

Governments must do more to prevent slavery and exploitation during COVID-19 pandemic

GENEVA (30 November 2020) - *The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk that people at the edges of society will be pushed into slavery, trafficking and/or sexual exploitation, and governments must do more to protect them, say UN human rights experts*.*

They issued the following statement for the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, which marks the day in 1949 that the United Nations General Assembly adopted the first Convention to fight human trafficking:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the direct connection between increased socio-economic vulnerability, discrimination and the risk of exploitation in forced labour, including the worst forms of child labour, or of being subjected to sale, trafficking in persons and sexual exploitation.

Workers in low income and emerging economies have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. With loss of employment, income or land, the most affected groups often subjected to discrimination should be at the centre of States’ and businesses’ policy responses. These groups include women, children, young people, migrants and their families, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, LGBT persons, older workers, members of racial, ethnic and religious minorities, persons deprived of liberty, workers in informal economies as well as refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons fleeing from conflict and post-conflict zones. Limited access to adequate housing, drinking water, sanitation, hygiene, health care, and education further increases vulnerability, so improvement of basic services should be part of any comprehensive response.

If workers don’t receive adequate economic, social and other support from governments, without discrimination on grounds of migration and other status, they face serious risk of exploitation, including being subjected to slavery, servitude, forced or bonded labour, or trafficking in persons. In this regard, we are concerned that these practices have increased in the past months. In some cases, victims are further subjected to ill-treatment, torture, or even disappearance when they are prevented from informing as to their fate and whereabouts, and put outside the protection of the law.

To ensure that no one is left behind as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, States must increase their efforts to identify and protect victims of slavery and trafficking, including by ensuring their access to essential health services, including reproductive health services, psycho-social counseling, legal assistance, vocational training, income-generating support and remedies without discrimination.

We urge States to strengthen social and labour protection frameworks by combatting

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existing inequalities based on a number of grounds including sex, gender, age, race and other factors that increase the vulnerability of certain populations to slavery and exploitation. At a time of heightened risk for children, greater investment of resources for child protection are urgently needed. International solidarity will be critical to address this global challenge together and to accelerate action in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), towards a sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

We call upon Member States and other entities to address the structural causes that contribute to slavery and exploitation and continue providing support to those offering comprehensive assistance to victims, including through contributions to the UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, which will celebrate its 30th anniversary next year. The Fund will convene a webinar with the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery and other international experts to showcase the work of civil society organizations to aid racially discriminated groups subjected to slavery during the global pandemic.”

2 December, 12:00 – 13:30 CTE-time –

https://geneva-academy-ch.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_ebEcExx3RUOLu6Doulw8Hw

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affected by leprosy and their family members; Mr. Olivier De Schutter, Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; Ms. Koumbou Boly Barry, Special Rapporteur on the right to education; Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh, Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children; Mr. Alioune Tine, Independent Expert on the human rights situation in Mali; Mr. David Boyd, Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment; Ms. Jelena Aparac (Chair-Rapporteur), Ms. Lilian Bobea, Mr. Chris Kwaja, Mr. Ravindran Daniel, and Ms. Sorcha MacLeod, Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination; Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation; Ms. Tlaleng Mofokeng, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism; Mr. Nils Melzer, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Mr. Javaid Rehman, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Ms. Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons; Mr. Victor Madrigal-Borloz, Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity; Ms. Anita Ramasastry (Chairperson), Mr. Dante Pesce (Vice Chair), Mr. Surya Deva, Ms. Elżbieta Karska, and Mr. Githu Muigai, UN Working Group on human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises; Ms. Ikponwosa Ero, Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism; Mr. Gerard Quinn, Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities; Mr. Tae-Ung Baik (Chair-Rapporteur), Mr. Henrikas Mickevičius (Vice Chair), Ms. Aua Baldé, Mr. Bernard Duhaime, and Mr. Luciano Hazan, UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Ms. Karima Bennoun, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; Ms. Elizabeth Broderick (Chair), Ms. Dorothy Estrada-Tanck, Ms. Meskerem Geset Techane, Ms. Ivana Radačlíc, Ms. Melissa Upreti (Vice Chair), Working Group on discrimination against women and girls; and the Committee against Torture; Committee on Enforced Disappearances; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture; Committee on Migrant Workers; Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The Special Rapporteurs and Independent Experts are part of what is known as the [*Special Procedures*](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a

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voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent of any government or organisation and serve in their individual capacity.

*The [UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery](#), establishment by the General Assembly in 1991 ([resolution 46/122](#)), is managed by the United Nations Secretary-General through the OHCHR, with the advice of a Board of Trustees composed of five independent experts. Board members are appointed by the Secretary-General from amongst experts with wide experience in the field of human rights, in particular contemporary forms of slavery. The Fund's mandate is to support victims of contemporary forms of slavery. It does so by channelling voluntary contributions to civil society organizations providing legal, social, psychological and medical services, humanitarian assistance and vocational training. For inquiries and **media requests**, please contact:*

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