

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen demonstrations of overwhelming solidarity between nations and communities working together to address the impact and challenges it poses. Unfortunately, the pandemic has also given rise to a new wave of hate speech and discrimination. 'COVID-19 related hate speech' encompasses a broad range of disparaging expressions against certain individuals and groups that has emerged or been exacerbated as a result of the new coronavirus disease outbreak – from scapegoating, stereotyping, stigmatization and the use of derogatory, misogynistic, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic or antisemitic language. Closely linked to this is the dissemination of 'disinformation' or 'misinformation' related to COVID-19.¹

Since the pandemic emerged, individuals perceived as ethnically Chinese or Asian, or belonging to certain ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, and foreigners have been blamed and vilified for spreading the virus. In some instances, this is grounded in misinformation and rumours, however, more insidious instances of hate speech related to COVID-19 being used to target already marginalized populations have also been reported. Conspiracy theories attributing the spread of the virus to Jews, Muslims, Christians, Bahai's or minority groups has fuelled discriminatory speech against such individuals, in some instances resulting in hate crimes or discrimination against them in the response to COVID-19. In some instances, journalists,² whistle-blowers, medical and health care professionals, human rights defenders

and peacebuilders – are also being subjected to unlawful attacks as a result of their work in addressing or reporting on the pandemic.

The phenomenon of COVID-19 related hate speech is being advanced through mainstream media and via online social media and tech platforms. Though it is often spread by private individuals, its consequences are most severe when it is propagated by political leaders, public officials, religious leaders and other influencers, or when it is part of concerted efforts by individuals or groups to spread hate or incite violence.

COVID-19 related hate speech has serious implications, both in the short and long term. It makes those targeted more vulnerable to violence, exposes them to political and social exclusion, isolation and stigmatization, inhibits them from expressing themselves and participating in public debate, and deters them from accessing medical care and other vital services. In so doing, it heightens the disproportionate effects of the disease on certain communities and exacerbates underlying social and economic inequalities, aggravates drivers of violent extremism while undermining the social cohesion, solidarity and trust necessary to effectively tackle the spread of the virus. It may also trigger social unrest and intergroup violence, possibly enhancing the conditions conducive to conflict and atrocity crimes.³ COVID-19 related hate speech may therefore pose a threat to the enjoyment of human rights, sustainable development and international peace and security.

A/HRC/44/49, paras 34 – 40.

As part of global efforts to respond to the pandemic, the international community needs to be more vigilant and remain unequivocal in condemning COVID-19-related hate speech, promoting messages of inclusion, acting in solidarity and on the basis of international human rights law, particularly freedom of opinion and expression and the right to equality and non-discrimination.

While Member States have the primary responsibility for tackling COVID-19-related hate speech, other actors – especially tech and social media companies, mainstream media, and civil society – also have a significant role to play. The United Nations system plays a critical role, especially in supporting states and other

actors to develop and apply human rights-compliant measures to tackle COVID-19 related hate speech. As the [United Nations Secretary-General stated](#) when launching the policy brief, “[COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together](#),” on 23 April 2020, human rights must be ‘front and centre’ of ‘response and recovery’ efforts in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ‘biggest international crisis in generations.’

This guidance sets out recommendations to various actors for addressing and countering COVID-19 related hate speech. It builds on and is complementary to the [UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#).

TO MEMBER STATES

Uphold the freedom to seek, receive and impart information as a cornerstone of building trust in measures taken to contain the pandemic

Ensure that any emergency or exceptional measures, legislation or policies taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are articulated and applied in compliance with international human rights law as set out in the Secretary General's policy brief on COVID-19 and Human Rights and the guidance note by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights⁴

Address and counter COVID-19 related hate speech publicly and swiftly through:

- implementing a robust crisis communication response to ensure coherent messaging during the response phase of the pandemic and to mitigate the impact of the crisis on social cohesion and community resilience

- ensuring that accurate and verified information on the pandemic is disseminated regularly, with robust public messaging against COVID-19 related hate speech, disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories

- support transparent, accessible and independent systems for monitoring COVID-19-related hate speech

support the independent production and dissemination of professional and accurate public interest narratives about the struggles and full diversity of individuals affected by COVID-19, and about the experiences of those most vulnerable to COVID-19-related hate speech

Ensure that all public communications by state officials, especially statements by senior members of government, concerning COVID-19:

- are accessible, accurate, complete, reliable, evidence-based, transparent, available in all languages spoken in the population, and imparted in a timely way

- do not attribute blame or responsibility for the emergence or spread of the virus on any particular community or group

- promote inclusion and help members from diverse communities being impacted by the virus and working together to prevent the spread of COVID-19

of dissemination, as well as the *likelihood* of harm on users and the public⁸

involve communities most affected by content identified as hate speech in the development of effective tools to

Influential figures in society – including religious leaders, faith actors, trade union leaders, the leaders of non-governmental organizations, youth leaders, public figures, and influencers – should actively speak out against COVID-19-related hate speech, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories, express solidarity with those targeted by such expressions, and amplify messages that serve to reduce discrimination and stigma