



Maat for Peace' submission on "COVID-19 lessons learnt and moving forward"

➤ **Preamble:**

The Covid-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on people's political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to life, health, work, education, participation in managing public affairs, voting, and running for elections. The scope of violations related to the right to life and health under the pandemic has been exacerbated with the increase in the number of deaths and infections due to the lack of health care, medicines, vaccines, and supplies to prevent and protect against infection with the virus. Violations of the right to work and to enjoy an adequate standard of living have been exacerbated with the layoff of workers after corporations and business enterprises were completely or partially shut down as a preventive anti-epidemic measure without providing any compensation to those affected. In 2020, that is the epidemic peak outbreak, there was a deficit in hours worked globally equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs¹. Studies also suggested that nearly 207 million persons may live in extreme poverty by 2030 as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which could raise the total number of poor people to more than 1 billion. The right to education-related violations reached its highest levels with the closure of schools and universities for long periods and the transition to distance education without the presence of infrastructure and technology capable of promoting distance education and addressing the imbalance in the educational field. In the same context, violations of the right to manage public affairs, voting, and running in elections have exacerbated, with the decline of democratic life in light of the disruption of elections in more than 60 percent of countries during the epidemic peak outbreak in 2020 as a direct result of the measures to respond to the epidemic.²

Despite the adoption of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) in 2011 as a general framework aimed at reforming the imbalance between the state, people, and markets, and bridging the gaps between the ambitions of economic forces and business enterprises on the one hand, and the imperative to respect and promote human rights, on the other hand, these principles have not been duly observed amidst the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, as companies and businesses have completely ignored human rights and focused more attention on their ambitions to maximize their economic gains and try to avoid the losses caused by the outbreak of the epidemic without any regard for human rights. Based on the Working Group

¹ International Labour Organization's COVID-19 and labour statistics, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/covid-19/>

² 10 Statement by UNDP Administrator, Achim Steiner at High -Level Political Segment of 46th session of the Human Rights Council, UNDP, EBRUARY 23, 2021, link: <https://bit.ly/34AKDZR>



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on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises call for inputs on the lessons learned from the Covid-19 and moving forward to the 50th session of the Human Rights Council, **Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights** presents its intervention by answering the questions of the survey attached to the invitation as follows:

- 1) What were the most significant challenges and obstacles experienced by your organization, movement or community during the pandemic and the recovery period related to human rights abuses in the context of business activities? What were some of the challenges or/and shortcomings experienced by your organization, movement or community related to the fulfilment of the State's duty to protect business-related human rights during the pandemic and the recovery period? What were the main challenges faced by right holders during the pandemic and the recovery period, in the context of business activities?**

During the period of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, Maat noted a high occurrence of a wide range of human rights violations resulting from business activities of companies and business enterprises in the countries of concern. Maat noted the exploitation of companies and business enterprises operating in many countries of concern, the increased demand for medicines and supplies for prevention and protection from the Covid-19, such as masks, gloves, and other sterilizers, as these companies and enterprises raised prices to unprecedented rates, and got involved in the manufacture of fraudulent medical supplies that do not conform to the required medical specifications. These grave violations came as a direct result of the absence of the state's role in protecting the human rights of individuals from the exploitation of companies and business enterprises in accordance with its obligations under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

In Yemen, for example, companies and business enterprises exploited the Covid-19 crisis and doubled the prices of medical supplies needed for prevention and protection by 1,000 percent. The packet of masks price rose from 15 thousand Yemeni riyals, before the pandemic, to 230 thousand riyals after the outbreak of the pandemic³. **In Iraq**, companies and commercial establishments took advantage of the Covid-19 crisis, so the packet of masks price increased from 2000 Iraqi dinars to 8000 dinars, amidst ongoing calls to wear masks in schools and public places as a preventive measure⁴.

