Statement from UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Michelle Bachelet: Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 “rampaging through places of detention”

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Story

Urgent action needed to prevent COVID-19 “rampaging through places of detention” – Bachelet

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has called on governments to take urgent action to protect the health and safety of people in detention and other closed facilities, as part of overall efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

The High Commissioner urged governments and relevant authorities to work quickly to reduce the number of people in detention, noting several countries have already undertaken some positive actions. Authorities should examine ways to release those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, among them older detainees and those who are sick, as well as low-risk offenders. They should also continue to provide for the specific health-care requirements of women prisoners, including those who are pregnant, as well as those of inmates with disabilities and of juvenile detainees.

SOUNDBITE (English): Michelle Bachelet UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: “The Covid-19 pandemic has begun to strike prisons, jails and immigration detention centres, as well as homes for the elderly, psychiatric hospitals and other closed centres.”
It risks rampaging through the extremely vulnerable populations housed in such institutions.

In many countries, detention facilities are overcrowded, in some cases dangerously so.

Physical distancing and self-isolation in such conditions are practically impossible.

So, I’m calling on governments to take urgent action to protect the health and safety of people in detention.

I know Governments are facing huge demands on resources in this crisis and are having to take many difficult decisions.

But I urge them not to forget those behind bars, or in places such as closed mental health facilities, nursing homes and orphanages.

Otherwise the consequences could be catastrophic – for those detained, for staff, for visitors, and of course for wider society.

Authorities should examine ways to release those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 – such as older and sick detainees. To drastically reduce prison populations -- so physical distancing becomes possible -- they should also consider releasing low-risk offenders. Some countries have started to do this.

Now more than ever, governments should free every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners and others detained simply for expressing critical or dissenting views.

COVID-19 poses a huge challenge to the whole of society, as governments take firm steps to enforce physical distancing.

It is vital such measures are upheld, but I am deeply concerned that some countries are threatening to impose prison sentences for those who fail to obey.

This, of course, is likely to exacerbate the grave situation in prisons and do little to halt the spread of this killer disease.

Imprisonment should be a measure of last resort, particularly during this crisis.”

The UN Human Rights Office and the World Health Organization are due this week to issue an interim guidance paper - COVID 19: Focus on persons deprived of their liberty - which will contain key messages and actions for other UN agencies, governments and relevant authorities, national human rights institutions, and civil society