

THE EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GLOBAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Briefing from Humanists UK, November 2020



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

On Thursday 26 November at 13.30-15.00, Jim Shannon MP has secured a Westminster Hall Debate on 'The effect of the covid-19 pandemic on Freedom of Religion or Belief'. Below you can find a briefing on persecution of the non-religious around the globe, in general terms, and on the impact of Covid-19 in particular. We would also be happy to provide you with a further bespoke briefing or suggested lines.

PERSECUTION OF THE NON-RELIGIOUS AROUND THE GLOBE – IN GENERAL

In the view of Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, 'In my observations, humanists, when they are attacked, are attacked far more viciously and brutally than in other cases.' In addition, we observe that the situation in many places in the world is even worse than one of persecution. The long history of complete suppression of non-religious people means that in many places it is simply not possible to be openly and legally non-religious in the first place.

The number of non-religious people in the world is consistently underestimated and there is simply no reliable data outside of the West. The reasons are numerous but mostly it is because admitting to non-religious beliefs is either dangerous or socially unacceptable. That is how severe the persecution is. Those willing to even say they are non-religious make up a much smaller minority across countries with serious FoRB violations than are Christians. In some countries – like Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Afghanistan – the population willing to declare they are non-religious is essentially non-existent, and in many others it is very small indeed.

There are, as far as we are aware, no members of the Humanist Society Pakistan who are based in Pakistan and are open about their beliefs. As one of their members has told us, 'There are many vigilante extremists eavesdropping and sniffing on social media for easy targets. Any sort of denial [of Islam] is considered and labelled as heresy in Pakistan. Once someone is accused of being rationalist, agnostic, or atheist in Pakistan, they can be easily murdered by an angry mob or undercover vigilante. Our apprehensions about repression by forces of obscurantism and Islamist terror are not just bombastic rhetoric. The violence and torture meted out to secular and humanist victims is not unsubstantiated.'

Some 13 countries have the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy; a number more have seen people murdered for the same. 40 have prison sentences for blasphemy or apostasy, and 18 more have some other criminal restrictions, meaning 71 have some kind of criminalisation. More generally, some 30 countries are classified by the *Freedom of Thought Report* as guilty of grave violations against the non-religious, with 56 more guilty of severe discrimination, and 100 more of systemic discrimination. Only 10 are deemed to be mostly satisfactory or free and equal.¹

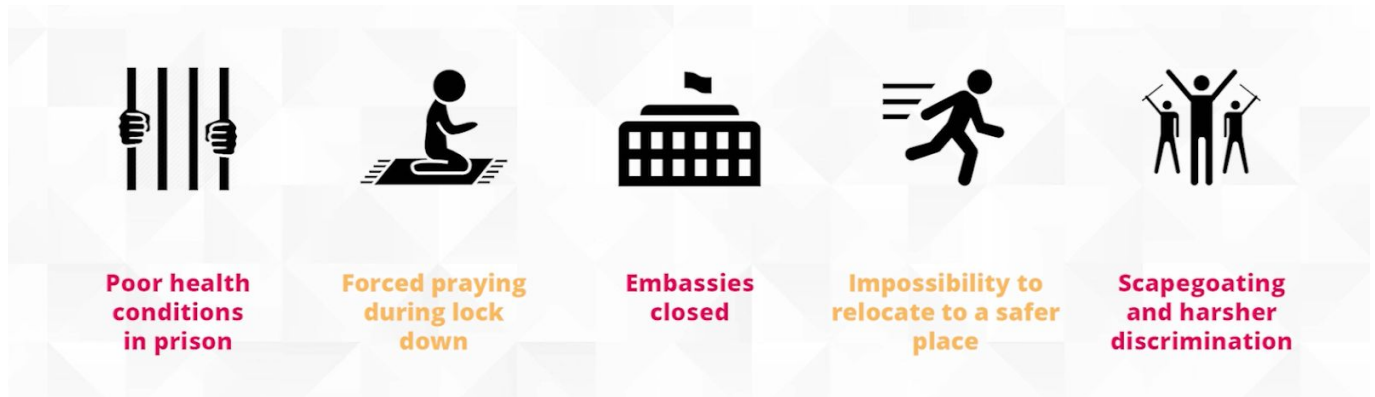
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE NON-RELIGIOUS

According to Humanists International, the global umbrella body for the humanist movement, 'The global Covid-19 crisis has dramatically affected the lives of humanists at risk. Many are in prison with little or no access to medical assistance and exposed to the contagion; the poor conditions in

¹ *Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International: <https://fot.humanists.international/>



many prisons, and disregard for their welfare, makes them all the more susceptible to contracting the virus. Still more find themselves stuck, unable to flee dangerous conditions at home or stranded in a foreign country, waiting for borders to open and struggling to sustain themselves financially.²



Humanists International graphic showing the ways in which the Covid-19 crisis has heightened the persecution of non-religious people.

Humanists International has also told us that 'many individuals have reached out to us expressing emotional distress about being unable to escape their families during lockdown; being forced to observe religious practices, fearing exposure. Most of those who reach out to us wish to flee their current situation, most often by going abroad, however, the closure of borders has rendered this all but impossible. We have cases where individuals are stuck in a limbo, either unable to leave their own country or else, stuck in transit between destinations.

