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Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide

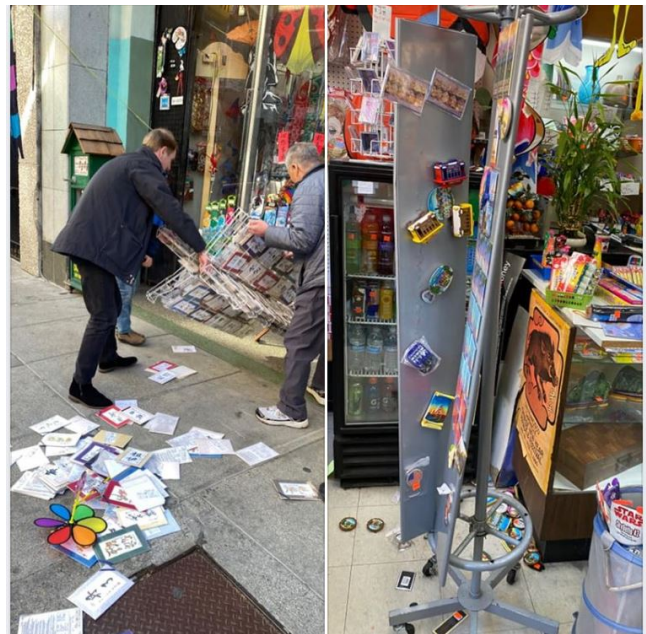
National Action Plans Needed to Counter Intolerance
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(New York) – Governments should take urgent steps to prevent racist and xenophobic violence and discrimination linked to the Covid-19 pandemic while prosecuting racial attacks against Asians and people of Asian descent, Human Rights Watch said today. On May 8, 2020, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that “the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering” and urged governments to “act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate.”

Government leaders and senior officials in some instances have directly or indirectly encouraged hate crimes, racism, or xenophobia by using anti-Chinese rhetoric. Several political parties and groups, including in the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece, France, and Germany have also latched onto the Covid-19 crisis to advance anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultra-nationalist, anti-semitic, and xenophobic conspiracy theories that demonize refugees, foreigners, prominent individuals, and political leaders.

“Racism and physical attacks on Asians and people of Asian descent have spread with the Covid-19 pandemic, and government leaders need to act decisively to address the trend,” said John Sifton, Asia advocacy director. “Governments should act to expand public outreach, promote tolerance, and counter hate speech while aggressively investigating and prosecuting hate crimes.”

The UN committee responsible for monitoring compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which 182 countries have ratified, has recommended that governments adopt



In this screenshot, a man helps a shop owner pick up a display stand after a group of teenagers vandalize the store in Chinatown San Francisco on March 16, 2020.

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“national action plans against racial discrimination.” Plans should lay out specific approaches to combat racism and discrimination, from enhanced policing of hate crimes to public messaging and education programming encouraging tolerance. Governments need to take urgent action to adopt new action plans to address the wave of Covid-19 racism and xenophobia.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Asians and people of Asian descent have been targets of derogatory language in media reports and statements by politicians as well as on social media platforms, where hate speech related to Covid-19 also appears to have spread extensively. US President Donald Trump’s use of the term “Chinese virus” and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s use of “Wuhan virus” may have encouraged the use of hate speech in the US. Although by late March Trump stepped back from using the term and issued a tweet in support of “our Asian-American community,” he has not directed any specific governmental response toward protecting Asians and people of Asian descent.

The governor of the Veneto region of Italy, an early epicenter of the pandemic, told journalists in February that the country would be better than China in handling the virus due to Italians’ “culturally strong attention to hygiene, washing hands, taking showers, whereas we have all seen the Chinese eating mice alive.” He later apologized. Brazil’s education minister ridiculed Chinese people in a tweet suggesting that the pandemic was part of the Chinese government’s “plan for world domination.”

Increases in racist rhetoric have coincided with increases in racist attacks. Since February, Asians and people of Asian descent around the world have been subjected to attacks and beatings, violent bullying, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination that appear linked to the pandemic.

