Ongoing Dimensions of Asia’s Fight Against Covid-19

Rajiv Narayan
Covid-19 has unleashed a wave of human-rights violations that hit especially hard at society’s most vulnerable members. Governments across the Asia-Pacific need to take action.

Donald K. Emmerson
The world needs to stop the blame game and seize the opportunity to fashion a common, co-operative approach to such global challenges as Covid-19.

Dominique Virgil & Roberto Lie
The coronavirus outbreak has posed an enormous challenge to ASEAN’s credibility and coherence and exposed cracks in the bloc’s commitment to marginalized communities.
By Rajiv Narayan

Attention on the effects of the global coronavirus outbreak have centered on the medical and economic consequences, but Covid-19 has also unleashed a wave of human-rights violations that hit especially hard at the most marginalized members of society. The Asia-Pacific region is rife with such problems, and governments need to take rights-centered and human-centric action, writes Rajiv Narayan.

THE GLOBAL HEALTH CRISIS caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatic consequences for human rights. The pandemic’s impact has already resulted in a massive humanitarian and human rights crisis that will have long-term effects that span economic, social, cultural, civil and political realms. I focus in this article on the human rights impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region.

The pandemic has its origins in the Asia-Pacific region, having reportedly originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan. It had an ominous beginning, from a human rights perspective, as the Chinese government’s initial response was to cover up news of the outbreak by censoring reporting, detaining whistleblowers and threatening activists. Chinese doctor Li Wenliang, who alerted his colleagues about the coronavirus, was censored and then reportedly detained for spreading false rumors. He sadly succumbed to the infection and died, becoming a martyr to the Chinese public in the process. The authorities later apologized to the family for their actions.

China’s delayed announcement of the pandemic has been blamed by several countries for not alerting them early enough, which might have curtailed the spread of the disease and reduced the millions of infections and hundreds of thousands of deaths globally. Nearly half the world has now suffered through lockdowns. Unfortunately, around the world including in the Asia-Pacific region, states reacted to the outbreak in an unco-ordinated way. In their initial responses, several governments were slow to recognize the seriousness of the situation, which resulted in frontline medical personnel lacking proper protection and delays that cost thousands of lives. Like in China, governments in many countries in this region imposed censorship, threatened journalists and in some cases seem to have used the crisis to assert controls that restrict human rights.

A few countries in the region, such as South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand and Australia, have taken appropriate steps by implementing preventive measures in a non-discriminatory, universal manner and taking the threat of the pandemic seriously, informing citizens early and involving them in the lockdowns. But they constitute a minority.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres expressed his view by highlighting that “against the background of rising ethno-nationalism, populism, authoritarianism and the pushback against human rights in some countries, the crisis can provide a pretext to adopt repressive measures for purposes unrelated to the pandemic.”1 His predecessor, former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, advised that “the constraints many countries have imposed on movement and assembly are understandable and necessary under the current circumstances, but legislators and judicialities must bear in mind that, if not carefully instituted, these restrictions risk accentuating the marginalization of vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants and racial minorities. Respect for human rights, solidarity and justice need to be at the heart of our response to Covid-19.”2

This article highlights the impact of the Covid-19 crisis that is currently being treated in many countries as a threat to health and life, but which has enormous and fundamental consequences on the right to equality, food, livelihood, housing, freedom of expression, association, civic space, and essential human security (freedom from fear and hunger) and increases the potential for conflict underlining the concept that human rights are universal, interdependent, inalienable, interrelated and indivisible.

Many countries in the Asia-Pacific region initially declared lockdowns and enforced social distancing through states of emergency that give extraordinary powers to the authorities. The enforcement of the lockdowns has been perceived as a law-and-order issue, and the implementation has been left to police and security forces, who have at times employed heavy-handed methods including beatings, mass arrests and even shootings. These tactics have been imposed largely on poor persons working mostly in the informal sector, who have been left without livelihoods and facing imminent starvation. In desperation and in pursuit of survival, millions have embarked on perilous journeys from the cities that employed them to their villages and hamlets. For instance, in India, the lockdown imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the evening of March 24 took effect four hours after his announcement. This sudden lockdown left reportedly 120 million persons unemployed, mostly in the informal sector. Consequently, tens of millions of people reportedly embarked on return migrations, often on foot, from megacities like New Delhi and Mumbai to villages located hundreds of kilometers away with very little money, food and water. In some cases, their journeys ended in death.

In the Philippines, after the main island of Luzon went into lockdown on March 16, the police employed harsh measures, reportedly arresting hundreds of people in Manila and other parts of the country. Local officials in Santa Cruz town, in Laguna province just south of Manila, reportedly admitted locking up five youths inside a dog cage on March 20. In Bulacan province just north of Manila, police reportedly killed a man after he allegedly avoided a checkpoint.

