

## Extemporaneous speech about COVID-19

Indeed this is an important meeting, at a time that none of us may ever forget. The COVID-19 pandemic is generating suffering and damage in every region. It poses a far-reaching threat to human rights. As Secretary-General Guterres has warned, it **threatens not only development, but also "enhanced instability, enhanced unrest, and enhanced conflict."**

We do not know how the virus itself might evolve, or whether those affected will permanently be immune. We do not have complete data of who is being infected and developing the most severe symptoms — or whether there are links to contributory factors, such as pollution. We do know that vital measures must be taken to upgrade health and social systems to ensure the greatest possible support to those most impacted by the epidemic. We know we cannot afford to leave anyone behind in this effort.

And we know that lockdowns cannot continue forever. Exit strategies must be carefully devised to ensure our societies and people recover.

Today, we have come together for this informal meeting of the Council, although we may be physically apart. I hope this contributes to the creation of **a more cooperative, global and human rights-based approach to the crisis.**

All States are facing tremendous challenges. Many are demonstrating their commitment to protecting human rights through this epidemic. Others should be encouraged to do so, in order to make their efforts to tackle COVID more effective for everyone – both in their nations, and across the world.

It is natural – and necessary – for national efforts to be a strong priority in any crisis. But this is a global pandemic, and only global solidarity will ensure that we can combat it effectively. This crisis makes clear how much we need collective international action and demonstrates the value of our multilateral organizations. The United Nations was created to prevent, mitigate and more effectively address international crises. I urge all of us to work together to promote a strong, multilateral, cooperative and global approach.

### **First I want to address some urgent issues regarding economic and social rights**

The pandemic is exposing the damaging impact of **inequalities**, in every society.

In developed countries, fault-lines in access to health care; in labor rights and social protections; in living-space; and in dignity are suddenly very visible.

In developing countries, where a large portion of the population may rely on daily income to survive, the impact could be far greater. The millions of people who have little access to health-care, and who, by necessity, live in cramped conditions with poor sanitation, and no

safety net, no clean water, will suffer most. They are less likely to be able to protect themselves from the virus, and less likely to withstand a sharp drop in income.

Unchecked, the pandemic is likely to create even wider inequalities, amid extensive suffering.

The universality of the threat from this virus provides the most compelling argument there has ever been for universal and affordable access to health care. **Actions to upgrade public health care**, in every country, are especially urgent. WHO is leading efforts to ensure that all countries are equipped to trace, isolate and treat people infected by COVID-19. This effort should be fully resourced. There will need to be a significant regional and global effort to avoid the collapse of any country's medical system – a matter of urgent interest to everyone.

Extensive economic and social measures must also be taken, in every country, to **lessen the shocks of this epidemic, and minimize the further growth of inequalities**. The full impact of the pandemic on global and national economies has yet to be felt. Many States in every region – especially in Europe – have taken unprecedented measures to protect the rights of workers and minimize the numbers of those made unemployed. All States with sufficient resources should be encouraged to do the same.

Many developing countries have less capacity to absorb and mitigate the economic and social impact of the epidemic. They may also be most vulnerable to world recession, through commodities pricing and a decline in foreign investment and of remittances, among other factors. The Secretary-General has called for measures including – but not limited to – debt alleviation, expanded access to funding through the IMF, and contributions to the Global Humanitarian Fund.

We may also need to explore new financial mechanisms to fund global solidarity. Last week the African Development Bank raised the world's largest social bond: a 3 billion US dollar fund to assist African governments to expand access to health and to other essential services and goods. This is precisely the kind of innovative thinking we need.

**I also want to emphasize the imperative of respect for civil and political rights during this crisis.**

Difficult decisions are facing many Governments. Emergency measures may well be needed to respond to this public health emergency. But an emergency situation is not a blank check to disregard human rights obligations.

Emergency measures should be necessary and proportionate to meet that need. People should be fully informed about the emergency measures and told how long they will remain in effect. The enforcement of emergency measures needs to be applied fairly and humanely. Any penalties should be proportional to the offence committed and laid down by law.

I am profoundly concerned by certain countries' adoption of emergency powers that are unlimited and not subject to review. In a few cases, the epidemic is being used to justify

repressive changes to regular legislation, which will remain in force long after the emergency is over.

I am also concerned by steps taken to impose restrictions on media freedom and freedom of expression. Vaguely formulated actions to combat alleged "misinformation" could be applied to any criticism, and in some countries we have already seen reports of journalists being penalized for reporting a lack of masks; health-workers reprimanded for saying they lack protection; and ordinary people arrested for social media postings about the pandemic. Criticism is not a crime.

I urge all Governments to greatly increase access to accurate information and statistics. Transparency is paramount and can be life-saving in a health crisis. I also urge an end to any blanket Internet and telecommunication shutdowns and denials of service.

When members of military forces conduct law enforcement functions, they should be accountable to civilian authorities, and they remain subject to international human rights law.