

THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF¹

Written Submission to the International Development Select Committee inquiry on 'Humanitarian crises monitoring - coronavirus in developing countries: secondary impacts.'

SECONDARY IMPACTS OF CORONAVIRUS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Scapegoating of religious and belief communities

1. In countries around the world, many marginalised communities have faced intensified discrimination since the outbreak of covid-19. The UN Secretary General described this phenomenon as a “tsunami of xenophobia”.² Minority religious and belief communities are among those whose suffering has increased following the outbreak of covid-19. Due to their already vulnerable status, many of these communities have been scapegoated and blamed for the virus. For example, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), “antisemitic hate speech has risen alarmingly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis.”³ The UK Community Security Trust note that this hate speech “ranges from conspiracy theories about Jewish involvement in creating and spreading Covid-19...to simply wishing and hoping that Jewish people catch the virus and die from it.”⁴
2. This scapegoating is partially a by-product of the human need to blame the other during difficult circumstances. However, it has also often been an opportunistic attempt to incite further hatred towards already marginalised communities and/or a tactical manoeuvre to distract from the failings of authorities to appropriately contain the virus. In India, for example, it has been all three. At the beginning of the covid-19 outbreak in India, two dozen Muslim missionaries tested positive for covid-19 after an international event in Delhi. This led to accusations that Muslims were deliberately spreading the virus and a campaign of Islamophobia in which Muslims were labelled “bio-terrorists” and “corona-jihadists” and discriminated against. As a result, countless instances of violence against Muslims in India have been recorded. For example, one attack which was caught on video, shows a Muslim being beaten up with a bamboo stick by a man asking him about his conspiracy to spread the virus. Moreover, over 3,000 Muslims were forcibly detained by Government authorities for more than 40 days under the guise of protecting public

¹The APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) is a group of over 125 cross-party parliamentarian members who champion the right to FORB, as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among their fellow parliamentarians, policy-makers, the media and the general public and pursue effective implementation of policy recommendations relating to this right. Established in 2012, the group benefits from the expertise of 25 human rights and faith-based stakeholder organisations.

² <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20076.doc.htm>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25800&LangID=E>

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/antisemitism-online-attack-coronavirus-lockdown-cst-a9643876.html>

health.⁵ The scapegoating of Muslims was picked up and supported by political leaders such as the BJP Minister for Minority Affairs who accused the event organisers of a “Talibani crime” and another BJP leader from Uttar Pradesh who advised citizens “do not buy from Muslims”.⁶

3. India is not the only country who has experienced the political scapegoating of marginalised religious and belief communities. According to the Institute for Development Studies, “in a significant amount of the nations which have encountered outbreaks of the novel coronavirus, politicians and opinion leaders have openly condemned religious minority populations under the guise of epidemiological containment, through hateful messages on social media, public speeches and official policies.”⁷ In South Korea, for example, members of the Shincheonji Church have been demonised and blamed for the spread of covid-19 by many Government officials leading to over 4,000 documented cases of discrimination against its members including being fired from jobs due to membership of the church.⁸
4. The scapegoating of marginalised religious and belief communities has contributed to the many reports of individuals from these communities being attacked, denied aid or otherwise prevented from accessing life-saving humanitarian interventions. In Iraq, for example, there are many reports of Christian communities being the last to get necessary food and medical supplies.⁹ Similarly, in Pakistan, there have been reports of NGOs denying food and aid to Hindus and Christians or only serving them after Muslims have been served.¹⁰ Some members of the ethnic and religious minority Hazara group in Pakistan have claimed that they need to disguise themselves if they hope to receive medical treatment or testing.¹¹ In Uganda, the Government’s response to covid-19 has systematically excluded religious minority groups. Consultative meetings with religious communities to allocate distribution of supplies and to coordinate responses and health messaging have been organised under the umbrella of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda whose membership is limited to 7 organisations. This means that all other groups are not included. This is not only to the detriment of those groups, but to everyone in Uganda, as certain groups being denied the knowledge and support to protect themselves from covid-19 means that it is more likely to spread and persist in the country.¹² There are countless more examples of religious and belief minority communities globally being discriminated against following the outbreak of covid-19.¹³

⁵ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/indias-muslim-minority-experiences-increased-targeting-and-violence-during-covid-19/>

⁶ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/indias-muslim-minority-experiences-increased-targeting-and-violence-during-covid-19/>

⁷ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/scapegoating-of-religious-minorities-during-covid-19-is-history-repeating-itself/>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/opinion/coronavirus-south-korea-church.html>

⁹ <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62332>

¹⁰ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Coronavirus:-Karachi-NGO-denies-food-to-poor-Hindus-and-Christians-49699.html>

