

Strong words and action needed to protect women's lives



AS world leaders attempt to tackle an unprecedented number of humanitarian crises, many of them deepened beyond imagination by the coronavirus pandemic, the United States is throwing

its weight around on the global stage to obstruct lifesaving aid efforts. The Trump administration appears intent on blocking international efforts and resolutions containing these critically important words: sexual and reproductive health.

Sexual and reproductive health care is essential health care. Yet it is often neglected, especially during emergencies. The health risks facing women and girls tend to multiply in times of crisis, and we can see the dangers clearly during Covid-19.

Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) teams around the world see women struggling to obtain the health services they need. Health facilities are shutting down, transportation is restricted, supplies of medicines and contraceptives are running low, and time-sensitive services are delayed—with devastating consequences. Unless we act now, many women and girls will die of preventable causes or suffer lifelong injuries simply because they cannot access care.

And yet, the US is using its tremendous power as the largest funder of global health and humanitarian assistance to slash international support for these essential services.

Most recently, the US has sought to strike references to sexual and reproductive health in an important resolution before the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on strengthening emergency humanitarian assistance—at a time when it is needed most. Among the sticking points is a line urging member states “to

ensure reliable and safe access to sexual and reproductive health-care services... in order to effectively meet the needs of women and adolescent girls and infants and protect them from preventable mortality and morbidity that occur in humanitarian emergencies.” Another key passage in the draft calls on states to meet the basic humanitarian needs of affected populations—“clean water, food, shelter, energy, health, including sexual and reproductive health,” among other things.

A single line in red ink stands out: “US: Cannot support references to sexual reproductive health in this text.”

It is not the first time the US has flagged these mightily significant words. In 2018, the US State Department issued a series of internal memos instructing UN diplomats to curtail support for sexual and reproductive health programmes and to oppose international resolutions that use the phrase “sexual and reproductive health.”

In 2019, the US succeeded in striking any reference to sexual and reproductive health care in a UN Security Council resolution on sexual violence and conflict.

Last month, the US explained its position in a letter addressed to the UN Secretary-General objecting to the United Nations Global Humanitarian Response Plan to Covid-19. The plan “cynically [places] the provision of ‘sexual and reproductive health services’ on the same level of importance as food-insecurity, essential health care, malnutrition, shelter, and sanitation,” reads the letter by USAID Acting Administrator John Barsa. The letter states that the UN should not use the coronavirus crisis “as an opportunity to advance access to abortion as an ‘essential service’.”

The US is cynically using its power in the midst of this crisis to roll back decades of progress made to improve access to health care and protect the lives of women and girls. Sexual and reproductive health care is not code for abortion. It’s a comprehensive set of services for women including prenatal check-ups, safe delivery care, neonatal care,

sexual violence care, treatment for sexually transmitted infections, contraception, and safe abortion care. These are absolutely essential services.

Recent studies show that even a small reduction in sexual and reproductive health care services during this pandemic will be catastrophic.

A study by the Guttmacher Institute predicts that just a 10 percent reduction in low and middle income countries could

mean an additional 15.4 million unintended pregnancies, more than 3.3 million unsafe abortions, and an additional 28,000 maternal deaths over the course of a year. At least 22,800 women already die each year due to complications from unsafe abortion, so the pandemic would more than double the death toll based on this conservative estimate of the impact. We are likely to see much more than a 10 percent loss in services, but the actual

scale will be hard to measure because women and girls with no access to care often suffer at home or hidden within communities. The awful reality is that more women and girls could die due to the pandemic’s disruption of sexual and reproductive health services than to the coronavirus itself.

We must avoid politicising health care and focus on the medical evidence: sexual and reproductive health programmes save lives. In 2018, MSF teams treated 24,900 cases

(Mexico City Policy) to prevent health providers around the world from even speaking about abortion or making referrals to other organisations that provide safe abortion care. The latest version of the Global Gag Rule applies restrictions on all US-funded global health assistance, not only aid to organisations involved in family planning. MSF does not receive US funding, but we see the harmful impacts of this policy on frontline health providers providing a range of services including mother and child health care, nutrition programmes, malaria treatment, and HIV care. A study published by The Lancet last year indicates that US policy to restrict funding for abortion services can lead to “more—and probably riskier—abortions in poor countries.”

