

STATEMENT AHEAD OF THE 32ND ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS TREATY BODIES

On the occasion of the upcoming Annual Meeting of Chairpersons of the Human Rights Treaty Bodies, on 1 June 2020, our organizations reiterate our support and commitment to strengthening the system. As our organizations greatly value the work of the treaty bodies, we aim to ensure that the 2020 review outcome (mandated by [General Assembly resolution 68/268](#)) supports a treaty body system that strengthens States' capacity to give effect to their treaty obligations, and makes the system more accessible to rights-holders. We also take this opportunity to address the Chairpersons on challenges affecting the treaty bodies arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October 2019, Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims and the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights published a [Position paper on strengthening the human rights treaty bodies in 2020 and beyond](#).¹ The paper includes recommendations in relation to the framework of the 2020 review as well as to the treaty bodies themselves regarding:

- (i) procedural and substantive cross-committee coordination;
- (ii) improving accessibility, visibility and predictability both in relation to state party reviews and individual communications;
- (iii) the development of predictable calendars.

We urge you to consider the recommendations in this paper ahead of your discussions.

We cannot address the 2020 review while ignoring the COVID-19 pandemic. Our organizations work to monitor government responses to the crisis, and we express solidarity with all affected by the global health crisis and the economic consequences. Every institution—the United Nations, states, and civil society organizations—has been forced to respond to the pandemic. So far, six treaty bodies have cut their sessions short or postponed scheduled sessions until at least June 2020.

The work of the treaty bodies is more important than ever at a time when governments are enacting unprecedented restrictions related to the global health emergency. We welcome the recent statement by the Chairpersons stressing the need for states to respect human rights even as they enact emergency measures as well as the statements issued by individual treaty bodies.² We encourage the treaty bodies to continue to monitor human rights violations in the context of the pandemic response and to continue issuing guidance to all stakeholders.

¹ *Position paper on strengthening the human rights treaty bodies in 2020 and beyond*, 23 October 2019, Index number: IOR 40/1218/2019, available in English, French and Spanish at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/1218/2019/en/>

² UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies call for human rights approach in fighting COVID-19, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25742&LangID=E>. The Committee on the Rights of the Child warns of the grave physical, emotional and psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and calls on States to protect the rights of children, 8 April 2020, available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_E.pdf, the Committee adopts statement on the Covid-19 Pandemic and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 6 April 2020, available at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CESCR/STM_COVID19.docx, Advice of the Subcommittee to States parties and national preventive mechanisms relating to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (2020), available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/OPCAT/Pages/AdvicesToNPMS.aspx>

We encourage OHCHR and the treaty bodies to propose creative solutions to avoid further significant interruptions to their work, by, for example holding future sessions on virtual platforms. However, any new procedures must be transparent and ensure robust access for civil society. Furthermore, we warn against the entrenchment of temporary arrangements; procedures that are appropriate during a pandemic should not become permanent responses to long-standing challenges.

We urge the treaty bodies to build on existing best practises, and agree to time-bound modalities that enable robust civil society engagement with remote meetings, guaranteeing both privacy and security for potentially at-risk participants. For example, we recommend that all treaty bodies convene NGO meetings, through video and audio conferencing services, prior to any remote country review pursuant to the modalities of the NGO meetings held by the Committee against Torture.³ In addition, accessibility for persons with disabilities must be guaranteed for all sessions of the treaty bodies, not only for the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We also encourage the treaty bodies with individual communications and urgent action procedures to continue to exercise these functions throughout the pandemic.

The global health crisis and related responsive measures also have exacerbated our concerns relating to the treaty body 2020 review. We have urged States to avoid the mistakes that dogged the previous intergovernmental process culminating in General Assembly resolution 68/268. Several major stakeholders—particularly rights-holders and their representatives, including NGOs, and the treaty body experts themselves—could not observe or participate in most of the discussions.

The 2020 review should be open, transparent, and participatory. We recognize the challenges in the current context. But as States move to start the 2020 review, non-State stakeholders, and in particular NGOs, will have difficulties in accessing forums where the review discussions will take place, many of which are likely to be online. Consequently, we urge the treaty bodies to call for guarantees that the 2020 review will enable the participation of all stakeholders, including States, treaty body members, OHCHR, and NGO representatives through the use of accessible technologies and open sharing of information. Properly managed online meetings and consultations enable us to open these forums to greater participation, if we are deliberate and committed. Let us turn the pandemic's challenges into a moment for greater civil society inclusion into this crucial treaty body 2020 process.

We look forward to an opportunity to discuss these important issues with you in more detail.

Amnesty International
International Commission of Jurists
International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims
Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights
Open Society Justice Initiative

³ See also *Submission to the 30th meeting of Chairs of the human rights treaty bodies* (which focusses on existing good practices), 25 May 2018, Index number: IOR 40/8473/2018, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/8473/2018/en/>