

Research Report

COMMITTEE : Human Rights Council

ISSUE : *How to address the escalation of racial discrimination in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

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KEY WORDS

Human rights council: main UN entity regarding human rights. Its role is to assess situations of human rights violations and make recommendations to remedy them, ultimately strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the world. The Council has the power to debate any human rights issue and situation in the world.

Discrimination: Amnesty International defines discrimination as a situation in which “a person is unable to enjoy his or her human rights or other legal rights on an equal basis with others because of an unjustified distinction made in policy, law or treatment.”

Covid-19: name given by the WHO to the new infectious respiratory disease that emerged in December 2019, in China, and caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. This respiratory disease can be fatal when affecting patients weakened by age, chronic diseases or other pre-existing ailments. It is transmitted by close contact with infected persons. Currently, there have been over 241 million cases of covid-19 worldwide since the beginning of the pandemic, resulting in nearly 5 million deaths.

OVERVIEW

Since Covid-19 outbreak in November 2019, a rise of racial discrimination has been reported worldwide. On May 8, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated that “the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering.” He called on governments to “act immediately to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate.”

The first and most obvious form of racial discrimination is anti-Asian discrimination. Be it in the media, on social networks, or in political speeches, many people have shown open hostility towards people of Chinese origin, but also individuals with asiatic features in general, because many do not distinguish between the various ethnicities that are grouped under the

same term of “Asian.” Violence suffered by these people is not limited to verbal or written abuse: shocking stories of physical aggression - in some cases even murder - have been seen in the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Kenya, Brazil, the Middle East... The extent and alarming gravity of this discrimination is easily recognizable. Political leaders and parties have sometimes themselves encouraged, directly or indirectly, hate crimes, racist or xenophobic acts, by making hostile comments about the Chinese or Asian community. For example, the use of the term "China virus" by former U.S. President Donald Trump, and "Wuhan virus" by the Secretary of State have undoubtedly encouraged hate speech in the United States. No continent has escaped this outpouring of hate towards individuals perceived as coming from Asian countries.

But other groups have also experienced increased racial discrimination as a result of the pandemic. First of all, we can note people of African origin: a study conducted by the Pew Research Center reports that racist behavior or comments towards blacks in the United States have been amplified by the arrival of COVID-19. The Roms communities from the north of Spain have also been targeted, under the pretext that they were the first to be contaminated by the virus and that they would therefore present a major danger for the rest of society. Finally, Muslim communities in India have been the victims of attacks and other forms of discrimination in the context of the pandemic, following the idea that a gathering organized by a missionary movement in March had drastically worsened the health situation.

Some ethnic minorities are being designated as scapegoats, through fake news media or racist comments by influential people, which only makes the situation worse. Although these discriminations are partly linked to the fear of being infected and the generally feverish atmosphere associated with the virus, it is important to know that these discriminations did not only emerge because of the COVID-19 crisis: they had already existed for a long time, and simply resurfaced in a brutal and sudden way following the pandemic.

These discriminations become all the more alarming when we assess the impact they have on access to basic health care. Indeed, in June of last year, the United Nations launched a call to action to address the underlying structural inequalities that were highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher risks of infection, less access to health care, higher socio-economic impact: available data clearly shows that the coronavirus disproportionately affects certain communities and racial or ethnic minorities. Typically relegated to lower socio-economic status because of entrenched discrimination, these groups have been made even more vulnerable by the crisis, suffering higher infection and mortality rates, harsh treatment by law enforcement orders, and unequal access to adequate medical care.

According to UN figures relating to the direct effects of the disease, the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo for example observed that people of color are 62% more likely to die from the virus than white people. In France, in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis where many minorities live, excessive mortality rates have also been reported. In the United States, the mortality rate from COVID-19 among African-Americans is reportedly more than twice that of other racial groups.

In order to maintain a social cohesion which has already been extremely weakened by the health crisis, it is therefore essential that countries and global actors become fully aware of this social crisis, and work together to fight against these brutalities which concern us all, regardless of our physical appearance.

UN TREATIES AND MAIN EVENTS

08/Sept/2001

Adoption of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA)

This document proposes concrete measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, while embodying the strong commitment of the international community to combat these issues at national, regional and international levels. Although the DDPA is not legally binding, it nevertheless has strong moral value and serves to support efforts to bring awareness around the world.

22/Feb/2021

Twenty years after the adoption of the Durban Declaration, the Human Rights Council discussed the progress of the fight against racism and discrimination, and particularly the negative effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had in this regard.

"As we strive to recover from the pandemic and build a better world, it is time to forge a new social contract based on inclusion and sustainability. The world needs greater investments in inclusion and cohesion, to take benefits of diversity rather than perceiving it as a threat."

- António Guterres, UN Secretary General

14/Jul/2021

Creation of an international mechanism of independent experts by the Human Rights Council to "promote transformation for racial justice and equality". Among other things, experts will examine the root causes of systemic racism in judicial and legislative systems, investigate violations of international human rights law around the world, and work to ensure that victims and their families receive justice and compensation.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

1) Organize a multidimensional action plan on various levels

The aim is to promote an active understanding that discrimination against people of color will only exacerbate existing vulnerabilities of ethnic groups and increase hostile prejudice and hatred around the world.

a) At an international level

- Promote the work of anti-racist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their data gathering platforms;
- Promote and strengthen the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), encouraging countries to be aware of the Committee's observations and to act accordingly.

b) At a national level

- Urge States to comply with the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action within their country;
- Promote ethnic and cultural diversity in all areas under the jurisdiction of the country (public administration, education, etc.).

c) At a local level

- Create toll-free numbers where people can report cases of racial discrimination and get support as soon as possible;
- Promote any social/cultural initiative (films, shows, events...) or any other initiative that promotes cultural, social and ethnic diversity within communities.

2) Adapt the legislative and judicial systems

- Establish laws that criminalize discriminatory violence, whether verbal or physical, and ensure that they are respected and adequately punished;
- Through education, training and awareness-raising, promote rehabilitative, not just punitive, approaches to address the problems that lead to discriminatory acts, encourage post-release reintegration and reduce recidivism. Imprisoning criminals is important, but so is rehabilitating them and aiming for eventual reintegration.

3) Raising awareness among new generations

Considering that racially discriminatory behavior can be learned and unlearned, promoting racial tolerance and acceptance among children in schools can be a useful long-term approach to eliminate racial discrimination. Authorities in places of social gathering, such as workplaces, hospitals, sporting events, etc., can also intensify advocacy against racial discrimination.

- Push for the implementation of moral and civic education hours in schools to give students and teachers the opportunity to discuss the topic of racial discrimination: how it manifests itself, against whom, what are the dangers and how to solve it;
- Integrate the history of ethnic minorities in each region/nation into school curricula, so as to include them in the collective mentality, avoid discrimination due to ignorance and strengthen their place as members of the community;
- Carry out awareness campaigns in the professional and public spheres in order to heighten collective awareness and change behaviors or habits that may contribute to the various forms of racial discrimination.

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<https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2020/05/12/le-covid-19-attise-le-racisme-anti-asiatique-et-la-xenophobie-dans-le-monde-entier> -> Examples of anti-Asian xenophobic incidents in various countries

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