So what can be done? Governments and health providers must make it clear that sexual and reproductive health care is essential care, and prioritise these services accordingly. We must make every effort to mitigate the risks of movement restrictions, the shutdown of health facilities, and supply shortages. Communities urgently need clear guidance, as misinformation and fear also prevent women from getting the services they need.

This coronavirus crisis should push us to adapt and innovate to get care to the people who need it most. Right now, women and health providers are struggling with the inaccessibility of brick-and-mortar facilities. It’s time to shift our focus toward community-based activities, remote support of services, and self-care models where possible. Global health actors, including MSF, need to engage more with women and their communities to adapt our responses.

We need strong words and strong action by world leaders, including the US, to meet the extraordinary humanitarian challenges ahead. We must ensure that women and girls have access to lifesaving health care—in the midst of a pandemic and always.

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PHOTO: UNFPA

Covid-19, constitutional crisis and rise of authoritarianism

MD ABDUL ALIM

LIKE all other sectors and spheres of activity, elections and democracy have become the victims of Covid-19 since its outbreak earlier this year. Due to the unprecedented crisis caused by the global health emergency, leaders across the world are focusing mainly on people’s lives and livelihoods, while setting elections and such democratic practices aside. Between January and June of this year, at least 10 national parliamentary and two presidential elections, six nationwide referendums and thousands of local elections and by-elections have been postponed due to the pandemic. Although fresh dates have been announced for some of the deferred elections, most of the elections have been postponed indefinitely. As a result, both elections and democracy are now “in quarantine” in many countries; no one knows when this prolonged quarantine will end.

In some countries, postponement of elections has created a constitutional crisis. Sri Lankan parliamentary elections, initially scheduled to be held on April 25, were rescheduled twice and are now expected to be held on August 5. Delaying elections due to Covid-19, the country faces a constitutional crisis as article 70 of Sri Lanka’s constitution states that a general election must be held and a new parliament seated within three months of the dissolution of the former parliament. As its parliament was dissolved on March 2 but no election was held within three months, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is running the government without parliamentary oversight.

At least 84 countries have declared a state of emergency in response to the pandemic, leading not only to suspension of democratic rights but also to fears about misuse of power. In Thailand, the government not only declared a state of emergency and imposed curfew, it also issued several orders and announcements that curb freedoms, rights and liberties of its citizens. The opposition, Move Forward Party, did not oppose the state

of emergency in order to curb Covid-19 cases. However, the party proposed a bill to amend the 2005 state of emergency decree to make the government accountable, to be checked by the legislative and judicial branches. Several rights activists are against the state of emergency declaration and continue to protest outside the Civil Court in Bangkok, seeking an order requiring the government to adhere to normal laws to control Covid-19 instead of an executive emergency decree.



A woman wearing a mask to prevent contracting the coronavirus leaves a voting booth to cast her absentee ballot for the parliamentary election at a polling station in Seoul, South Korea, on April 10, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/HEO RAN

Along with postponement of elections and declaration of state of emergency, a few countries “witnessed an unmistakable authoritarian surge, in which leaders around the globe have manipulated the coronavirus threat to consolidate their own political power and to run roughshod over democracy and human rights.” Therefore, *The Washington Post*, on April 13, wrote that “as leaders seize

powers to fight coronavirus, fear grows for democracy.” Similarly, an April 28 Foreign Policy article posited that “the pandemic provides ample opportunity to accelerate an evident trend toward authoritarianism.” There are illustrative examples in support of these statements.

Hungary declared a state of emergency due to Covid-19 on March 11. Later, despite courageous protests from local human rights groups, the Bill on Protection

of coronavirus autocracy. Israel’s prime minister has shut down courts and instituted intrusive surveillance of citizens. Chile has deployed the military to clear public squares once occupied by protesters. Russian President Vladimir Putin has firmly consolidated his power as he expanded his formidable apparatus of state repression in many ways including changes to the constitution that enable him to stay in power up to 2036. This was passed with public support. However, the election was marred by numerous voting irregularities.

