

United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech

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I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen demonstrations of overwhelming solidarity between nations and communities working together to address the impact and challenges it poses. Unfortunately, the pandemic has also given rise to a new wave of hate speech and discrimination. 'COVID-19 related hate speech' encompasses a broad range of disparaging expressions against certain individuals and groups that has emerged or been exacerbated as a result of the new coronavirus disease outbreak – from scapegoating, stereotyping, stigmatization and the use of derogatory, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic or antisemitic language. Closely linked to this is the dissemination of 'disinformation' or 'misinformation' related to COVID-19.¹

Since the pandemic emerged, individuals perceived as ethnically Chinese or Asian, or belonging to certain ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, and foreigners have been blamed and vilified for spreading the virus. In some instances, this is grounded in misinformation and rumours, however, more insidious instances of hate speech related to COVID-19 being used to target already marginalized populations have also been reported. Conspiracy theories attributing the spread of the virus to Jews, Muslims, Christians, Bahai's or minority groups has fuelled discriminatory speech against such individuals, in some instances resulting in hate crimes or discrimination against them in the response to COVID-19. In some instances, journalists,² whistle-blowers, medical and health care professionals, human rights defenders

and peacebuilders – are also being subjected to unlawful attacks as a result of their work in addressing or reporting on the pandemic.

The phenomenon of COVID-19 related hate speech is being advanced through mainstream media and via online social media and tech platforms. Though it is often spread by private individuals, its consequences are most severe when it is propagated by political leaders, public officials, religious leaders and other influencers, or when it is part of concerted efforts by individuals or groups to spread hate or incite violence.

COVID-19 related hate speech has serious implications, both in the short and long term. It makes those targeted more vulnerable to violence, exposes them to political and social exclusion, isolation and stigmatization, inhibits them from expressing themselves and participating in public debate, and deters them from accessing medical care and other vital services. In so doing, it heightens the disproportionate effects of the disease on certain communities and exacerbates underlying social and economic inequalities, aggravates drivers of violent extremism while undermining the social cohesion, solidarity and trust necessary to effectively tackle the spread of the virus. It may also trigger social unrest and intergroup violence, possibly enhancing the conditions conducive to conflict and atrocity crimes.³ COVID-19 related hate speech may therefore pose a threat to the enjoyment of human rights, sustainable development and international peace and security.

¹ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_dissecting_responses_covid19_disinformation.pdf

² A/HRC/44/49, paras 34 – 40.

As part of global efforts to respond to the pandemic, the international community needs to be more vigilant and remain unequivocal in condemning COVID-19-related hate speech, promoting messages of inclusion, acting in solidarity and on the basis of international human rights law, particularly freedom of opinion and expression and the right to equality and non-discrimination.

While Member States have the primary responsibility for tackling COVID-19-related hate speech, other actors – especially tech and social media companies, mainstream media, and civil society – also have a significant role to play. The United Nations system plays a critical role, especially in supporting states and other

actors to develop and apply human rights-compliant measures to tackle COVID-19 related hate speech. As the [United Nations Secretary-General stated](#) when launching the policy brief, “[COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together](#),” on 23 April 2020, human rights must be ‘front and centre’ of ‘response and recovery’ efforts in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ‘biggest international crisis in generations.’

This guidance sets out recommendations to various actors for addressing and countering COVID-19 related hate speech. It builds on and is complementary to the [UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#).

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

TO UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENTS, AGENCIES, FUNDS AND PROGRAMMES

- Continue to stress that upholding freedom of opinion and expression is a bedrock of societies based on the rule of law, democracy and human rights
- Condemn COVID-19 related hate speech, express solidarity with its victims and support those who challenge and counter such expressions
- Recognize, monitor, collect data and analyze trends on COVID-19-related hate speech, at national and global level to support effective responses
- Convene relevant actors – including Member States, regional organizations, media and social media platforms, civil society organizations, and faith actors – to develop strategies to identify, address and counter COVID-19 related hate speech at the national and global levels, in accordance with the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech

3 Genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

TO MEMBER STATES

- Uphold the freedom to seek, receive and impart information as a cornerstone of building trust in measures taken to contain the pandemic
- Ensure that any emergency or exceptional measures, legislation or policies taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are articulated and applied in compliance with international human rights law as set out in the Secretary General’s policy brief on COVID-19 and Human Rights and the guidance note by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights⁴
- Address and counter COVID-19 related hate speech publicly and swiftly through:
 - implementing a robust crisis communication response to ensure coherent messaging during the response phase of the pandemic and to mitigate the impact of the crisis on social cohesion and community resilience
 - ensuring that accurate and verified information on the pandemic is disseminated regularly, with robust public messaging against COVID-19 related hate speech, disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories
 - support transparent, accessible and independent systems for monitoring COVID-19-related hate speech
- support the independent production and dissemination of professional and accurate public interest narratives about the struggles and full diversity of individuals affected by COVID-19, and about the experiences of those most vulnerable to COVID-19-related hate speech
- Ensure that all public communications by state officials, especially state-governments by senior members of government, concerning COVID-19:
 - are accessible, accurate, complete, reliable, evidence-based, transparent, available in all languages spoken in the population, and imparted in a timely way
 - do not attribute blame or responsibility for the emergence or spread of the virus on any particular community or group
 - promote inclusion and show members from diverse communities being impacted by the virus and working together to prevent the spread of COVID-19
- Ensure that legal responses to hate speech are carefully balanced with the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right of access to information, including the free flow of scientific information and ideas on the COVID-19 pandemic, including by:
 - ensuring that all limitations to freedom of opinion and expression are provided by law and necessary and proportionate to respect the rights or reputation of others, or to protect national security, public order, or public health or morals

