



UN Volunteer Zein Ayoub during a regional webinar on the Right of Youth to Participate in Public Affairs.

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UN Volunteers monitoring human rights in areas hardest hit by the pandemic

UN Volunteers are supporting the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) at an unprecedented time. Over thirty UN Volunteers are on the ground around the world, monitoring the measures countries have taken to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and human rights implications for the most vulnerable. They are also engaging youth, women and under-represented groups in dialogue, peacebuilding and protection for migrants and refugees.

UN Volunteer Giada Rubina supports a specialized OHCHR unit in Honduras that promotes dialogue and provides technical assistance. She is particularly concerned with strict lockdown measures that have decreased access to legal aid, limited rights awareness and the movement of rights activists.

UN Volunteer Zein Ayoub is monitoring human rights in justice systems and also concerned with the protection risks increasing in migrant communities. From the OHCHR office in Beirut, he assesses new sentencing regulations for incarcerated persons and the extent to which they comply with humanitarian law.

Their efforts have drawn attention to pre-existing social inequalities and the challenges advancing the cause of justice reform in the Covid-19 pandemic. In Mali and Mexico, UN Volunteers have taken further initiative and have purposed to help justice systems integrate a human rights-based approach.

Adama Zabré is a Burkinabé international UN Volunteer and Human Rights Officer serving with OHCHR in Mali. Adama conducts both monthly monitoring in detention facilities and training on international human rights and humanitarian law with the National Guard, Gendarmerie, Police and civil society advocates. These activities have been critical to decreasing human rights abuses resulting from armed conflict, civilian casualties and high incarceration rates.

UN Volunteer Andrea Nomdedeu supports OHCHR in Mexico, a common transit area for Central American migrants. COVID-19-related border closings and travel restrictions have limited opportunities to repatriate migrants and they have been stranded – exposed to an increasingly hostile local environment and prolonged, indefinite stays in detention centers. Andrea documents these conditions across Mexico and is currently monitoring reports of violence in Chiapas and Tabasco, where there have been riots.

In addition to human rights violations in justice systems, UN Volunteers are monitoring the social environment. For example, migrants have been [stigmatized as carriers and spreaders of the virus](#) and are often excluded from social services at the state level.

“ Social welfare benefits have been distributed to citizens in many instances. However, these were not provided to the same degree for migrants, who can no longer afford the costs of living, including housing, education, food and other necessities. Thus, we have to increase our advocacy for this segment of the population. --Zein Ayoub, UN Volunteer Associate Human Rights Officer, OHCHR Regional Office for the Middle East

While these concerns are present across many migrant groups, they are

especially profound among children. UN Volunteer Seulbee Lee supports UNICEF in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Child Protection Associate. Her post is funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea and could not coincide with a more critical time. Over 1,100 children are stranded, with a third of this group comprised of unaccompanied minors and separated children.

Seulbee supports fundraising and communications, while making recommendations to expand child protection initiatives, including activities that pair local children and unaccompanied minors together at school.

In newly-formed countries, UN advocacy is particularly important because state agencies, disaster response and protection mechanisms are still developing. UN Volunteer Sandra Rodriguez for instance, is a Human Rights Officer supporting the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). With a focus on conflict-affected areas, she monitors, investigates and reports human rights violations, including sexual violence. Sandra also participates in advocacy and rights awareness activities that help institutions uphold international human rights and humanitarian law.

States are also striving to increase community engagement among underrepresented groups. Nermeen Saad supports OHCHR in Tunisia as a Human Rights Officer and through assessments, identified inclusion opportunities in the education, health, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sectors. This data was leveraged to launch capacity building activities that integrated a human rights-based approach in municipal project planning and aims to eliminate discriminatory practices.

Moreover, UN Volunteers Line Bayram and Celine Rabbat have helped to organize webinars with youth representatives from 16 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and develop youth-centered policy recommendations for OHCHR's pandemic response. In addition, Celine is collaborating with Lebanese universities to launch human rights clubs and ensure support for youth networks is sustainable.

In Nepal, youth engagement is already growing rapidly. UN Volunteers are supporting Volunteer for Action (V4ACTION), a coalition of over 500 local volunteers and United Nations agencies which participate in dialogue and awareness campaigns, produce and disseminate videos and social media messages. These activities address the concerns of minorities who have limited access to national social assistance programs, encounter violence and are not equally recognized in national legislative frameworks.

Indeed, UN Volunteers are worldwide, promoting human rights in the areas

hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. They are real-life heroes, navigating lockdowns and fragile environments that narrow freedom of movement and accelerate vulnerabilities.



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