In Italy, the civil society group Lunaria since February has collected over 50 reports and media accounts of assaults, verbal harassment, bullying, and discrimination against people of Asian descent. Human rights and other groups in France, Australia, and Russia have also told Human Rights Watch of Covid-19-related attacks and harassment of people of Asian descent.

In the UK, Asian people have been punched in the face and taunted, accused of spreading coronavirus. Two women attacked Chinese students in Australia, punching and kicking one and yelling “Go back to China” and “you fucking immigrants.” Two men attacked a Chinese-American in Spain and beat him so badly that he was in a coma for two days. A man with a knife attacked a Burmese family in Texas.

In Africa, there have been reports of discrimination and attacks on Asian people accused of carrying coronavirus, as well as foreigners generally, including in Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa. In Brazil, the media have reported harassment and shunning of people of Asian descent.

In some instances, governments have imposed strict lockdowns that indiscriminately affect only foreign workers without providing adequate health care, financial assistance, or other services that many workers now need to survive. In early May, the Malaysian authorities carried out mass raids to detain refugees and migrant workers,

suggesting without basis that the migrant community and Rohingya refugees were responsible for the spread of Covid-19.

Across the Middle East, persistent racist rhetoric in public discourse against foreign workers intensified after several Covid-19 outbreaks occurred in densely populated segregated areas for foreign workers, most of whom are Asian.

Discrimination against Chinese people has also been reported in South Korea, Japan, and Indonesia.

Discrimination hasn't been limited to Asians or people of Asian descent. In India and Sri Lanka, where leaders have done little to stop rising anti-Muslim discrimination in recent years, many apparent Covid-19-related cases of attacks and discrimination against Muslims have been reported. In Myanmar, ultra-nationalist leaders have used the pandemic to justify threats and hate speech against Muslims.

In early April 2020, Chinese authorities in the southern city of Guangzhou, Guangdong province, which has China's largest African community, began a campaign to forcibly test Africans for the coronavirus, and ordered them to self-isolate or to quarantine in designated hotels. Landlords then evicted African residents, forcing many to sleep on the street, and hotels, shops, and restaurants refused African customers. Other foreign groups have generally not been subjected to similar treatment.

“Repeatedly and publicly condemning racism is an important part of any government’s response to the coronavirus,” Sifton said. “Governments also need to adopt special public education initiatives, strengthen policing of hate crimes, and offer support to communities victimized by discrimination and racially motivated attacks. “Social media companies have a responsibility to protect users against hateful and xenophobic content on their platforms, and should invest adequate resources to addressing it and mitigating its harm.”

Country-Specific Cases

United States

Anti-Asian incidents have continued in the US since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, with numerous media reports in February and March about attacks and discrimination linked to Covid-19. By late April, a coalition of Asian-American groups that had created a reporting center called STOP AAPI HATE said it had received almost 1,500 reports of incidents of racism, hate speech, discrimination, and physical attacks against Asians and Asian-Americans.

In one typical incident, a Chinese-American reported “I was on the phone with my mom speaking in Mandarin when a woman walked by and yelled ‘get this corona virus chink away from me,’ directed at me.”

At least 125 of the incidents reported were physical attacks. Among the reported incidents: “A truck drove by and threw a [fast food franchise] drink on my back and yelled ‘Hey chink, you’re fucking nasty.’” In another, an Asian-

American waiting for a bus said a man:

began berating me. I ignored him ... [then] an object of substantial weight was thrown at me with high velocity – missing me but impacting the side of the bus with a sickening ‘thwack.’ Instantly, I sobered to an awareness in the amount of trauma the object would have caused if it had struck my head.

The group also reported hundreds of cases in which Asian-Americans were harassed in public or barred from businesses or transportation, yelled at in supermarkets, accused of “bringing coronavirus” to the US, or refused transport in car services like Uber or Lyft.

On May 4, the Anti-Defamation League released a list of near-daily incidents of racist attacks and cases of harassment from January through early May. For instance, on May 3, a stranger shouted at an Asian man on the New York subway. “You’re infected China boy, you need to get off the train” and then attempted to pull the man out of his seat.