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CLIMATE OF FEAR
The pandemic also degrades the rights-based human security paradigm, which is based on freedom from hunger and fear. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) says that the pandemic has put several regions on the brink of severe famine and increased the risk of food insecurity. Even before the pandemic, some 135 million were experiencing crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity globally.

The climate of fear has increased with the incredible pace of infection and global news moving at lightning speed, often unfortunately including “fake news.” To control such news, governments have introduced measures and laws punishing vaguely defined crimes within the policies introduced to combat Covid-19. These measures have been used against the independent media, and have involved the arrest and intimidation of journalists, political opponents, healthcare workers, citizen journalists and whistleblowers. These persons, often perceived to be critics of governments, have been arrested and detained for allegedly spreading fake news.

in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. Governments have imposed aggressive cyber-policing and increased online surveillance, resulting in the removal of critical information online. There have also been reports of journalists disappearing after publishing coverage critical of the Covid-19 response, and several news outlets have been closed by authorities over their reporting.

The disruptions to economic activity in migrant hosting countries have resulted in the loss of livelihoods, often at very short notice, for huge numbers of migrant workers, who are now returning to their countries of origin. However, many have been stranded as international borders have been sealed or travel restrictions imposed in most countries to check the spread of the pandemic. Tens of thousands of migrant workers from Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos, who lost their jobs or incomes and sought to return home from Thailand, have been stranded due to border closures and testing requirements. The border closure by Nepal’s government and its continued refusal to re-admit Nepali citizens into their

In Focus: Narayan

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Photo: EPA/FRANCIS R. MALASIG

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country resulted in over 20,000 Nepali citizens being trapped in India. Thousands of migrant workers from several Asia-Pacific countries were stranded in Middle Eastern states. Migrant workers also face stigmatization because they present a health risk to home countries with inadequate medical capacity to screen, contact and trace returnees. For Afghanistan, the return of some 300,000 migrant workers from Iran, a Covid-19 hotspot, and Pakistan has stoked fears that the pandemic will spread beyond the means of a very fragile medical system, combined with food scarcity and insecurity made worse by declining international assistance. The context of conflict-scarred Afghanistan, where even before the pandemic, 14 million people had insufficient access to food, is grim as shortages lead to a rise in the price of basic food items and lockdowns cripple informal employment and remittances from abroad. The situation is made worse by continued conflict, which was highlighted by the brutal attack in May, during the holy month of Ramadan, by Afghan militants on a maternity ward in a hospital in Kabul’s western suburb of Dasht-e-Barchi.

**BORDER CRISIS**

Closures of international borders have led to the rise of makeshift camps for returning migrant workers, internally displaced persons and asylum-seekers, many of whom are targets of xenophobic attacks. The *New York Times* reported that several dozen Afghan migrants were drowned by Iranian border guards. The overcrowded conditions, with limited access to sanitation facilities and healthcare, make these camps potential hotspots for the Covid-19 pandemic. In January-February 2020, the Australian government reportedly sent hundreds of its returnees to Canada, many of whom were of Chinese origin, to quarantine in an immigration detention center on Christmas Island, where the conditions were previously described as “inhumane” by the Australian Medical Association in a BBC report. Governments in the region have been increasingly reluctant to allow refugees to disembark because of fears of the pandemic. Hundreds of mainy Rohingya refugees are currently believed to be stranded at sea. On April 15, the Bangladesh Coast Guard rescued 400 Rohingya refugees after their boat was prevented from disembarking in Malaysia due to Covid-19 restrictions. Dozens died, according to the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières. Many of the survivors were severely malnourished and dehydrated.

The closure of borders in January, following concerns of the pandemic spreading from China, appears to have significantly hampered North Korea from importing resources from outside, according to South Korea’s Ministry of Unification. The impact of continued international sanctions on North Korea, lower crop production in 2019 and the closing of the borders could have a deteriorating effect on human rights including economic rights such as adequate access to food and healthcare.

**PRIVACY UNDER ASSAULT**

Concerns have been raised by several human rights organizations about increased human rights violations to personal privacy caused by disproportionate surveillance through mobile phone location tracking applications used by governments to carry out contact tracing. As restrictions were relaxed, Chinese authorities required citizens to use contact tracing software on their smartphones that dictate whether they should be quarantined or allowed into public spaces. A *New York Times* analysis of the software’s code concluded that the software not only decided, in real time, whether a person posed a contagion risk, it also appeared to share information with the police, establishing a platform for new forms of automated social control that could persist long after the pandemic subsides. Some residents in Hong Kong were made to wear a wrist-band linked to a smartphone app to alert the authorities if the person broke quarantine. In some parts of India, passengers were stamped with indelible ink on their hands, showing the date until when the person should remain in quarantine. Across South Korea, concerns have risen about surveillance led by the issuing of emergency alerts by mobile phone to those living or working in districts where new cases have been confirmed and which pinpoint nearby locations visited by patients before they were diagnosed with Covid-19. While this surveillance has been defended as part of the transparent approach by authorities to control the spread of Covid-19, the consequences of spreading private information in a country with one of the highest ownership levels of smartphones have been described by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea as constituting human rights violations when the confirmed patients became subject to secondary damages, such as being criticized, ridiculed and abhorred online.