¹¹ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/go-in-disguise-to-ensure-you-receive-medical-treatment-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>

¹² <https://africanarguments.org/2020/06/22/ugandas-covid-19-neglect-of-minorities-is-bad-for-everyone/>

¹³ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/religious-inequalities-and-the-impact-of-covid-19/>

Increased vulnerability of minority religious and belief communities due to economic pressures

5. Covid-19 has exacerbated the economic pressures felt by already marginalised and often poor religious or belief communities. This has made life significantly more difficult for these communities. It has also made them much more vulnerable to threats and external pressure. For example, following the outbreak of covid-19, many Hindus in Pakistan have been forced to convert to Islam in mass ceremonies in order to access jobs and opportunities, as well as to protect themselves from increasing stigmatisation.¹⁴ Similarly, thousands of young Hindu, Shi'a, Sikh and Christian girls in Pakistan are kidnapped and converted to Islam every year. This happens generally with impunity because of the vulnerable status of these communities and, in particular, these girls, who suffer double discrimination because of their gender and belief. Women from these communities have become much more vulnerable since the outbreak of covid-19 and this increased vulnerability puts them at much greater risk. As a result, many young girls from minority communities have been kidnapped and forcibly married in Pakistan in 2020¹⁵ and incidents of domestic violence have increased dramatically, as they have done everywhere following the outbreak of covid-19. This huge increase in domestic violence has led to several reports of women from minority communities, such as the Yazidis, taking their lives.¹⁶

State crackdowns on marginalised religious and belief communities

6. Certain states have utilised the covid-19 outbreak as an excuse to intensify persecution of marginalised religious or belief communities. For example, China has increased its interference and surveillance of Tibetan Buddhists under the pretense of attempting to tackle the coronavirus, even using contact tracing apps to monitor every movement of Tibetan citizens.¹⁷ Similarly, in Pakistan, 1500 Hazaras were forcibly detained in March by Government authorities upon their return from a pilgrimage to Iran, while non-Hazara travellers coming from other countries were allowed to travel freely, some without even basic health screening.¹⁸ There are many other examples of Governments using covid-19 to crackdown on groups it wants to control. These are so prevalent that the International Religious Freedom Alliance (a group of 27 countries including the UK) published a declaration in which it specifically calls on Governments to not use covid-19 as a justification for human rights violations.¹⁹

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/world/asia/pakistan-hindu-conversion.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/we-just-want-our-daughter-back-sanehas-parents-speak-out/>

¹⁶ <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62470>

¹⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/chinas-hidden-crackdown-in-tibet/>

¹⁸ <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m2280>

¹⁹ <https://www.government.nl/documents/diplomatic-statements/2020/08/20/covid-19-and-religious-minorities-pandemic-statement>

Violent Conflict

7. In response to the covid-19 outbreak, many countries have seen increases in levels of violent conflict. This is because of how, in some cases, the pandemic has negatively interacted with the root causes of conflict such as youth unemployment, social and economic inequalities, and stigmatisation of minority groups.²⁰ There has also been increasing reports of armed groups utilising the chaos and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, and the fact that state resources are being directed towards health interventions, to increase their activities. This increase in the rise of armed groups can have devastating consequences for countries as a whole, but it often creates a problem for religious or belief groups specifically. For example, according to the Institute for Development Studies, “with the security forces turning their attention to implementing lockdown measures, Daesh and others are re-emerging to attack minorities they previously had targeted, such as the Kakai’s.²¹ The UN has also noted that in response to the virus Daesh “is continuing its efforts to reassert itself in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.”²² Similarly, in Nigeria, according to the US Institute for Peace, “Boko Haram has stepped up its attacks as the number of cases in Borno state grows. These attacks combined with other battles involving farmers and herders and increasing banditry in the northwest have displaced hundreds of thousands of people... The lockdown measures are increasing the demand for food in IDP camps, and the conditions in these camps make it challenging, if not impossible, for people to protect themselves from the virus.”²³ These attacks have devastated Christian communities in Nigeria. Furthermore, the insecurity caused by the pandemic makes any health response much more difficult, thereby making the spread of the virus more likely.

²⁰ <https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/peps/ahead-of-print/article-10.1515-peps-2020-0050/article-10.1515-peps-2020-0050.xml>

²¹ <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/covid-19-and-increased-daesh-attacks-threaten-survival-of-iraqs-religious-minorities/>

²² <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-07-06/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-of-the-virtual-counter-terrorism-week-united-nations-delivered>

²³ <https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/05/covid-19-and-conflict-nigeria>