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Child rights violations in the context of the quarantine to contain the COVID-19 outbreak

In the light of the current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Defence for Children International (DCI) is deeply concerned at the serious infringements of the human rights of children, caused by certain responses adopted by some States to limit and manage the coronavirus outbreak. In the context of this unprecedented global crisis, DCI emphasizes that States should be more than ever committed to uphold the rights of children as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and ensure their protection, without discrimination. States should take into account the needs of children in some specific situations and contexts of vulnerability, among which children deprived of liberty, children on the move or indigenous and minority children, and ensure their protection against violence and equal access to education and health care.

It is urgent that States adopt specific measures to protect children in situations of increased vulnerability, endorsing the words of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "we can only defeat this virus when each and every one of us is protected."
Defence for Children International urges governments to take specific and urgent measures to:

- **Protect children deprived of liberty.** The alarming sanitary and hygienic conditions in many places of deprivation of liberty, in addition to the serious problem of overcrowding, may result in a high risk of exposure to the virus, especially for adolescents in institutions. Therefore, it is urgent to ensure the highest standards in hygiene and living conditions, and to reduce the number of adolescents in institutions of deprivation of liberty through early releases and noncustodial measures, in order to limit serious consequences such as irreversible damage to health or even death of children and young people deprived of their liberty.

- **Protect children on the move.** Migrant and refugee children constantly face obstacles to receiving medical attention and accessing adequate sanitation facilities. States must guarantee access to clear, timely and meaningful information to children and their families, and ensure access to health, based on equal treatment with any other citizen. Likewise, containment measures such as the closing of borders and restrictions on movement should not impede or block their right to request asylum and be reunited with members of their families.

- **Protect the education of children.** With closure of schools, children are forced to stay at home and this deprives them of their right to formal education. Children in vulnerable situations such as those living in refugee camps, asylum seekers, and children living in poverty depend heavily on schools for a daily meal and other basic needs. It is urgent that States use all the available technological and traditional means to reach out to these children. While schools in many countries are not equipped to provide online education, those which are equipped, must ensure keeping data on children safe and private as the risk of online predators are even greater while schools are closed or during a lockdown. In

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countries or regions where access to internet is poor or unavailable, the government must immediately endeavour to broadcast educational programmes on the TV and radios.

- **Protect children from abuse of power by security forces.** Failure to comply with mandatory social distancing and isolation measures should not result in irrational, disproportionate or illegal use of state force, under any circumstances. Violence perpetrated by security forces is unacceptable and severely reprehensible when perpetrated against children. The increase in violence against children registered should be countered by the adoption of clear intervention protocols for the security forces in the context of the current health emergency. This is indispensable in order to ensure the respect for human rights, to take due account of child development, psychology, and the particularly difficult circumstances of some children during confinement and quarantine, as well as to enable complaint mechanisms and protocols ensuring that state security forces are held accountable for their actions.

- **Protect children in armed conflicts.** Children in armed conflicts cumulate many of the above factors of vulnerability. Deprived of liberty, obliged to flee their households with their families or alone, often lacking access to food, water and sanitation, their human rights are even more threatened in this crisis. The UN Secretary-General launched on 23 March 2020 the global call for peace, in which he emphasized the need “to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives: COVID-19”. Respecting this call for a ceasefire, as well as putting an immediate end to the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts is now crucial, as well as the release of all children, while prioritizing reintegration assistance in the context of the pandemic.

- **Protect indigenous and minority children.** It is urgent to take an action plan to protect the life of indigenous children and their effective access to health services. Communication on prevention, hygiene and containment measures should be carried out with pedagogical tools and appropriate language based on an intercultural approach. Leaders, caregivers and traditional healers must be involved, while particular attention should be paid to indigenous or minority children’s language and culture. States have a duty to uphold the self-protection measures established by indigenous and minority communities, supporting and reinforcing them, if so requested.

- **Protect girls.** Incidents of gender-based violence (GBV) are on the rise in many countries around the globe as more people spend most of their time at home as a result of the measures imposed by States to curb the spread of the pandemic. An increased number of children, including girls, are living in facilities, such as children's homes, or being cared for by guardians or relatives other than their parents. As already observed in other similar circumstances, like the Ebola epidemic, this may put them at increased risk of GBV and sexual exploitation or abuse. Indeed, while schools are closed, girls are more at risk of being sexually exploited, victims of unintended pregnancy and of child labour. This makes it less likely for girls to return to school when classes resume which creates greater gender gaps in education.
In the face of the public health threat that the COVID-19 pandemic is generating, the States cannot abdicate their responsibility and commitment to uphold children’s rights. Good practices from certain authorities show that this is not only possible but is also reinforcing the impact of the fight against the pandemic. Indeed, already during the first weeks of the pandemic, some governments released children detained or transferred children deprived of liberty to family-based care; other authorities launched public education and prevention campaigns, or activated reporting mechanisms such as hotlines or other referral systems; tens of countries have committed to halt hostilities or declared ceasefires, following the call of the UN Secretary-General. Last but not least, children themselves have a great role to play, they just need to be meaningfully informed and empowered. Some governments already started doing so with excellent results.

**Defence for Children International present in 38 countries** remains more than ever active and vigilant to protect human rights of children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. [Read our DCI Survey on COVID-19 HERE.](#)

**For more information:**
Alex Kamarotos  
Defence for Children International (English, French, Spanish, Italian, Greek)

+33607028641 (mobile or WhatsApp)
+41 76 625 82 44

director@defenceforchildren.org  
Twitter: @DCIdirector