

HUMAN RIGHTS ON CAPITOL HILL IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

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AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



The world is facing an herculean challenge as coronavirus cases have [exceeded one million and the death toll has surpassed 64,000 worldwide](#). In responding to the COVID-19 crisis, the U.S. should prioritize human rights for all, with particular attention to people locked up in jails, prisons, and detention facilities. All [governments](#) must uphold international [human rights law and standards](#) in responding to COVID-19. Governments [must](#) protect every person's right to health, economic security, non-discrimination, and access to information. For breaking news on Amnesty's response to COVID-19 and our policy recommendations, check out our website [here](#).

While the coronavirus does not discriminate, the President and senior administration officials have called it the "[Chinese Virus](#)" and "[Wuhan Virus](#)," in turn encouraging xenophobic attacks and remarks against Asian-Americans. The U.S. government responses to COVID-19 must [not stigmatize](#) any country or population. Instead of blaming China for the pandemic, the U.S. must cooperate with all nations to produce and disseminate critical health gear and equipment.

Throughout April, Amnesty International USA ("AIUSA") will host telephonic briefings for Congress on a range of human rights issues related to COVID-19. To RSVP for any briefing, please email mcullen@aiusa.org.

April 7, 1 p.m. (EST): Technology and Surveillance in the Age of COVID-19

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1) U.S. – FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MUST UPHOLD HUMAN RIGHTS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Amnesty International USA (“AIUSA”) calls on the [President](#), [Vice President](#) and Congress to ensure adequate funding and support, accessibility and affordability of care, protection for healthcare workers, and the mitigation of risks that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. The administration must take immediate action to ensure that every person [who requests access to COVID-19 testing can receive it](#) and that adequate and quality personal protective equipment, information, training, and psychosocial support are available to support nurses, doctors, and other response staff on the front lines.

a. Asylum Seekers - Trump Administration Must Not Use Pandemic to Justify Its Ban on Asylum Seekers. On March 20 the Trump administration’s [rule](#) and accompanying order went into effect allowing officials to [turn back asylum seekers](#) and unaccompanied children without affording them any [legal process](#). The [ban on asylum](#) forces asylum seekers into perilous conditions along the border, endangering their lives and jeopardizing public health. It also dispenses with long-established critical protections passed by a bipartisan Congress providing for trafficking screenings and safeguards for unaccompanied children. [Leaked Border Patrol guidance](#) about the new asylum ban confirms that asylum seekers are given no screening for fear of persecution whatsoever before being summarily pushed back or repatriated, in stark violation of U.S. legal obligations. Amnesty [demands](#) that U.S. border officials continue to allow people to follow the legal process to request asylum, and provide screening and referral to health facilities.

b. Immigration Detainees – Homeland Security Must Immediately Release Detainees. On March 17 AIUSA called on Homeland Security (“DHS”) to [immediately release](#) all detained asylum seekers and immigrants in order to prevent infection, illness and death for detainees and facility staff. There have already been several confirmed cases of COVID-19 among staff and detainees in detention facilities in four different states; this number is likely under-representative considering

inadequate access to testing, particularly in detention facilities. Given that social distancing is impossible in detention and any virus will [spread rapidly in the overcrowded facilities](#), DHS must immediately release immigrants from detention facilities or the number of cases will grow exponentially. At least [92 percent of asylum seekers](#) have close family and friends whom they could live with in the U.S. Detainees must be released on humanitarian parole to sponsors including friends, family, and where appropriate, NGO shelters.

c. Gun Violence - Top 10 Ways COVID-19 Intersects with Gun Violence. After the Trump Administration deemed gun stores to be [an essential business](#), AIUSA explained how the COVID-19 [pandemic intersects with gun violence](#). COVID-19 will exacerbate the already devastating crisis of gun violence with first-time buyers rushing to buy guns, children at home with unsecured guns, and domestic violence survivors stuck at home with their abusers. Congress must pass into law: Ethan's Law ([H.R. 2867, S. 193](#)), the Background Check Expansion Act ([S.42](#)), Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act ([S. 2843](#)), the Extreme Risk Protection Act ([H.R. 1236, S. 506](#)), the Disarm Hate Act ([H.R. 2708, S. 1462](#)), and the Break the Cycle of Violence Act ([H.R. 4836, S. 2671](#)).