⁴ SG Policy Brief ‘COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together’ https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf; OHCHR, Emergency Measures and COVID-19: Guidance, 27 April 2020 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25828&LangID=E>

- refraining from imposing censorship measures unless they meet international human rights standards, as such measures may otherwise result in limiting access to important information for public health⁵
 - ensuring the safety of journalists and the protection of sources, including that journalists and whistle-blowers who have raised legitimate concerns about COVID-19 and responses to it do not face criminal prosecution, civil penalties, intimidation or harassment
 - releasing wrongfully or arbitrarily imprisoned journalists, human rights defenders and activists, including those who have been imprisoned for the work related to the COVID-19 pandemic
 - refraining from using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext for unlawfully restricting the public's access to information and media freedom
 - lifting all internet shutdowns and restrictions on access to information online, refraining from blocking or restricting internet access, and taking active measures to enhance access to the internet, including by providing free access, especially to vulnerable or marginalized groups
 - robustly implementing freedom of information laws to ensure that all individuals, especially journalists, have access to information⁶
- Ensuring that education and training, especially at schools, including via online platforms, addresses COVID-19 related hate speech, disinformation and misinformation by encouraging critical thinking, social and emotional skills and responsible engagement, through global citizenship education⁷ and human rights education
 - Ensure that the rights of those targeted by COVID-19-related hate speech are upheld, including by:
 - ensuring that allegations of hate speech that may constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence are independently investigated and the perpetrators are held accountable, in accordance with international human rights law

TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECH COMPANIES

- Ensure their policies concerning hate speech, including COVID-19-related hate speech, on their platforms:
 - are clear, precise and set out in an accessible, transparent and comprehensible manner
 - are developed and applied in line with the standards of international human rights law
 - involve an evaluation of the social and political **context**, the **status** and **intent** of the speaker, the **content** and **extent**

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25729&LangID=E>

⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25729&LangID=E>

⁷ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced>

of dissemination, as well as the *likelihood* of harm on users and the public⁸

- involve communities most affected by content identified as hate speech in the development of effective tools to address harms caused on the platforms
 - focus on curation to ensure that users can easily access journalism as verified information shared in the public interest
 - provide more financial support to fact-checking networks, independent journalism, and media and information literacy campaigns
 - avoid overreliance on automation, especially for content moderation where there is a need to expand the human review process⁹
- Monitor the dissemination of COVID-19 related hate speech on their platforms, evaluate how their approaches in response impact upon the human rights of their users, and make such information publicly available
 - Take down COVID-19 related hate speech when it amounts to incitement to hostility, discrimination or violence, in accordance with international human rights law
 - Ensure, in relation to any adverse action against COVID-related hate speech that due process guarantees are met, including by notifying users when such action is taken and providing opportunities for appeal
 - Collaborate with relevant stakeholders – particularly, the United Nations, including the World Health Organization, health and education ministries and authorities, independent fact-checkers, civil society organizations, and affected groups – to develop and promote approaches and campaigns to address and counter COVID-19 related hate speech, misinformation and disinformation on their platforms (such as education, reporting and training)

TO MEDIA

- Proactively and professionally report on COVID-19 related hate speech, misinformation, disinformation and discrimination, whether by state or non-state actors
- Support effective systems of self-regulation (such as national press complaints bodies and ombudsmen, or public editors at individual news outlets) to ensure the right of correction or reply is applied to address discriminatory reporting in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak
- Adhere to the highest ethical and professional standards when reporting on COVID-19, including by reporting about COVID-19 pandemic accurately and without bias, using fact-checking, avoiding stereotyping, and without unnecessarily referring to such factors as race, ethnicity, nationality or religion

⁸ A/HRC/22/17/Add.4; <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomOpinion/Articles19-20/Pages/Index.aspx>

⁹ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_dissecting_responses_covid19_disinformation.pdf

TO CIVIL SOCIETY AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- Influential figures in society – including religious leaders, faith actors, trade union leaders, the leaders of non-governmental organizations, youth leaders, public figures, and influencers – should actively speak out against COVID-19-related hate speech, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories, express solidarity with those targeted by such expressions, and amplify messages that serve to reduce discrimination and stigma
- In line with international human rights standards, civil society organization should collaborate with relevant stakeholders – including governments, United Nations, regional organizations, social media and tech companies, journalists, and academic institutions and experts – on initiatives to
 - monitor and report on the nature, scale and impacts of COVID-19-related hate speech, as well as legislative and policy measures intended to address such expressions
 - develop responses involving the most affected communities (e.g. social media campaigns)

III. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing concerns related to the spread and use of hate speech globally. It has also created new vulnerable groups targeted by hate speech. Ensuring that hate speech is effectively addressed and countered at both national and

global level will help improve our responses to the pandemic in the short term. It will also give us an opportunity to “build back better” by addressing the root causes of this phenomenon in our societies through promoting inclusion, solidarity and our common humanity.