³اليمين يشهد ارتفاعاً في أسعار المستلزمات الطبية رغم عدم تسجيل إصابات بفيروس كورونا، Rudaw، 17 ابريل 2020، الرابط:

<https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/07042020>

⁴نفثي الدعر والغضب في العراق بعد رفع أسعار مستلزمات الوقاية من فيروس كورونا، الحرة، 24 فبراير 2020، الرابط: <https://arbne.ws/34pyh71>



On a related level, many private and state-owned companies and business enterprises have laid off thousands of workers and dismissed them from their jobs as a measure aimed at alleviating economic losses resulting from the economic closure measures that were followed to limit the spread of the epidemic, which was done without providing effective compensation by these enterprises and companies to the affected rights holders, which constituted a clear violation of the rights of thousands of persons to work. In this regard, Maat has monitored that many private and state-owned companies in Qatar, including Qatar Petroleum and Qatar Airways, laid off thousands of foreign workers and deported them to their home countries during the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic without being able to obtain their financial dues and delayed salaries, in light of total disregard for Qatar's obligations under the UNGPs.⁵

2) What were the most important lessons learnt by your organization, movement or community from the crisis? How can these lessons help in addressing better business-related human rights abuses linked to future crises?

There are many lessons learned from the pandemic that will help address business-related human rights violations linked to future crises. The most important lessons are as follows:

- The need to build more adaptive, flexible, and comprehensive social protection systems, and to take various and effective measures for social protection, such as providing assistance and social insurance to poor families affected by crises, and adopting programs aiming at revitalize labor markets, in order to face the repercussions of current and future crises and help the affected people extricate themselves from extreme poverty that they find themselves slipping into with the emergence of these crises.
- Work to compel business enterprises and the private sector to comply with existing labor and employment laws and regulations, including those relating to wages, occupational health and safety, discrimination, the right to organize and collective bargaining, avoid layoffs, monitor and hold enterprises and companies that violate those laws to account.
- Supporting the pharmaceutical industries and achieving pharmaceutical and preventive security by expanding the establishment of pharmaceutical factories and medical supplies needed to confront diseases and epidemics, such as medical masks, sterilization materials, and respirators.
- Working to expand digitization plans and use modern means of communication and technology, and expand the establishment of advanced technological infrastructures

⁵ تأيم لاین.. العمال الأجانب "ضحية دائمة" لأزمات قطر مع كورونا، العين الإخبارية، 11 يونيو 2020، الرابط: <https://bit.ly/3uykPZa>



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that can be resorted to in times of crises as alternatives to direct transactions. These measures have proven effective when people, with the difficulty of direct transactions during the Covid-19 crisis, were forced to transact financially via the internet, work from home, and study remotely.

- Paying attention to scientific research in the fields of medicine and science, and increasing the financial allocations provided for it.

3) What is the opinion of your organization, movement or community about available opportunities to access to effective remedy provided by the State and businesses for human rights harms occurred during the pandemic? Which of those remediation efforts proved to be the most successful and how can they serve as examples to follow in the future at times of crisis?

Enabling rights holders to access effective remedies when a human rights violation occurs in a business context through judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms is an integral part of a State's legal duty to protect human rights in accordance with its international obligations under the UNGPs. Despite the occurrence of a wide range of business-related human rights violations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in the countries of concern to Maat, including Qatar, and Yemen, Maat noted that none of these countries provided effective redress and remedies to enable victims obtaining their rights. **In Qatar**, for example, the Qatari authorities have left foreign workers who have been laid off by employers, companies, and business enterprises to face their fate alone without enabling them to access judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms to obtain their rights and entitlements looted by business owners, especially with the closure of government enterprises and courts during the epidemic peak outbreak in 2020, which prompted most of them to give up their legal pursuit and returned to their countries without their due wages.⁶

On the other hand, some countries, including Egypt, sought to provide some social benefits to workers affected by the pandemic, such as monthly salaries of 500 Egyptian pounds, to help mitigate the harm caused to workers in non-governmental sectors, following the adoption of closure measures during the epidemic peak outbreak in 2020⁷. Maat, however, believes that judicial grievance measures are the most appropriate means that countries must provide to victims of closed businesses in order mitigate the harm inflicted upon their human rights.

4) What efforts have you seen governments and businesses making to engage in constructive and meaningful dialogue with civil society actors and communities to address business-related human rights abuses during the pandemic? Such efforts

⁶ "How Can We Work Without Wages?", Human Rights Watch, August 24, 2020, link: <https://bit.ly/34rH6NQ>

⁷ القوى العاملة: صرف 500 جنيه للعمالة غير المنتظمة من مكاتب البريد.. اعرف أكثر، اليوم السابع، 17 مارس 2020، الرابط: <https://bit.ly/3JcTHTP>



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include steps to empower and protect workers and to build a resilient and inclusive society and economy able to prevent human rights abuses in future crisis situations. Are there examples of particular attention being paid to potentially affected individuals that may be at heightened risk of vulnerability or marginalization?

