

**In full solidarity with defenders: Protection International's recommendations for  
Governments in addressing the global COVID-19 pandemic**

**27 March 2020, Brussels**

COVID-19 is presenting humanity with one of its biggest challenges in living memory, but under this pandemic the threat to human rights, defenders and our right to defend human rights is one that we call attention to.

The impact of the COVID-19 virus has reached the four corners of the globe and has affected all parts of society. But some parts have been more affected than others, especially in settings where the right to defend human rights and defenders are most at risk. In such complex times, the role of civil society and human rights defenders remains essential and must be reinforced and protected.

Under such extraordinary circumstances, extraordinary measures must be taken. However, these measures must not be exploited to weaken nor affect the work and life of defenders and their communities. Governments' responses to the crisis cannot be used as an excuse to crack down on human rights defenders. Governments must ensure the implementation of additional measures in strict accordance with human rights standards, as stressed by the [UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), and, now more than ever, they must protect all those who are committed to the right to defend human rights.

[Declaring a state of emergency](#) should not translate to increased surveillance, intimidation, aggression or repression over civil society, communities and individuals who exercise their right to defend human rights.

Calls to release human rights defenders in detention, many of whom are held in [alarming conditions](#) unfit to face a health pandemic of this magnitude, need to be heard and acted upon. As stressed yesterday by [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet](#), "governments should release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners". Our colleague, Burundian human rights defender [Germain Rukuki](#), unlawfully sentenced to 32 years in prison and currently detained in Burundi, must be immediately and unconditionally released.



Governments must ensure the right to health for all and also take into consideration the accessibility to health services for rural and indigenous communities, particularly in countries where such groups already suffer from a lack of access to basic services.

From Protection International's offices across the globe, we are monitoring closely the evolution of the situation and are making the necessary shifts in strategy, reprioritisation, and adjustments in programming and outreach, which are needed to safeguard the health and safety of our partner communities and staff.

As always, Protection International stands in full solidarity with defenders across the globe facing increased risks and threats. Now more than ever, we will continue to advocate for the right to defend human rights alongside communities of defenders across Latin America, Africa, South East Asia and Europe.