'Other individuals have reported increased stigma against non-believers who are accused as being responsible for Covid-19, as it is seen as a punishment from God, whichever god that might be. They report people spitting on them (some assume/fear this is an attempt to give them the virus). In societies where being non-religious is frowned upon, it has meant that society has closed ranks further, leading to greater ostracism and difficulty finding employment.

'In terms of our ability to support individuals at risk, there are several elements, but the main thing is the difficulty in ensuring their safe passage. They require much more financial support as they are forced to live in hiding and are unable to return to/or seek employment. Few organisations, including our own, are built to provide long-term financial aid, and many are finding that their pot for grants is drying up as demand for financial support increases.

'Online abuse has not at all abated in the period. Where state resources and institutions were already weak, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue, which in turn impacts anyone seeking assistance from them, be they a religious minority or not. The need for mental health support is also something striking.'

² 'Protect Humanists at Risk', Humanists International:
<https://humanists.international/get-involved/campaigns/humanists-at-risk/>



Humanists International has also highlighted that organisations in developing countries with little or no digital capacity simply had to stop all their activities – being unable to move online. Fundraising is also extremely hard under these circumstances, and all resources are allocated towards humanitarian support rather than humanist campaigning; this means that some self-funded organisations are left with very little or no money now.

Mubarak Bala is a clear example of an individual who has suffered due to the pandemic. Bala, the President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, was first arrested in April, after being accused of posting blasphemous content on Facebook. He was arbitrarily detained for six months before he was allowed in October to see his lawyer or wife. He still today hasn't been charged. Authorities have used the pandemic as an excuse for keeping him in this arbitrary detention, with conditions in Nigerian prisons significantly worse than before the pandemic, and serious risks of outbreaks.³ After meeting him, his lawyer said that his fellow 'inmates have threatened to kill him if he does not make peace with God. He is now constantly in fear for his own life and that of his wife and child.'⁴

Humanists International also provides primary testimony from people in key countries of concern:

- **Sri Lanka:** 'Most members of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka are stressed, especially those of us that are now forced to do the five daily Islamic prayers together with their family members... At this moment, we can't do anything as an organization since most of us ex-Muslims are in the closet, and we strictly follow the guidelines set by the government.'⁵
- **Nigeria:** 'Superstition is a huge problem... It's almost like another virus to fight. Witchcraft accusations related to the virus are increasing and... we are doing what we can to prevent alleged witches from being harassed and lynched. Also, many people are desperate and vulnerable so they are prone to being exploited by snake oil sellers. Humanists need to act fast, and to spread proper evidence-based information.'⁶
- **Kenya:** 'As COVID-19 spread around the world, here in Kenya the government seemed to place religion ahead of health. President Uhuru Kenyatta hosted religious leaders to a day of national prayer just before the government suspended all social gatherings/events. As the public health measures took effect, some religious leaders said that their places of worship would remain open to the public, against government directives. This business-as-usual attitude among some religious and political leaders threatened to undermine public efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus.' Humanists International adds, 'Those of religious faith

³ *Individual Briefing: Mubarak Bala*, Humanists International, page 8:

<https://drive.google.com/uc?export=download&id=1K2wu-lWaVbRYF6SGpAKEj048HcssTclQ>

⁴ 'Mubarak Bala meets with lawyer', Humanists International, 7 October 2020:

<https://humanists.international/2020/10/mubarak-bala-meets-with-lawyer/>

⁵ 'Rishvin Ismath from Sri Lanka: "Some of us are forced to pray five times a day"', Humanists International:

<https://humanists.international/blog/rishvin-ismath-from-sri-lanka-some-of-us-are-forced-to-pray-five-times-a-day/>

⁶ 'Leo Igwe from Nigeria: "Many might die of hunger, not as a result of the virus."', Humanists International:

<https://humanists.international/blog/leo-igwe-from-nigeria-many-might-die-of-hunger-not-as-a-result-of-the-virus/>



were initially inclined to explain the pandemic variously as some kind of global conspiracy or a punishment from God.⁷

- **Zimbabwe:** Humanists International reports, 'State bias towards religion has also manifested itself during the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of presidential calls for National Prayer Days. During one such event, the President is reported to have intimated that such a pandemic comes "as a warning to people to leave their sinful ways. As such, President Mnangagwa said Zimbabweans had two choices to make in light of the pandemic; either to repent and seek God's help or continue to live in defiance of his word." Throughout the event, prayer was touted as the way to eradicate the pandemic.'⁸
- **Bangladesh:** Laws controlling freedom of expression are frequently used to curtail discussion of religion, or criticism of the Government by humanists. Humanists International reports that 'Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, ARTICLE 19 has observed an upsurge in attacks on media critical of the government's response... journalists had been arrested, many charged under the [Digital Security Act]. Other journalists, medical professionals, students and activists faced harassment and intimidation in order to suppress criticism.'⁹

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Since 1896, our work has been helping people be happier and more fulfilled. By bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Together with our partners Humanist Society Scotland, we speak for 100,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

We are a member of Humanists International, the global umbrella body for the humanist movement.

For more details, information and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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⁷ Kenya entry of the *Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International: https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/kenya/#Non-belief_in_the_times_of_a_pandemic

⁸ Zimbabwe entry of the *Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International: https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-eastern-africa/zimbabwe/#Religious_Bias

⁹ Bangladesh entry of the *Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International: https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/bangladesh/#Freedom_of_expression_a_dvocacy_of_humanist_values

