

URGENT ACTION

PRISONERS ACROSS PAKISTAN AT RISK OF COVID-19

An inmate at Camp Jail, with a prison population of 3,500 people, in the provincial capital Lahore tested positive for coronavirus before being transferred to a medical facility. However, even as provincial high courts issued directives to release vulnerable, under-trial and elderly prisoners, the Supreme Court of Pakistan suspended all bail orders. Prisons in Pakistan face massive overcrowding (jails in Pakistan have a capacity of 57,742 but currently house 77,275 inmates), with limited hygiene supplies and insufficient access to healthcare. Enforcing inmates to practice social distancing would be impossible, given the overcrowding, drastically increasing the potential for the virus to spread. Pakistani authorities must protect the health of all prisoners and should urgently consider measures to reduce the prison population. Should the government fail to act now, Pakistani prisons and detention centers could become hotspots for the transmission of coronavirus.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

*Honourable Mr Arif Alvi
President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan
President's Secretariat
Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: drarifalvi@gmail.com*

Dear President Arif Alvi,

I am writing out of extreme concern for prisoners in Pakistan who must be protected from the COVID-19 outbreak. I am particularly alarmed that a prisoner at the Lahore Camp Jail, with a prison population of 3,500 people, tested positive for the virus on 24 March and all bail orders now stand suspended.

Jails in Punjab are worryingly overcrowded, meaning social distancing is not an option for prisoners. Unsanitary conditions mean that preventative steps such as washing hands are harder to follow.

The right to health is guaranteed under several human rights treaties. Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) includes the "prevention, treatment and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational and other diseases" as a part of the right to health. In the context of a spreading epidemic, this includes the obligation on states to ensure that preventive care, goods, services and information are available and accessible to all persons.

I ask you to seriously consider reducing the prison population. Should the government fail to act now, Pakistani prisons and detention centers could quickly become hotspots for the transmission of coronavirus.

Specifically, I urge you to:

- **Release immediately and unconditionally all those detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights**
- **Consider if the outbreak qualifies certain prisoners for parole or early release, especially older detainees who no longer pose a threat to public. There should also be a presumption of release for people charged with a criminal offence who are awaiting trial.**
- **Ensure that all prisoners enjoy the same standards of health care that are available in the community, including when it comes to testing, prevention and treatment of COVID-19.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Pakistan's prisons suffer from severe overcrowding. Currently, prisons are at 130 percent occupation rate, with poor ventilation, insufficient beds and limited access to medicines, hygiene and sanitary products. While everyone remains at risk of contracting COVID-19, such detention conditions greatly increase the potential spread of the virus.

Families of prisoners have expressed concern about their loved ones being at heightened risk of COVID-19. In Punjab, prison visits have been banned for at least the next two weeks.

The provincial governments of Sindh and Punjab, in Pakistan, had announced measures such as [early release](#) and [testing](#) in prisons.

However, on Monday 30 March, the Supreme Court of Pakistan suspended [suspended all bail orders](#) stating that a suo motu notice (a decision made by a judge at their own discretion, without the prompting of another party) could only be issued by the Supreme Court.

Under the right to health in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), health care goods, facilities and services should be available in sufficient quantity within the state; accessible to everyone without discrimination; respectful of medical ethics and culturally appropriate; and scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality. To be considered "accessible", these goods and services must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable or marginalized sections of the population; within safe physical reach for all sections of the population; and affordable for all. The right also includes the accessibility of health-related information.

According to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, under conditions of detention, the Pakistani authorities should ensure that all prisoners have prompt access to medical attention and health care. The provision of health care for prisoners is a state responsibility. Prisoners should enjoy the same standards of health care that are available in the community, including when it comes to testing, prevention and treatment of COVID-19.

Where a prison service has its own hospital facilities, they must be adequately staffed and equipped to provide prisoners referred to them with appropriate treatment and care. Prisoners who require specialized treatment, not available at the prison facilities, should be transferred to specialized institutions or to civil hospitals.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 6 May 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Them/they

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/2032/2020/en/>