



OHCHR's brief virtual intervention¹
CND Intersessional Meeting, Thematic Discussion: 1
19 October, 2020

Dear Mr. Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues,

I thank the Secretariat of CND for inviting our office to participate at this event.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, the United Nation Human Rights Office is addressing its impact on the right to health of vulnerable populations, such as people who use drugs.

In his recent policy brief on human rights and covid-19, the Secretary General Antonio Guterres recognises that “people who use drugs” is one of the vulnerable group; and call for their protection. It is critical that this particular population should continue to receive treatment and harm reduction services, where necessary.ⁱ

In the current pandemic context, people who use drugs face unique risks and needs, due to criminalisation, stigma, discrimination, underlying health issues, social marginalisation and higher economic and social vulnerabilities.

The COVID-19 has highlights how nations are struggling to keep prisons safe and to protect the right to health for persons detained across the globe.

Reportedly, as of 17 October, more than 243,000 (two hundreds forty-three thousands) prisoners in 111 countries have been infected with COVID-19 and at least 2300(two thousands three hundreds) have died in 38 countries.ⁱⁱ

Panellists and previous speakers have discussed the protection of people in prison setting in a length. In the following, I will focus on another closed setting i.e. drug rehab detention centres.

People in drug rehabilitation detention centres, live in a closed environment and in close proximity with one another. These conditions facilitate transmission of diseases. They also

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have a greater underlying risk of disease and worse health conditions than the general population due to stress, poor nutrition, poor health care or pre-existing health conditions.

In May this year, UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) WHO, UNAIDS and UNODC issued a joint policy statement on the impact of COVID-19 in prisons and closed settings. Among other issues, it was recommended that compulsory detention and rehabilitation centres, where people suspected of drug use are detained in the name of treatment or rehabilitation- should be closed.ⁱⁱⁱ

We know that thousands people are currently detained in these drug rehab detention centres around the world. There is no evidence that such centres are effective in the treatment of drug dependence or rehabilitation of people. It is critical that authorities implement voluntary, evidence-informed and rights-based health and social services in the community as an important measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 and to facilitate the recovery and reintegration of those in the detention centres back into their families and communities.

Responding our calls, several countries have taken measures, including for the release of an unprecedented number of people from prison, including those are imprisoned for minor drug related offences.

The current situation provide an opportunity for authorities to review their drug policies, criminal justice system and embark on a long term structural reform towards developing and implementing comprehensive, human rights-based and sustainable responses to the drug problem.

In line with our office's mandate, we remain available to provide support to States in the rapid deployment of the recommendations outlined above. In this regard, we would like to highlight the importance of the implementation of **the International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy**^{iv}, which was launched during the High Level Ministerial Segment of CND in March 2019.

ⁱ https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.jpp.org.pk/covid19-prisoners/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-05-2020-unodc-who-unaid-and-ohchr-joint-statement-on-covid-19-in-prisons-and-other-closed-settings>

^{iv} <https://www.humanrights-drugpolicy.org/>