

26th March, 2020

Mr. Simon Coveney TD
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
80 St. Stephen's Green
Dublin 2

Re: International Solidarity in Times of Crisis

Dear Minister Coveney

I know we are all immensely stressed at present and struggling to prevent further devastation from the Covid-19 crisis here. I am writing to you however in relation to some of the most vulnerable groups of people in the world who are in grave danger of being left even further behind than pre crisis. Covid-19 will hit especially hard for those who already have difficulties.

I understand from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) that a devastating healthcare crisis could occur in Gaza. PCHR are concerned over the healthcare system's inability to respond to the needs of patients if an outbreak occurs. According to PCHR, the healthcare facilities in Gaza are already on the verge of collapse due to the Israeli- imposed closure on the Gaza Strip for the last thirteen years. All of this has caused a fragile healthcare system in the Gaza Strip, a perpetual shortage of essential drugs and medical devices and insufficient number of specialized health professionals; rendering the system unable to meet the basic medical needs of the Gaza Strip population in normal times.

On 19th March 2020, Michael Lynk, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, said in a statement "that he is worried about the potential impact of COVID-19 on the Gaza Strip population. He added that the Gaza health care system was collapsing even before the pandemic, because its stocks of essential drugs are chronically low and its natural sources of drinkable water are largely contaminated. He explained that Gaza's population is also a physically more vulnerable population due to the malnutrition, deteriorating living conditions and high population density. Lynk warned that the possible widespread outbreak of the Coronavirus in the besieged Gaza Strip will exacerbate pressures on medical personnel".

In light of the fear of a health sector collapse in the Gaza Strip and the foreseeable inability of the healthcare system to deal with patients in the case of a Coronavirus spreads, PCHR have made the following points which we strongly support:

- Stresses that the primary responsibility for providing medical supplies to the Gaza Strip population lies with Israel and it must take all necessary preventive measures available to combat the spread of infectious diseases in accordance with Articles 55 and 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

- Calls upon the international community and WHO to put pressure on Israel and compel it to comply with its obligations, and to allow the entry of medical supplies and equipment necessary for Coronavirus medical examination.
- Calls upon the international community and humanitarian organisations to provide assistance to the health system in the Gaza Strip, including medical supplies to Gaza Hospitals, in order to combat the spread of Coronavirus.
- Stresses the need for coordination between MOH in Gaza and Ramallah to combat the spread of Coronavirus.

We would add a call for you to demand that Israel lifts the siege on Gaza and that you urge fellow EU foreign ministers to do the same.

Included in groups of vulnerable people are also refugees at Europe's external borders, as well as the homeless, and the elderly and the sick everywhere. The corona-crisis may potentially distract us from the suffering of those seeking protection, but violence and humanitarian disasters continue. That's why international solidarity is important now more than ever.

The virus of course does not differentiate according to skin colour, religion or gender. COVID-19 affects us all.

For Europe to confront this pandemic in unity, overcrowded refugee camps must be evacuated quickly. The Greek mainland needs support in this, as do the people on the Greek islands. For far too long, we have been letting these citizens down.

Currently, on Lesbos's Camp Moria alone, over 20,000 people live in a camp built to accommodate only 3,000. Quarantine, hand-washing or social-distancing are essential at this moment, but if you live in Moria, none of this is possible. These people are threatened with infection, faced with a lack of humanitarian care, and left to their fate. If the virus breaks out in such a camp, it will be almost impossible to stop it from spreading. Inaction at this time is to be complicit in the disaster that threatens those in need.

That is why we are calling on you to urge the European Commission and EU governments to ensure the following:

- Evacuation of the overcrowded refugee camps and provision of safe accommodation for migrants, where they can be protected from contracting and spreading the virus. The EU has room for humanity.
- Necessary quarantine and protective measures against coronavirus should be implemented everywhere to prevent the exponential spread of the virus. That includes refugee camps.
- Access to medical care for the homeless, refugees and all others. Through a European effort, humanitarian and financial support for the most affected areas, especially Greece.
- Access to asylum procedures and unconditional defence of the rule of law, including in times of crisis.

Furthermore, we are calling on the Irish government to support the call of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet for the authorisation of humanitarian exemptions to sanction measures for essential medical equipment and supplies to avoid the collapse of any national healthcare system. Such sanctions are greatly impacting the ability of medical efforts in countries such as Iran, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. Progress in upholding human rights is essential to improve these healthcare systems. Obstacles to the import of vital medical supplies, including over-compliance with sanctions by banks, will create long-lasting harm to vulnerable communities in these countries during this pandemic.

A Better World, Ireland's policy for international development outlines Ireland's vision of a more equal, peaceful and sustainable world. It charts a clear way forward to achieve this vision, shaping and protecting our stability, our prosperity, our shared interests and our common future. In times of crisis it is essential that we continue to play our role in the world according to such important values.

I look forward to hearing from you on these important matters.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Patricia King', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patricia King
General Secretary

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