already experiencing restrictions on the freedom of expression, but with COVID-19, artists, activists and critics face further restrictions in expressing legitimate criticism of the Government and military, including on their COVID-19 response,’ said Rin Fujimatsu, Advocacy Director of the Progressive Voice.

‘Additionally, the lack of an inclusive response to the pandemic is seen to aggravate the persecution and discrimination of the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities. The continued internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin States has impeded the vital flow of information on the pandemic, and is further endangering the lives of individuals already living in conflict zones,’ she added.

Despite an International Court of Justice ruling, which has ordered Myanmar authorities to protect the Rohingya from genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity continue to take place in the country, making conflict-affected communities more vulnerable to the pandemic.

In Sri Lanka, COVID-19 is compounding the systematic discrimination against marginalised groups. As in other countries, the pandemic is deepening the vulnerabilities of the most marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, garment workers, and women, which has an adverse impact on their economic, social and cultural rights.

‘The effects of policies that promoted privatisation of basic services, can now be seen clearly — only two per cent of Sri Lanka’s gross domestic product (GDP) is allocated to the health sector. As exporting garment has been the country’s primary economy, 30 to 40 per cent of factory workers are expected to become unemployed because of the pandemic,’ said Sandun Thudugala, Head of Programmes of the Law and Society Trust.

Participants raised concerns on the impact of technology and surveillance measures, such as those used for contact tracing, on civic space and fundamental freedoms. ‘We need a synergy between security and human rights. Any measure introduced to combat a public health crisis must be based on the principles of necessity and proportionality,’ urged Prof. Joseph Cannataci, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy.

Aside from challenges, the pandemic is presenting civil society with opportunities and spaces to leverage on their collective power. Digital and online spaces are increasingly used to connect with one another, and even to stage protests against human rights violations.

Despite the bleak recognition that Governments are using the pandemic to further authoritarian goals, the human rights defenders in the webinar are determined to fight back. Civil society will continue to play a role in raising awareness and holding Governments accountable to their obligation to prioritise the rights of all individuals.
'Human rights violations existed before COVID-19, are exacerbated in the face of the virus and will continue to occur even after the pandemic. We now have the opportunity to determine how we want to shape the human rights discourse,' concluded the speakers, collectively. 

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The webinar was jointly organised by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), CIVICUS, iDefend and the Philippine Alliance for Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA).

About the organisers:


- **The Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)** is an alliance of individuals, institutions and organisations committed to the promotion, protection and realization of human rights in the Philippines. [https://philippinehumanrights.org/index.php?](https://philippinehumanrights.org/index.php?)

- **In Defense of Human Rights and Dignity Movement (iDefend)** is a grassroots movement that defends the rights and upholds the dignity of all Filipinos. [https://idefend.ph/](https://idefend.ph/)

- **The World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS)** is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. [https://www.civicus.org/index.php](https://www.civicus.org/index.php)

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