d. Privacy – Congress Must Pass Measures to Protect Personal Health Data in COVID-19 Relief Packages. With governments across the world rapidly expanding the use of digital surveillance to combat COVID-19, Amnesty published a list of [strict conditions](#) that must be met to safeguard human rights and prevent surveillance overreach. Congress must ensure that any relief package includes [privacy protections for personal health data](#) including protections for new data collection, processing, and sharing, and real consequences for violations of privacy protection laws during a national emergency. For more information, join Amnesty's April 7 telephonic briefing "Technology and Surveillance During the Age of COVID-19." To RSVP, email mcullen@aiusa.org.

e. Environment - EPA Must Immediately Revoke Suspension of Environmental Protections. On March 27 the Environmental Protection Agency [announced](#) it would suspend enforcement of environmental laws indefinitely due to the pandemic. The enforcement of these laws is necessary to save hundreds of thousands of people from premature death each year and millions more from unnecessary illness. The Trump administration must not use this crisis to gut environmental regulations.

2) HOW IS COVID-19 AFFECTING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AROUND THE WORLD?

a. Refugees - Refugees Have No Nations Fighting for Their Health and Survival Amidst Pandemic. The [World Health Organization](#) and the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) have made clear that asylum seekers, refugees, and displaced peoples face [distinct risks](#) that will only grow worse as the pandemic spreads across the world.

Bangladesh: For the nearly one million refugees in Cox's Bazar District (the world's most populous

refugee camp), social distancing is not an option in overcrowded camps with inadequate health care. On March 24 Bangladesh authorities reported the [first case](#) of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar District, home to nearly 860,000 Rohingya refugees forced to flee Myanmar, most of them as a result of crimes the United Nations ("UN") has said likely amount to genocide. In late March 2020 Amnesty interviewed 15 older Rohingya refugees living in refugee camps near Cox's Bazar. The UN Refugee Agency [indicates](#) there are more than [31,500 refugees age 60 or older](#) in the camps. Information about the illness and measures to prevent its spread is failing to reach many older people, thereby placing [older Rohingya refugees](#) in imminent danger.

Greece: Amnesty [documented](#) in a March 2020 report how thousands of older people, people with chronic diseases, children, pregnant women, new mothers and people with disabilities are trapped in dangerously [overcrowded conditions](#) in the Greek Islands. The population has extremely limited access to water, toilets, and showers, and is forced to wait in line for hours for food. Anyone who arrived after July 2019 has not been allowed to [access public health care](#).

Lebanon: Amnesty [documented](#) in April 2020 how Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in dire need of preventative equipment like sanitizer and disinfectant so they can protect themselves from contracting the virus.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: In March 2020 local authorities in Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina [forcibly transferred and confined](#) thousands of migrants to an inadequate tent camp in Lipa. This forced people to hastily set up remote tent facilities without adequate access to water and sanitation, spaces to self-isolate, and accessible medical care.

b. Detainees/Prisoners – Detainees/Prisoners Are at Heightened Risk of Infection. Amnesty has called on the governments of [Cambodia](#), [Chile](#), [Colombia](#), [Egypt](#), [Indonesia](#), [Iran](#), [Pakistan](#), [Russia](#), [Syria](#) and [Turkey](#) to immediately and unconditionally release human rights defenders. In overcrowded prisons it is impossible to isolate people who may have contracted the virus. Limited access to health services and hygiene products increase the risks of exposure to infection and hinder recovery. Authorities should release detainees especially those with underlying medical conditions and the elderly and authorities should also consider releasing those people in pre-trial detention.

