

Human Rights Council – 44th session
Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner for Human Rights Annual Report
Followed by her Oral Update on COVID-19
30 June 2020

Australian Statement

Australia thanks the High Commissioner for her oral update, and for her ongoing leadership in bringing to light that COVID-19 is not only a health crisis, but also a human rights crisis.

The systemic disruption caused by the pandemic has challenged the capacity of governments to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights. Australia is particularly concerned about disproportionate and discriminatory impacts on people in vulnerable situations.

Women's and girls' rights have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. We urge States to adopt gender-responsive approaches in response to COVID-19.

Emergency measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 must be necessary, proportionate, non-discriminatory and reasonable. We condemn the abuse of emergency measures or the imposition of rule by decree to undermine human rights, subvert democratic or judicial processes, contribute to disinformation and target opponents, including through silencing journalists, health workers, human rights defenders, and others reporting on the pandemic or criticising official responses.

It is important that States ensure that people in detention are treated in accordance with international human rights law and afforded access to justice. Australia is concerned about reduced or removed consular access to detained foreign nationals due to COVID-19. This global pandemic is not an excuse to prevent governments from ascertaining the treatment and welfare of their citizens in detention. While recognising the unique challenges in containing the spread of COVID-19, we urge all States to uphold their consular obligations and provide appropriate access to forms of communication, such as telephones, video links and letters.

Australia is deeply concerned some states are taking advantage of COVID-19 to undermine or supplant established human rights. This may be the pandemic's most lasting and profound impact. We urge all states to protect human rights and ensure transparency and accountability to best protect their populations from the worst effects of COVID-19.