**IMPACT ON THE MARGINALIZED**

Globally, the pandemic’s impact is being felt more on the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of society, revealing very clearly the great inequalities that exist — and the Asia-Pacific region is no exception. With very weak coping mechanisms, millions face a bleak future including making difficult existential choices between fighting the Covid-19 virus or fighting life-threatening hunger. The International Labor Organisation estimates there has been a 6.7 percent loss in working hours globally in the second quarter of 2020, equivalent to 195 million full-time workers — 125 million of whom are in the Asia-Pacific region. Even under its “optimistic” scenario, the World Bank projects at least 11 million people across the region will fall into poverty in 2020. With the pandemic leading to reductions in production and reduced global demand, export-oriented industries, tourism, and service industries have closed down, shedding millions of jobs.

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of marginalized communities such as religious and ethnic minorities as they face increased discrimination, xenophobia, physical attacks and stigmatization. These attacks have taken place on Asians, including the Chinese, in Europe and the Americas, in Vietnam and in China against foreign nationals including Africans in Guangzhou. India has seen many cases of people from its northeast regions being called “coronavirus” because of their racial similarities to the people of China. Furthermore, the stigmatization has taken religious colors in India, with hate speech on social and local media falsely accusing Muslims of propagating Covid-19 after a religious gathering organized prior to the lockdown in Delhi by the Islamic organization Tabligh Jamaat was linked to a spike in cases. Reports suggest subsequent attacks on Muslims, boycotts of their businesses and bans on Muslims from some neighborhoods have taken place. In Sri Lanka, Muslims were similarly attacked on social and traditional media for allegedly spreading Covid-19, which government authorities did not challenge; instead, the authorities were reportedly accused of assisting biased reporting by pro-government TV. On April 11, the Sri Lankan government made cremation — in contravention of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for all of Islamic burial practices — compulsory for 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Misinformation leading to fear has resulted in healthcare workers being reportedly subjected to violence and abuse in several countries including China, the Philippines, Pakistan, Australia and India. According to the Economist, the response has resulted in extreme measures being adopted to protect healthcare workers. For instance, in China some hospitals now teach medical workers self-defense and hospital administrators in Australia have started advising staff not to wear their scrubs outside hospitals. The Indian government updated laws in April to deny bail to those accused of violence against healthcare staff.

The pandemic also has increased the vulnerability of people in prisons, administrative detention centers and rehabilitation centers. The spread of the virus, it is feared, can be very fast due to overcrowding in confined spaces and, in many cases, restricted access to adequate hygiene and healthcare. The fear of a spike in Covid-19 cases in their overcrowded detention facilities has led to countries like India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Myanmar releasing thousands of prisoners.

Despite the pandemic, death sentences continue to be handed out and executions carried out in the region. Because issues relating to the death penalty are often considered a secret, there are fears of capital punishment being used in secret in countries including China, Vietnam and North Korea. In Singapore, a death sentence was passed remotely via the Zoom communication application by its Supreme Court for the first time in May. The court ruled that Punithan Genasan, a 37-year-old Malaysian, would face the death penalty on drug-related charges.

In many regions, including in the Asia-Pacific region, war or prolonged unrest, especially when complicated by foreign sanctions, have left national health systems extremely ill-prepared for Covid-19. The pandemic has made the situation increasingly fragile for communities in conflict zones like Afghanistan, the autonomous region of Bangsamoro in the Southern Philippines, Eastern and Southern Mindanao, Rakhine state in Myanmar (which has led to the displacement of 157,000 persons), Southern Thailand and Indian Kashmir. Due to a lack of credible, verified reporting, information on the pandemic in these conflict zones is difficult to ascertain.

In conclusion, the approaches by Asia-Pacific governments to control the Covid-19 pandemic has huge human rights implications with worrying impacts on the right to health and life, food and movement. Increased, widespread unemployment has deepened poverty. There has been disproportionate violence by law-enforcement authorities, especially on the poor, and threats to freedoms of expression and association, increased surveillance and enhanced vulnerabilities for women as they face the greater brunt of unemployment and increased gender-based violence during the confinement imposed by lockdowns. Authorities in the Asia-Pacific region need to adopt a more rights-centered, human-centric approach to resolve the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic sustainably, fairly and equally.

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