

Check against delivery

Remote 69th session of the
Committee against Torture



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Mr. Chairperson,
Distinguished members of the Committee,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, I would like to welcome you to the sixty-ninth session of the Committee against Torture, the first-ever remote and unusual session of the Committee against Torture.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the work of all ten human rights treaty bodies. More importantly, it has had an impact on human rights and, in particular, on persons deprived of their liberty. As your Committee and other UN Anti-Torture mechanisms pointed out in their joint statement on the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture on 26 June, the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the risk of ill-treatment and torture worldwide and people deprived of liberty are now facing a new threat. As of mid-June 2020, more than 78,000 prisoners had contracted COVID-19 in 79 countries, and at least 1,100 had died of this new virus in prisons in 35 countries. Unfortunately, these numbers continue to grow.

At the webinar “Combating torture and ill-treatment in the Covid-19 context: Testimonies from the ground” -- organized on 26 June 2020 by OHCHR and the Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT) – your Chair together with representatives of other UN Anti-Torture mechanisms and civil society organizations gave concrete examples of how situation is evolving on the ground and how crucial the work of international and national mechanisms to prevent and the fight against torture is in these difficult circumstances.

As you all know, the Covid-19 crisis has not only brought about substantive human rights challenges. It has also affected the implementation of your mandated activities. Due to the health risks and travel restrictions, all in-person meetings of treaty bodies have been suspended through August. Despite recent positive developments in Europe and some other parts of the world, the pandemic is likely to persist and there is a possibility of a second wave of COVID-19 during the second half of the year. We therefore need to be prepared for all possible scenarios, including further postponements of in-person meetings.

As this is a shared challenge for all treaty bodies, cooperation between treaty bodies is crucial to share experiences and approaches. It is therefore important that your Committee and other treaty bodies engage with the informal Treaty Bodies Working Group on the Covid 19, which held its first on-line meeting on 3 July 2020. Implications of Covid-19 were also discussed at length at the Chairs' informal online meeting from 2 to 5 June. In her opening remarks, the High Commissioner acknowledged the extraordinary efforts made by the treaty bodies during the COVID-19 crisis to implement their mandates to the maximum extent possible despite significant challenges. The Chairs stressed that, while innovative approaches and the partial shift to on-line work have enabled some important work to go forward, the necessary tools must be put in place, including a secure online platform with simultaneous interpretation and the provision of accessibility for persons with disabilities. In this regard, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our colleagues at Conference Services, who made it possible for you to benefit from simultaneous interpretation at today's session, using a newly-launched online platform.

We all look forward to resuming in-person meetings that are an essential component of treaty bodies' work. In the absence of in-person meetings, we need to explore means to ensure close contacts between treaty bodies and their partners. These are crucial in these particularly challenging times. In this regard, it is important that the Convention against Torture Initiative (CTI) and the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) will today make presentations on the relevance of CAT work in the context of Covid-19. Over the past years, your Committee has also been innovative in pursuing some elements of its mandate remotely, for example, by preparing decisions on certain types of individual complaints remotely via your working group on communications and having teleconferences with NGOs and other stakeholders. We stand ready to support you such creativity and your efforts to adapt your methods of work to the current circumstances to advance the implementation of your mandate.

In addition to Covid-19, we are facing another major challenge: the current liquidity crisis of the United Nations. The persistent late and underpayment of assessed contributions has reached the stage where the implementation of various activities is being hampered by the lack of resources.

Distinguished experts,

The current challenging period coincides with the 2020 review of the treaty body system, which was launched on 2 June by the co-facilitators, the Permanent Representatives of Morocco and Switzerland to the United Nations in New York, appointed by the President of the General Assembly. At the launch, the High Commissioner highlighted the invaluable role played by treaty bodies and the fact that treaty body review can draw on the many proposals already put forward to strengthen the system, including those contained in the Chairs' vision agreed at their meeting in 2019. She also stressed that treaty bodies need sufficient and regular budget resources and adequate staffing, based on their real workload and all mandated activities.

The Chairs had a chance to unpack the proposal for predictable review cycles and other elements of their vision in more detail at an online technical briefing for Member States on the 2020 Review organized by OHCHR and co-facilitators on 4 June. At the briefing, the Chairs and OHCHR also highlighted resource and other challenges related to the implementation of resolution 68/268.

As indicated in their letter of 11 June 2020, the co-facilitators will seek written contributions from Member States and hold informal consultations in July in New York and Geneva. They will also hold dialogues with OHCHR, treaty bodies, civil society, National Human Rights Institutions and other stakeholders to seek their contributions. This will be an opportunity for treaty bodies to reiterate their concerns, including on the issue of adequate financial resources. The Chairs of Treaty Bodies will hold an on-line meeting later this month to finalize their input. The co-facilitators are planning to draft their report and outline recommendations to the current President of the General Assembly during the month of August.

Distinguished members,

Before concluding, I would like to congratulate and extend a warm welcome to the three new members of the Committee for their first, though unusual, session: Mr. Huawei LIU (China), Mr. Erdogan ISCAN (Turkey), and Ms. Ilvija PUCE (Latvia). I look forward to meeting you all in person in Geneva in the future.

I wish you a very successful session.