Despite the weak role played by companies and business enterprises in order to address business-related human rights abuses during the pandemic in a number of countries of concern to Maat, and the complete absence of this role in other countries, some of the governments of the aforementioned countries have made efforts and active steps of participation of civil society in order to address human rights violations related to business during the pandemic. These efforts included, among other things, steps to empower and protect workers and build a flexible and inclusive society and economy. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the efforts undertaken by the Egyptian government with the participation of civil society to address human rights violations related to business, empower workers and protect them, and build a flexible and inclusive society and economy during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts are summarized as follows⁸:

- The Ministry of Manpower disbursed a monthly subsidy grant of 500 pounds to workers affected by the pandemic.
- The Egyptian government has taken decisions to move markets and support businessmen, such as subsidizing the stock exchange with 20 billion pounds, as well as reducing gas and electricity prices for large industrial facilities.
- Reducing interest rates on deposits and savings accounts by 3%.
- Granting soft loans to tourism and hotel enterprises, so that they can continue.
- Allocating 3 billion pounds as loans to investors in the tourism sector to pay salaries to workers and re-operate hotels and tourist villages.
- Removing the real estate tax on hotel and tourist enterprises for 6 months, and postponing the payment of all dues on tourist and hotel enterprises for 3 months without fines or late interest.
- Demanding the private sector to reduce the number of workers in their facilities, similar to the government's decision for the public and governmental sectors, without prejudice to their wages.
- Launching initiatives in cooperation between banks and the Ministry of Awqaf (Zakat House) to support irregular employment.

⁸ وضاع العمال المصريين في ظل التداعيات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية لجائحة "فيروس كورونا" بطالة تتزايد ووظائف مفقودة"، دار الخدمات النقابية والعمالية، 14 أكتوبر 2020، الرابط:



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- Reducing the price of natural gas for heavy industries by \$4.5 per million units, and reducing the price of electricity for high-voltage industries by 10 piasters per kilowatt.

The Egyptian government has paid special attention to Egyptian women in light of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as one of the vulnerable and marginalized groups. It has carried out many programs and projects in cooperation with international organizations and local civil society organizations in order to empower women on the economic level and mitigate the human rights violations related to business that affected working women during the height of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps the most prominent of these programs and projects was the project “Women's Empowerment and Financial and Economic Inclusion in Rural Egypt: COVID-19 Response”, which was launched in March 2021 in cooperation with the National Council for Women, the Central Bank of Egypt, the European Union, the Embassy of the Netherlands, and the United Nations Women in Egypt. this project aimed at enhancing women's access to financial services, and supporting small projects led by women in rural areas in the governorates of Minya, Beni Suef, Assiut, and Sohag. This, in addition to the national project for the community, human, and local development "Your Project", which benefited 61,600 women, and the projects of the Local Development Fund, which benefited 83,500 women..⁹

5) According to your organization, movement or community what are those opportunities that would allow businesses to build back better by ensuring stronger and more decisive action to protect human rights in the context of business activities particularly for those individuals and communities at heightened risk of discrimination or marginalization?

Maat believes that there are a set of measures allowing companies to take stronger and more decisive measures to protect human rights in the context of business activities and to better rebuild human rights violated in the context of business. These measures may include, among other things, the following:

- Governments shall reduce gas and electricity prices for large industrial facilities during periods of major crises, in order to reduce the economic burdens and material losses faced by companies during periods of crisis.
- Governments shall provide soft loans to industrial and service enterprises that employ large numbers of individuals in order to be able to continue their work.
- Governments shall allocate soft loans to industrial and service facilities affected by major crises so that they can pay the salaries of employees in order to avoid arbitrary dismissals.

⁹ خطوات واثقة على طريق دعم وتمكين المرأة بعد أن سطرت التاريخ في ثورة 30 يونيو.. إنفوجراف، اليوم السابع، 21 مارس 2021، الرابط: <https://bit.ly/3a771cK>



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- Governments shall remove taxes on all industrial and service enterprises affected by crises so that they can provide the wages of their workers in light of the closure periods that follow the emergence of crises.
- Some companies and business enterprises shall allow employees to work from home and take advantage of digital solutions during crises as long as this is possible.