



Dignity in the time of COVID-19

The world appears to be no longer the way we knew it.

Unprecedented emergency measures are enacted. Countrywide lockdowns are imposed to protect public health and safety. Borders are closed.

The OMCT and its global SOS-Torture Network support and demand effective measures to protect public health and safety, including for those most vulnerable. Health systems need to be accessible to all and provide the necessary care for all people in need. Safety and health policies are dictated by the very respect for human dignity that is at the core of our mandate: the struggle against torture.

At the OMCT, we are committed to supporting preventive measures and physical distancing. Since Monday, all our staff have been teleworking with our Geneva, Brussels, and Tunisia, with our offices closed. We are replacing meetings with online formats and working on innovative ways to support our global network in its fight against torture.

While we are changing our way of working, we continue to support our members in their struggle for human dignity and to protect people from torture and other abuse. The world may appear to be no longer the way we knew it, but the rights of every person are inalienable. Our inherent rights as human beings are not swept away by a pandemic. International human rights law was crafted by States to also accommodate crises like this one. It remains intact and applicable as a guide for any government.

While supporting robust public safety measures, the OMCT will scrutinize and take a strong stance on the situation of vulnerable groups:

Preventing mass infections in detention

The risk of coronavirus infections in the global prison population and governments' inaction to protect detainees and prison staff alike are alarming. Detention conditions around the world are already precarious, often characterized by serious overcrowding, lack of hygiene, and poor access to health services. Closing access to prisons cannot be the sole solution and needs to be compensated by alternative communication methods inside and outside prisons. Protection against abuse must be maintained in prisons. Social or physical distancing is a concept that is not workable without an ad hoc and significant reduction of prison population. Massive coronavirus infections in prison will have disastrous effects. Taking decisive action now will also mean protecting those who work in the penitentiary service. States can simply not afford to ignore this matter. They have to act now.

Preserving our dignity and that of migrants and refugees

The same precarity applies today in many camps for migrants and refugees, including in the Mediterranean. The OMCT calls on States to take their responsibilities towards this particularly vulnerable population. We will shed light on abuses and will denounce those States who set aside

international human rights and refugee law as public attention is focusing on the COVID-19 crisis. Movement restrictions are permissible in times of crisis. Ill-treatment or throwing out the protection against deportation to torture is not.

Staying aware of the inadvertent impact of confinement

The confinement at home is an exceptional measure justified by the protection of people from harm, but it comes with considerable strain on family life and carries the inherent risks of domestic abuse and violence. States have a core responsibility to maintain a viable response to reports of domestic violence and keep support structures accessible to victims. We also need everyone's sense of individual responsibility to speak out and respond to such situations.

Preserving our right to know and the right to defend rights

The OMCT continues to provide protection to human rights defenders. The story of the doctor castigated for alerting his community about the virus is a stark warning to those seeking now to silence dissent, free speech and the space for human rights defenders to protect those most vulnerable. The legitimate protection of our health must not serve as an opportunistic pretext to muzzle those defending our rights.

At the OMCT, we are committed to contributing to new ways of working together and preserving the human dignity and the respect for the inalienability of rights that are the very foundation of our lives and of our societies.