**Inputs for HRC res 44/2 on needs assessment for HR response to pandemic and other health emergencies**

**Iran**

1. Human rights challenges experienced by countries in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

**COVID-19 in Iran, sanctions and other human rights concerns**

**Economic crisis and the response to the pandemic:**

Since the COVID-19outbreakin February 2020, Iran remains the most affected country in the region with 1,385,706 infections and 57560 deaths (as of 27 January 2020). The response to the pandemic has been affected both by the imposition of sanctions, including its impact on the economy, as well as by long-standing concerns around policies impacting the social determinants of health and the health system. In the beginning of the outbreak, Iran faced difficulties in containing the spread of COVID-19 due to shortages of medical and sanitary equipment, medical testing and PPE in part due to sanctions limiting imports. On 12 March 2020, in a letter to the SG, Foreign Minister Zarif asked for the lifting of U.S. sanctions to allow Iran to identify and treat COVID-19 patients. A number of items on Zarif’s list required a special licence from OFAC. A further 10% depreciation of the *rial* was registered since COVID-19. In addition, the inability for Iran to sell crude oil under sanctions combined with historically low oil prices led to a depletion of its foreign currency reserves. Despite its campaign, Iran has not obtained the temporary suspension of US sanctions nor has it been afforded the USD 5 billion loan requested from the IMF.

In addition to the economic hardship, more long-standing concerns around the health system and around policies impacting the social determinants of health, political and economic factors around economic management, transparency of information and decision-making also affected the Government’s approach to containing the outbreak. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, despite the repeated request of the health experts for strict lockdown, the Government refused to close the cities due to the shortage of resources. In addition, shutting down businesses and transportation links could impair the weakened internal economy. In the following waves of COVID-19 in summer and autumn 2020, the Government was criticized for its late action to impose restrictive measures to limit the transmission. By November 2020, the sharp increase of COVID-19 cases reached to one reported COVID-19 death every three minutes. The Government’s decision not to apply stringent social measures was also motivated by fears of further protests in Iran as a result of economic hardship. President Rouhani stated on 11 June 2020: “In these circumstances, we have no other choice. […] We have to work, our factories have to be active […] The easiest option is to shut down everything, but then people will pour into the streets because of hunger and unemployment.”

In January 2021, the Supreme Leader of Iran announced that COVID-19 vaccines produced by US/UK would be prohibited in Iran and called these state untrustworthy. The message was met with objections from civil society and the medical community, raising concerns at the detrimental impact of the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic on the right to health. In a public letter to the president, members of Iran’s Medical Council plead for a depoliticized approach to the vaccination. In a public statement, a number of Iranian and international NGOs called upon the Supreme Leader of Iran to rescind this order and allow Iranians to purchase any safe and effective vaccines as soon as they are available, regardless of their country of origin.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite the official statement prohibiting US/UK produced vaccines, Iran has purchased 4.2 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine within the framework of COVAX, expected to arrive by end of February. The purchase is reportedly justified by pointing to the Swedish production of the vaccine.

Towards the end of January 2020, the President announced that Iran has authorized the use of Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, with the first shipment arriving in Tehran in the first week of February. The decision to import this vaccine was met with concern by one of the members of Iran’s National COVID-19 Taskforce, stating that information about the efficacy of the vaccine was not available. Russian-made vaccine, however, has raised concerns too. According to the authorities, in the second phase the vaccine will be jointly produced by the Russian Federation and Iran.

**COVID-19 response in places of detention and denial of access to medical care**

The **COVID-19 outbreak in prisons** has affected the prison population and prison staff, leading to a deterioration of already dire prison conditions. Most prisons experience a lack of medical and sanitary supplies, adequate medical testing and treatment as well as poor hygiene conditions in overcrowded cells. On 26 and 29 February 2020, the Head of the Judiciary issued directives according to which some prisoners would be granted furlough after “posting suitable bail”, as a means to decongest penitentiary institutions, holding over 240,000 inmates – over twice of the official capacity. By the end of April 2020, the Government announced that 120,000 individuals benefitted from the temporary release policies. The temporary release schemes appear to have come to a halt during the summer of 2020. A number of prisoners who had been released in March were asked to return to prison, creating new concerns relating to overcrowding and exacerbated infection rates in prison.

A main concern for the Office has been that these release schemes were designed in a way that disproportionately excluded certain categories of prisoners, including political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.[[2]](#footnote-2) The directives’ eligibility criteria preclude, with a few exceptions, those convicted of serious violent crimes and national security offences if the sentence is over five years’ imprisonment. If the sentence is under five years, the person must have served one-third of their sentence. As a result, most human rights defenders, lawyers, dual and foreign nationals, environmentalists, as well as prisoners of conscience who have been imprisoned on lengthy national security charges, were unable to benefit from temporary release[[3]](#footnote-3).

This context has also hastened negotiations on prisoner swaps leading to the release of some foreign and dual nationals detained in Iran.

**Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience**, including human rights defenders, women’s rights defenders, lawyers and labour rights activists, as well as protesters have been excluded from temporary releases and continue to be targeted. Many continue to be denied medical treatment and live with the fear of contracting COVID-19 in overcrowded prisons with low sanitary standards. Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh’s prolonged hunger strike (11 August-25 September 2020) in detention brought public attention to prison conditions but without any real impact so far.[[4]](#footnote-4) On 16 September, SRs Iran, HRD, Health, WGAD, Torture, issued a [statement](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26244&LangID=E) calling on Iran to release HRDs from prison during COVID-19.

**Rights to information and participation**

Inconsistency in figures of COVID-19 infections announced by officials at the national and local levels created concerns about the lack of accurate reporting and transparency. Since the beginning of the outbreak, the daily official death tolls have been contradicted by the health and local authorities. The Government has acknowledged the issue of underreporting. The Deputy Health Minister stated in October 2020 that due to the errors in testing, the actual number of cases and death could be 1.5 to 2.2 times higher than the official figures. However, health experts have raised concerns that the COVID-19 related figures have been engineered since the start of the pandemic and the first cases of the disease were covered up for political reasons.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Right to education**

Pre-existing educational inequalities in Iran is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a response to COVID-19 outbreak, schools and universities were closed on 5 March 2020 until the end of the academic year. Following the shut down of schools, educational programs were broadcasted on state television. On 9 April, the Ministry of Education launched a national distance-learning platform named “SHAD”. Lack of access to electronic devices and internet has led to major challenges for students to access distance-learning platforms. According to the Deputy Education Minister, 3,255,000 Iranian students and 500,000 Afghan students in Iran were deprived of distance-learning education due to lack of access to technological equipment and internet connectivity.[[6]](#footnote-6) The deprived students make up more than 22 per cent of the total 14,600,000 student population of Iran in the academic year of 2019-2020.[[7]](#footnote-7)

- The Government decided to reopen schools for the new academic year on 5 September 2020. The decision was met with criticism by health experts. In response, the Ministry of Education announced on 7 September that students' presence at schools is not mandatory, and the students can choose between in-person or virtual education. Lack of accessibility and to affordable Internet services and technical equipment remain an issue for 3.5 million students in the academic year of 2020-2021.[[8]](#footnote-8) Emblematic cases concern the suicide of an 11-year-old boy in Bushehr province[[9]](#footnote-9) and a 13-year old girl in Orumiyeh province[[10]](#footnote-10) allegedly for not having a tablet or phone to access online classes. The Ministry of Education rejected the news that these two students committed suicide for not having technical equipment.

**SG report and SR report to the 75th session of the General Assembly:**

The [report](https://undocs.org/A/75/287) of the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (A/75/287), and the [report](https://undocs.org/A/75/213) of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (A/75/213) to the 75th session of the General Assembly raised some of the challenges experienced by Iran in the context of COVID-19. Strictly speaking, some of the “challenges” are government measures in direct violation of obligations under international human rights law, and not human rights challenges as such.

Impact of economic challenges and pandemic on economic and social rights:

SG Report: paras. 4; 40-44

SR Report: paras. 3, 52-53

Challenges related to sanctions and impact on health sector:

SG Report: paras. 45-50

See also [statement](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25744) by the HC calling for ease of sanctions in the context of COVID-19

SR Report: paras. 52-53

COVID-19 response in places of detention and denial of access to medical care

SG report: paras. 29-36

See also [statement](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26345&LangID=E) by the HC calling for release of human rights defenders in the context of COVID-19

SR report: paras. 3, 33, 34, 35, and in particular paras. 40-45

In addition, the Special Rapporteur has issued several communications on this issue. Three of the communications are currently public: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TmSearch/Results>

Measures taken on the situation of women and girls in the context of COVID-19:

SG report: paras. 38

SR report: para. 47

Restrictions to freedom of expression and access to information in the context of COVID-19:

SG report: para. 28

1. **Technical or other support needed**

OHCHR has initiated technical cooperation with the Government of Iran to assess the right to health, in particular in the context of sanctions. A technical mission to Tehran scheduled for 2020 was postponed due to COVID-19. However, the engagement continues remotely.

1. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2021/01/iranian-rights-groups-call-on-khamenei-to-allow-purchase-of-u-s-and-uk-covid-19-vaccines/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also OHCHR web story of 21 May 2020: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/IranianPrisioners.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See statement by Special procedures on [17 April 2020](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25803&LangID=E); [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also statements by Special procedures on [9 December 2020](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26582&LangID=E); [13 November 2020](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26502&LangID=E); [25 September 2020](https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26297&LangID=E); [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://cpj.org/2020/08/iran-shuts-down-economic-newspaper-over-covid-19-reporting/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.ilna.news/fa/tiny/news-949241> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.isna.ir/news/98070100412/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.barkhat.news/social/161082618639/3-5-million-students-drop-out-due-to-corona> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://cutt.ly/dgTLx3n>, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/iran-shock-kid-suicide-poverty.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-27146/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)