While postponement of elections and suppression of civil liberties are problematic, holding elections during this time is also troublesome. A few countries have gone ahead with elections in the time of Covid-19, but the credibility of these elections is questionable. Held on June 21, the Serbian parliamentary election was the first national poll in a European country since the Covid-19 lockdown. It was boycotted by most of the opposition saying that taking part in the vote amid the coronavirus pandemic and without a free media around would only legitimise the government in what they called a “hoax vote.” However, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) visited a limited number of polling stations and found voting processes appearing to be smooth and administered efficiently, despite challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The turnout was roughly 48 percent, the lowest since the establishment of a multi-party system in Serbia in 1990.

But South Korea is a country that showed the world how to hold elections and continue democratic processes during a pandemic. The Korean legislative election, which was held on April 15, saw a 66.2 percent voter turnout—the highest since 1992. Along with voting at the polling stations, the country arranged mail voting as well as early voting at special polling stations for Covid-19 patients, voting for self-quarantined voters at certain times on the election day. All the polling stations were disinfected, and voters were

instructed to stand at least three feet apart, with lines carefully marked on the floor. All voters had their temperature taken, and those with temperatures above 37.5 degrees Celsius were taken from the regular line and directed to separate booths. In India, a series of Rajya Sabha elections were held on June 19, 2020.

Holding elections during a pandemic is not new. In 1918-20, during the height of the Spanish flu, which killed hundreds of thousands of Americans—with a total of 195,000 Americans dying in the month of October alone—elections were held on November 5, 1918 with around 40 percent turnout. During campaigning, candidates maintained social distancing, and on election day, voters and poll workers were required to wear masks.

Regular, credible democratic elections are fundamental to the proper functioning of a modern representative democracy. Therefore, election experts around the world are encouraging holding elections adjusted for the new normal with the suggestion to focus on how to protect the health of the democracy while protecting the health of the people. For saving both democracy and people’s lives, pandemic-time elections can be held by including online nomination, virtual campaigning through social and print media, radio and TV, even using banners, posters and leaflets, instead of door-to-door physical campaigning that might increase infection. For election day, along with fumigating the polling stations, voting hours may be extended and additional polling stations may be set up to avoid large gathering of voters. Some countries are also using mobile voting, postal voting, advance voting, etc.

Bangladesh, considering its political and social contexts, could consider some of these practices and make the required changes to the legal framework to hold genuine, legitimate democratic elections during the pandemic, which are of paramount importance to the democratic process.

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QUOTABLE Quote

B R AMBEDKAR
(1891-1956)
Indian political leader

So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Chickens and turkeys
- 5 Misbehave
- 10 Land measure
- 11 Moon feature
- 13 Place for snorkeling
- 14 Nemesis of Ness
- 15 Banish
- 17 Skillet
- 18 Get excited
- 19 Country lodgings
- 20 Refinery supply
- 21 Track event
- 22 Spanish farewell
- 25 Worker with a pick
- 26 Soft shot in

DOWN

- 1 Door-slamming comedy
- 2 Pacific, for one
- 3 Take by force
- 4 Boxing hit
- 5 Point a finger at
- 6 Packing box
- 7 Keg need
- 8 Perfect
- 9 Act of contrition
- 12 Jeremy of “The Avengers”
- 16 For us
- 21 Boxing hit
- 22 Floating aimlessly
- 23 Personal logs
- 24 Powerful
- 25 A lot of
- 27 Stephen King novel
- 29 Appraised
- 30 Kitchen come-on
- 31 Yard tools
- 32 Fabric workers
- 36 Mineral suffix

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BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	R	A	T	E	R	L	I	E	D
H	O	M	I	L	I	O	M	N	I
E	D	I	B	L	E	V	I	V	A
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M	I	N	T	J	O	L	E	P	
S	O	N	R	O	P	E			
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