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Agenda item 2

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Liberal International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[28 May 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Call to stop using the Coronavirus as an excuse to restrict political rights and persecute the opposition

Although there is broad agreement across the world that unconventional measures are required to hinder the spread of the coronavirus, states' efforts to contain the virus must not be used for consolidation of authoritarian powers and disproportionate use of executive authorities violating human rights.

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has introduced a state of health emergency for three months (with the possibility of extension) and has given orders that those who do not observe the curfew can be shot dead. The Philippine authorities have also blocked Senator Leila de Lima from participating in the virtual legislative work.

In Cambodia, prime minister Hun Sen has continued to use his prior existing right to close down independent media and organisations, and he has used the restrictions on freedom of speech to put opposition figures in prison and further suppress the banned opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party.

In Hungary, prime minister Viktor Orbán has seriously undermined the country's democracy as journalists may face years in prison for spreading so-called "fake news" about the virus. He now rules by decree with essentially no parliamentary scrutiny. In Poland, medical personnel have been censored and the government has used the virus to push forward laws restricting women's rights.

In Latin America, countries with dire human rights records such as Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Cuba, and Nicaragua, have increased the already severe repression of their citizens during the pandemic. Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega has ignored international health recommendations and is encouraging his people to participate in mass gatherings. These countries also all have large numbers of political prisoners held in prisons with high infection risks.

Recognising the dangerously overcrowded conditions of many prisons, countries like Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey, and others have released prisoners to reduce the risk of the virus spreading among prison populations. However, political prisoners are often not among those released. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has pointed out, these people are not criminals and should be prioritised for release. It is striking that some leaders are more willing to release those convicted of real crimes, than those whose only crime is to disagree with them.

In a report the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (A/HRC/44/49) registers alarm that some efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic may be failing to meet the standards of legality, necessity, and proportionality. The Special Rapporteur shows that access to information, independent media, and other free expression rights are critical to meeting the challenges of pandemic.

We need to constantly remind the world that the free flow of information and exchange of ideas is what has led the world forward. Silencing critics and opposition causes self-censorship and may hamper public response to a virus, as in China where medical staff raising the alarm of a new coronavirus in late 2019 were silenced instead of praised.

Liberal International calls on all governments to immediately release all prisoners detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners and any persons detained for critical or dissenting views. Political pluralism is crucial for functioning societies, and political opposition must not be suppressed.

Further, any measures taken to combat the virus, especially measures that restrict human rights, must be carefully evaluated and kept strictly proportional to the aims they are designed to advance. It is essential that these measures remain temporary and that governments do not use this crisis as an excuse to put in place new permanent limits to democracy and a free exchange of ideas.

Finally, we call on the United Nations and the international community not only to be vigilant and monitor closely any measures put in place to combat the virus and ensure that they do not violate international human rights law, but also to speak up against governments who are using this global tragedy as an excuse to extend their own power at the expense of their citizens.
