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Bachelet calls for easing of sanctions to enable medical systems to fight COVID-19 and limit global contagion

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GENEVA (24 March 2020) – Broad sectoral sanctions should urgently be re-evaluated in countries facing the coronavirus pandemic, in light of their potentially debilitating impact on the health sector and human rights, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said Tuesday.

"It is vital to avoid the collapse of any country's medical system – given the explosive impact that will have on death, suffering and wider contagion," Bachelet said. "At this crucial time, both for global public health reasons, and to support the rights and lives of millions of people in these countries, sectoral sanctions should be eased or suspended. In a context of global pandemic, impeding medical efforts in one country heightens the risk for all of us."

"Humanitarian exemptions to sanctions measures should be given broad and practical effect, with prompt, flexible authorization for essential medical equipment and supplies," Bachelet said.

For example, in Iran, where at least 1,800 people have died from COVID-19, human rights reports have repeatedly emphasized the impact of sectoral sanctions on access to essential medicines and medical equipment – including respirators and protective equipment for health-care workers.

More than 50 Iranian medics have died since the first cases of the COVID-19 coronavirus were detected five weeks ago. The epidemic in Iran is also spreading to neighbouring countries which will strain health services in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A variety of sanctions may also impede medical efforts in Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Venezuela and Zimbabwe, Bachelet said. "The majority of these states have frail or weak health systems. Progress in upholding human rights is essential to improve those systems – but obstacles to

the import of vital medical supplies, including over-compliance with sanctions by banks, will create long-lasting harm to vulnerable communities. The populations in these countries are in no way responsible for the policies being targeted by sanctions, and to varying degrees have already been living in a precarious situation for prolonged periods."

In Venezuela, some hospitals regularly suffer water and electricity cutoffs and lack medicines, equipment, disinfectant and soap. While this situation pre-dates the imposition of sectoral sanctions, easing them could mean more resources could be allocated to treating and preventing the epidemic.

"It is especially important to protect the health of health-workers themselves, and medical professionals should never be punished by the authorities for pointing out deficiencies in the response to the crisis," Bachelet said. "Doctors, medics and all those working in health structures are in the front line, protecting us all."

She called for world leaders to come together. "International cooperation and solidarity are essential at all times, to advance human rights; they are also vital to advancing every country's national interests at this time."

Bachelet also noted that the countries under sanctions should provide transparent information, accept offers of necessary humanitarian assistance, and prioritize the needs and rights of vulnerable people. They should also adopt measures to guarantee national and international organizations can carry out their humanitarian work unhindered.

"No country can effectively combat this epidemic on its own. We need to act with solidarity, cooperation and care," she said – echoing last week's call by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for "coordinated, decisive, and innovative policy action" to counter the spread of COVID-19.

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