



Africa: We must act now to avoid a catastrophe, say rights chiefs

BANJUL (20 May 2020) – Human rights chiefs from the United Nations and the African Commission today warned that tens of millions may become destitute in Africa as a result of COVID-19 and its economic impact with catastrophic human rights consequences.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Solomon Dersso, Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), called for urgent measures to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

As of 19 May, the disease had reached all 54 African States, infecting nearly 88,172 people. South Africa had the highest number of cases, with nearly 16,433 affected. The death toll on the continent stood at 2,834.

"We cannot afford to stand idly by and hope this most viral and deadly of diseases bypasses Africa, which is home to many of the world's poorest countries who are simply not in position to handle such a pandemic," Bachelet and Dersso said.

"The lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions Africans are at stake not just due to COVID-19, but mostly due to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 response measures adopted both continentally and globally."

Poverty, lack of social protection, limited access to water and poor sanitation infrastructure, a pre-existing disease burden, conflict situations and overstretched and poorly equipped health systems create heightened risk of the spread of the pandemic and its potentially dire consequences on the health and lives of people.

Bachelet and Dersso urged equitable access for COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines. They also called upon creditors of African countries to freeze, restructure or relieve African countries' debt in this challenging time.

"This health crisis, along with the debt burden of the continent and its already fragile economies, threaten to further drain reserves, cripple nascent job creation schemes and annihilate gains made in social development and efforts to industrialize," they said. "This could throw millions more people into want and poverty, with catastrophic consequences to the human rights of the most vulnerable, including the poor, women and children."

In many countries, the cost of water and basic commodities have spiked, with many people facing hunger due to disruption of access to food items and cooking fuel. Compounding people's distress, recession in the region now looms large for the first time in over 25 years.

"It is a matter of human rights necessity that there must be international solidarity with the people of Africa and African Governments, and priority given to investing more in health, water and sanitation, social protection, employment and sustainable infrastructures to ensure that no one is left behind," they said.

Bachelet and Dersso said that while measures to restrict movement and increase social distancing were essential in the fight against the virus, they were having a dramatic impact on populations especially those who rely on informal daily work for their survival.

They also underlined the importance of preserving freedom of association, of opinion and expression and access to information during this time. In particular, they called on Governments and businesses on the continent to consider making internet tariffs more affordable so that information can reach a broader audience.

Bachelet and Dersso said the continent had learned from its past experiences in dealing with diseases such as Ebola and malaria, and acted swiftly to counter the spread of the virus. They reminded African governments that it is a legal imperative and a pre-requisite for success in the effort to defeat the pandemic that they protect the most vulnerable and stamp out violations emerging in the context of COVID-19, including discrimination in all its forms, violence against women, food insecurity, excessive use of force and extrajudicial killings.

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