The value of life in times of pandemic

The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme provides country offices with specialized professionals and specific support on projects related to human rights. We work to ensure that the government response takes into account the specificities of each group in a situation of vulnerability – for example, indigenous peoples – also in the treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TRAPPED IN NO ONE’S LAND

Andrea Nomdedeu started her UNV assignment with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Mexico in April 2019. As the one responsible for migration and internal displacement, she monitors the situation of thousands of Central American migrants who pass through the country each year, in many cases to try to enter the United States.

She describes the dramatic situation of the irregular migrants held in detention centers in Mexico.

“There are many people from other countries of
According to her, when migrants are detained by migration officers, they are sent to detention centers called *Estaciones migratorias* (migration stations), that are often overcrowded. On one occasion, it was reported that there were more than 2,000 people where there should be 900. She comments on the dramatic nature of this situation while emphasizing the importance of supporting civil society organizations that defend human rights.

"The situation on the border with the USA changed dramatically last summer," she details. "On the country's northern border there have always been illegal activities related to migration, with abundant cases of human trafficking, but the increase in police operations was added to that in 2019, and some episodes of extreme violence occurred, says Andrea.

In this situation, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other UN agencies provide migrants with information on how to regularize their status or seek asylum. Andrea also highlights how she has counted on the support of the UN regional office from the beginning of April 2019 and has been able to travel throughout Mexico, documenting and reporting cases of human rights violations, and promoting the protection of migrants’ rights in particular.

Unfortunately, things have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government of Guatemala decided to close its border in March 2020 as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the country. This prevented the extradition of Honduran and Salvadoran citizens to their countries, causing them to be held for longer periods in migration centres on the
southern border of Mexico and spread fear of the virus within the detainees.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our capacity to act and has greatly worsened migrants' situation within the country," Andrea shares. "There were riots at a couple of facilities in Chiapas and Tabasco and according to information we received from civil society organizations, the Mexican authorities repressed the migrants violently."

In response to these events, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR and OHCHR, along with several Mexican organizations issued different press releases asking for the release of migrants. However, "according to reports, people were left close to the Guatemalan border days later, which could push them to go back to their countries by their own means. This put them at higher risk and also caused problems with the local population," Andrea says.

FIGHTING FOR THEIR RIGHTS

This is not just Mexico’s reality. Giada Rubina, another UN Volunteer who serves in Honduras with the Democratic Space Unit of OHCHR since 2019, shares a similar story. Giada is in charge of monitoring the civil rights of various vulnerable groups, as well as promoting dialogue between public institutions and civil society organizations. The Democratic Space Unit's mandate is to accompany local organizations and provide technical assistance to state institutions such as the Human Rights Protection Mechanism. It has collaborated with the National Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators and Justice Operators to develop a guide for the implementation of gender and intersectional perspective for its operations. Within this unit, Giada is in charge of gender, LGBTI and Garifuna people issues.
"We offer technical support to the Office of the Human Rights Prosecutor and the National Commissioner for Human Rights on specific cases and processes," Giada details.

Like Mexico, Honduras has also faced challenging times due to COVID-19.

"With the advent of the pandemic, everything has worsened. Since hospitals were overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases, there have been many situations of pregnant women who have had to give birth on the street or at home without health care, as well as other violations of sexual and reproductive rights and health care in general. It is a terrible situation for many people, since, according to a World Bank report, 58 per cent of people in the country live on informal economic activities," Giada shares.

Following Giada’s description, the government enacted on March 16 the executive decree PCM-021-2020 that suspended freedom of assembly (later reestablished thanks to the actions of OHCHR and civil society organizations), freedom of movement, and other constitutional rights. Due to the declared health and humanitarian emergency, an absolute curfew was established and the police enforced it through what could amount to disproportionate force.

These circumstances have significantly affected the work of activists, especially local monitoring and legal representation in cases of human rights violations and attacks on groups such as trans people. OHCHR has monitored several violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression discrimination.
"The most affected are the indigenous and Garifuna communities," Giada indicates. She also tells how the government itself does not always do enough in order to ensure recognition of the legal entitlement of the indigenous population to their own land.

"Many transnational companies just want to implement tourist or extractive projects. But consultations with the local population, according to the international standards on the matter, are not taking place as they should, and a large number of people are forced to move away and lose their land." Giada tells.

Lastly, Giada points out that the work volunteers do on the ground is essential to improve the rights of the local population.

"When some try to weaken the actions of civil society organizations and the voice of those who report injustices, we can assess the situation in the country and provide assistance to the institutions that require it."

This article was prepared with the kind support of Online Volunteer José María Sainz Maza del Olmo.

• Human Rights Day • migrants • COVID-19 • Coronavirus

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