Protesting the Right to Health in the COVID-19 Response in Zimbabwe

On Friday 27 March the President of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, declared a national disaster and called for a three-week national lockdown effective Monday, 30 March.

As Zimbabwe joins the rest of the world in efforts to prevent and manage the spread of COVID-19, Amnesty International Zimbabwe urges the authorities to implement all available measures to protect the right to health and adopt a human rights consistent approach to handling the pandemic.

The Right to Health

Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), guarantees “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest standard of physical and mental health”, including steps to be taken necessary for the “prevention, treatment and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational and other diseases”. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) – the UN body tasked with monitoring implementation of the ICESR – has spelled out in its General Comment 14 States’ duties flowing from this right. The Committee states that measures to prevent, treat and control epidemic and endemic diseases are core obligations of the right to health. Against this background, Amnesty International Zimbabwe urges the authorities to apply a human rights approach as they manage the following areas:

1. Accessibility of Treatment Centres for Infected Individuals

   As of 6 April 2020, there were nine people who tested positive for Covid-19 and one reported death. Health facilities are generally poor or non-existent and particularly so in remote rural areas. This makes it hard for marginalised groups to access health care. Amnesty International Zimbabwe calls on the government to use available resources to manage the COVID-19 outbreak so that affected individuals receive the care they need. We also urge the government to ensure that containment and prevention measures are scaled up. This includes requests for International Cooperation.

2. Accessibility of Treatment for Patients with Chronic Medical Conditions and Pregnant Women

   As the State implements the lockdown, Amnesty International Zimbabwe is concerned about the impact on specific groups of people such as those listed below and appeal to the government to ensure their right to health during the lockdown:

   - Patients with chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, or those who require dialysis treatment or have heart conditions who require specific treatment, and those with compromised immune systems who need specific drugs at set times.
   - Pregnant women who require urgent medical attention.

3. Protection of Health Workers and Care Givers
Medical personnel in Zimbabwe have downed tools several times in the last two years as they protested poor working conditions, inadequate remuneration and unavailability of essential medicines and equipment. At the onset of the lockdown, junior doctors and nurses in Zimbabwe threatened to withdraw their services due to insufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) for health professionals thereby increasing their risk to exposure to COVID-19. While we acknowledge the ongoing effort by both the government and well-wishers to source PPE for health workers and caregivers, Amnesty International Zimbabwe implores the government to take all available measures to ensure that all care givers – doctors, nurses, village health care givers and volunteers have access to PPE.

4. PREVENTION OF NEW INFECTIONS

We call upon the government to pay special attention to the prevention of new infections by ensuring all suspected cases are tested. We recognise the dire financial straits the government is in at this time, but we call on the government to use its leverage, as envisaged in the ICESCR to seek regional and International cooperation to ensure that there is relief for those who need it. The authorities in Zimbabwe must ensure testing equipment is made available and distributed equitably throughout the country. The government should set up testing centres in all provinces and effectively disseminate information about locations of testing centres to enable people, including those in marginalised communities, to access these centres.

We recognise the announcement by the government in calling for a lockdown as a measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 virus. However, we call upon government to promote social distancing by increased information dissemination on its importance for prevention of infection. There is evidence of some sections of the population who have not heeded calls to practice social distancing. We call upon the State to redouble efforts to enforce and promote social distancing in communities; as failure to comply by a few, exposes many to the risk of contracting the virus. Overall, more work still needs to be done to ensure prevention of new infections remains a priority in the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.