



INTERNATIONAL COALITION AGAINST ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

A Call on Governments to Respect Human Rights during the Pandemic ICAED Statement on the International Week of the Disappeared May 24-31, 2020

In the last week of May, the international community commemorates the International Week of the Disappeared. This occasion was initiated and traditionally commemorated by the Latin American Federation of Associations of Relatives of Disappeared-Detainees (FEDEFAM) during its first Congress in San Jose, Costa Rica in 1981. The commemoration was aimed to campaign against the situation of enforced disappearances which remains a relevant phenomenon not only in Latin America but in all nooks and crannies of the world. As enforced disappearances spread throughout the world, the occasion has later been adapted by several organizations working on the theme of enforced disappearances the world over.

As humanity is confronted with the coronavirus pandemic that has claimed 348,124 deaths as of May 26, 2020, the families of the disappeared, the majority of whom are from the poor sectors of society, are among those bearing the brunt of devastation. Already economically dislocated from the consequences of enforced disappearance and living a hand-to-mouth existence, they suffer aggravating poverty. As many governments impose lockdowns to prevent further spread of the virus, family members of the disappeared in a “no work, no pay” status are buried further in the quagmire of poverty – fearing hunger more than the virus and making them all the more vulnerable to the virus.

In Latin America, specifically in the Southern Cone, families of the disappeared are concerned with how the COVID-19 pandemic could impact the trials of individuals accused of crimes against humanity. These trials seek to condemn perpetrators of enforced disappearances in the region. Families of the disappeared, especially in Argentina, emphasize the continuing imperative for states to ensure there are no delays in investigating cases of enforced disappearances. However, families of the victims are worried that the pandemic could be used as an excuse to provide parole to persons involved in enforced disappearances. Latin American organizations working on enforced disappearances demand the guarantee of protocols that prevent enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detention. In view of pandemic-related human rights violations committed by security forces, human rights organizations are concerned with the absence of trainings in handling the pandemic, which gives further rise to the risk of human rights violations.

In Central America, specifically in Guatemala, the pandemic has disproportionately affected the indigenous population --about 50 percent of the population -- who also are victimized by racism and discrimination. All legal and psychosocial processes have been stopped for families of the disappeared, since there can be no movement to visit the families of the *desaparecidos* in their homes. The 21st anniversary of the program, “*Todos por el Reencuentro*” was not convened because of the lockdown. In El Salvador, the government’s response to the pandemic has caused

grave human rights violations, including disappearances of people arrested by security forces due to violations of the quarantine rules. It is impossible for families of the disappeared who earn less than a dollar per day to strictly follow all rules.

In the Asian region, which has submitted the highest number of cases of enforced disappearances to the United Nations, 49 countries have been affected by COVID 19. Since Asian states are notorious for human rights violations, families of victims worry about the situation of their disappeared loved ones during the pandemic. Cases of infections are increasing without letting-up. India is the Asian country with the highest number of infections in the last few days. In the Philippines, the economic situation of the impoverished families of the disappeared has gotten worse because of the loss of breadwinners. This situation has been aggravated by the incompetent and inadequate government response. It takes advantage of the pandemic by using a military response to a health crisis. In a crisis situation where lives are supposed to be saved, President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered the arrest, detention and killing of violators of quarantine rules, resulting in gross human rights violations. Activists distributing food were arrested. Food supposedly for the poor was confiscated. In Indonesia, despite the government's huge social safety net, which provides 110 trillion Rupiah or 9 Billion Dollars to affected families, sadly, victims of human rights violations do benefit from this form of social amelioration. These are just a few examples of the many difficulties that affect victims of disappearances in this vast continent.

Enforced disappearances are not only phenomena of Asia or Latin America. Europe, which has been very badly hit by the pandemic, has not been spared from this global scourge. Thousands of unsolved enforced disappearances exist in Spain, the Balkans, the Euro- Mediterranean region, and throughout the post-Soviet countries: Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan in Russia, in Turkmenistan and in Ukraine because of its continuing war with Russia. Belarus still has not properly investigated four cases of prominent political persons who were disappeared since 1999-2000. Certainly, as in other regions, families of the disappeared in this part of the world suffer untold pains caused by the pandemic.

In Africa, brutal dictatorships have used enforced disappearances to punish members of opposition political parties, human rights activists, intellectuals and relatives of dissidents who have challenged their rule. In Eritrea, the case of Ciham Ali, a dual US-Eritrean citizen who was detained at age 15, has caused outrage in Eritrea, the Eritrean diaspora and the U.S. Congress. Ciham is being held in "incommunicado detention," which constitutes an enforced disappearance since nobody knows where she is. Human rights organizations have documented many cases of Cameroonians, especially those from Cameroon's English-speaking region, who have been held in "incommunicado detention" in Yaounde, Cameroon's capital. There have been numerous cases of enforced disappearances in Sudan, Zimbabwe, Egypt and Libya. Only 16 of the 54 countries in Africa have ratified the International Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. All African countries need to ratify the convention, and just as important, they must cease using enforced disappearances as a tool of repression whether or not they have ratified the Convention.

On the occasion of this year's International Week of the Disappeared, the International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED) calls on all states, especially those that are parties to

the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, to adequately respond to the pandemic. Such responses have to take into consideration the distinct situation and needs of the families of the disappeared.

Moreover, ICAED stresses the imperative of a human rights approach to states' interventions during the pandemic, taking into consideration the provisions of key international human rights instruments and the most recent UN Guiding Principles for the Search for Disappeared Persons.

ICAED calls on all governments to respect human rights during the pandemic. Furthermore, it emphatically repeats its specific call to all states to respect the right of all persons not to be subjected to enforced disappearances.

As ICAED remembers all the disappeared during the International Week of the Disappeared and invokes their spiritual presence, the Coalition reiterates its commitment to struggle for truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.

In unison, we join our Latin American sisters and brothers in saying: *LOS DESAPARECIDOS PRESENTES!*