3) HOW ARE GOVERNMENTS' RESPONSES TO COVID-19 AFFECTING HUMAN RIGHTS AROUND THE WORLD?

a. Latin America and Caribbean - Governments Must Not Use the Pandemic to Violate Human Rights. Governments in the Americas have begun to impose states of emergencies, travel bans, and quarantines. Amnesty [calls on](#) governments to prevent discrimination, provide adequate resources to at-risk groups, stop the use of repression or excessive force in enforcement of public health measures, and stop limiting of access to information. States must guarantee workers' rights and economic security, access to adequate water, sanitation and health care for all, and protect people's right to privacy.

b. Asia

Cambodia - Cambodia Must Not Institute Proposed State of Emergency Law. On March 31 a leaked-legislative draft which imposes a [state of emergency law in Cambodia with no checks and balances](#) or periodic review was reported. These measures include provisions for conducting surveillance on all telecommunications mediums “using any means necessary,” and the power to ban or restrict the distribution of information that could scare the public and cause unrest. Other powers include restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly, the seizure of private property, and the power to enforce quarantines. The Cambodian government must not use the COVID-19 crisis to grab unchecked power.

India - India Must Restore Full Access to Internet in Kashmir. Amnesty [calls](#) on the Indian government to restore full access to the internet in Kashmir. Despite the increasing number of [COVID-19 cases](#), on March 17 the [Indian government](#) ordered continued restrictions on full internet services by restricting speed to 2G in Kashmir.

c. Europe - Hungary Leader Must Not Use State of Emergency to Grant Himself Unlimited Powers.

On March 30 the Parliament of Hungary passed the Bill on Protection against the Coronavirus which empowers the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban to rule by decree. The bill also creates two new crimes that could lead to the imprisonment of government critics for up to five years: (1) “presenting false or distorted facts that interfere with public safety” and (2) “interfering with the operation of a quarantine.” These crimes are vaguely defined and provide [ample space for abuse](#). Additionally, the bill includes no sunset clause, potentially allowing Orban to [rule indefinitely without checks on his power](#). Amnesty Hungary has [condemned](#) the bill. Amnesty USA urges the U.S. Congress to make known their serious concerns with this measure.

d. Middle East - Qatar Migrant Workers in Labor Camps Are at Grave Risk Amid COVID-19

Crisis. On March 20 Qatari officials locked down the Industrial Area in Doha after hundreds of construction workers became infected with COVID-19. These camps are home to many migrant workers. Locking them down puts migrant workers at [greater risk of exposure](#) to the virus. Amnesty calls on Qatar to ensure that migrant workers are not further marginalized during this crisis and that they can access health care and sick pay when they are unable to work because of COVID-19.



Above: Migrant workers in Doha, Qatar, are housed in very poor accommodations, sleep in bunk beds in overcrowded rooms, with poor sanitation and sometimes no electricity or running water.

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5) AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL USA NEWSLETTERS

For more human rights updates in Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Middle East and Eurasia, see [here](#).

6) CONNECT WITH US

Follow breaking human rights news, follow Amnesty International USA on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

For more information, please contact:

Regions:

Americas, U.S. southern border: Charanya Krishnaswami ckrishna@aiusa.org (Twitter @charanya_k)

Asia/Pacific: Francisco Bencosme fbencosme@aiusa.org (Twitter @bencosmef)

Eurasia/Europe: Daniel Balson dbalson@aiusa.org (Twitter @eurasiaview)

Middle East/North Africa: Philippe Nassif pnassif@aiusa.org (Twitter @ptnassif)

Sub-Saharan Africa: Adotei Akwei aakwei@aiusa.org (Twitter @aakwei)

Issues:

Surveillance, Technology, Digital Rights: Michael Kleinman mkleinman@aiusa.org

Refugees/Displaced Peoples: Ryan Mace rmace@aiusa.org (Twitter @ryanamace)

Gender: Tarah Demant tdemant@aiusa.org (Twitter @tarahdemant)

Gun Violence: Jasmeet Sidhu jsidhu@aiusa.org (Twitter @jasmeetsidhu_dc)

National Security: Daphne Eviatar deviatar@aiusa.org (Twitter @deviatar)

Human Rights Defenders: Andrew Fandino afandino@aiusa.org (Twitter @andrewfandinoAI)

Criminal Justice: Krissy Roth krroth@aiusa.org (Twitter @krissy_roth)

Climate Crisis: Zeke Johnson zjohnson@aiusa.org (Twitter @zeke_johnson)

All other issues: Joanne Lin jlin@aiusa.org (Twitter @JoanneLinDC)