From March through early May, there were numerous public reports of violent physical attacks on Asian Americans including in California, Minnesota, New York, and Texas. NextShark, a website focused on Asian-American news, only received a few messages per day before the pandemic about cases involving anti-Asian bias; now it receives dozens.

Senior members of several Asian-American and other nongovernmental organizations have told Human Rights Watch that many members of the Asian-American community they work with have experienced abuse or harassment, or know someone who has.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other federal agencies have not taken any specific actions to address the rise in racist attacks and discrimination, although several state and local governments have set up hotlines and directed authorities to investigate cases of attacks or discrimination.

United Kingdom

Several violent attacks against people of Asian descent were reported when the Covid-19 outbreak began in the UK in February, including several physical attacks or beatings.

In early May, Sky News reported that data it had obtained through Freedom of Information requests to various regional UK police forces showed at least 267 anti-Asian hate crimes recorded across the country between January and March. In many jurisdictions, the figures for the first three months of 2020 were higher than all of 2018 or 2019. The figures from the British Transport Police between January and March, for instance, showed anti-Asian (or “anti-Chinese”) hate crime incidents matching the total number of complaints during all of 2019.

Stop Hate UK, an anti-racism group, reported in March that it had received increasing numbers of calls or reports of “racism, discrimination, and verbal abuse, arising from perceptions that they are members of the Chinese

community.”

The senior-most UK police official responsible for hate crime nationally has stated publicly that police forces are monitoring anti-Asian hate crime and take such crimes seriously. In a recent release of crime statistics generally during the Covid-19 outbreak, however, police authorities focused on crime decreasing generally, without noting the rise in anti-Asian hate crime or indicating steps they are taking to stop it.

Several of the country’s local police forces did not provide information to the Sky News Freedom of Information requests about Covid-19-related hate crimes. This raises concerns about whether they are collecting data on anti-Asian hate crimes and whether they are monitoring and disaggregating hate crime by ethnicity, despite clear official guidance to do so.

Russia

On about February 20, after Russia banned Chinese citizens from entering the country, the state-owned transport company Mosgortrans began ordering drivers of public transport in Moscow to report Chinese passengers to the police. Staff stopped many passengers perceived to be Asian and asked for identification and the number of their metro pass to track their movements. The Chinese embassy sent a letter to the Moscow government on February 24 asking them to take steps to stop the discriminatory practice. During the last week of February, well before Moscow was placed under lockdown, police raided several locations to identify Chinese citizens and force them into quarantine, regardless of their travel histories.

The Russian group SOVA, which monitors xenophobia and racism, told Human Rights Watch that there had been increased attacks against Asians since February. It also reported a “wave of insulting and racist commentary directed at Chinese people and natives of Central Asia on social media” in relation to Covid-19.

A media report by Lenta on March 29 detailed several accounts, including cases of people yelling at Asians or Central Asians on the subway or in public, asserting that “the Chinese brought coronavirus to this country.” Through March, there were also reported incidents of discriminatory actions against Asian-looking people in Nizhnevartovsk, Ekaterinburg, Tatarstan, and Makhachkala, among other places.

Australia

A spate of cases of racist abuse and attacks and vandalism against people of Asian descent have been reported across the country since the outbreak of Covid-19. For example, there were reports in late March in Sydney of cases in which “Death to dog eaters” was painted in front of an Asian man’s house and of people screaming racist abuse at two sisters, calling them “Asian dogs” who “brought Coronavirus here” and “dumb whore.”

Near Melbourne, also in late March, a Chinese-Australian family’s suburban home was targeted with racist vandalism three times in the space of a week: on March 20, the family found the words “COVID-19 China die” spray painted on the door of their garage. Late the following night, an unidentified person threw a large rock though

one of their windows. On March 29, the door of their garage was again spray painted, this time with the words “leave and die.”

On April 15, 2 women in a group attacked 2 female Chinese students at Melbourne University, yelling racist statements such as, “Go back to China” and “you fucking immigrants.” One of the women repeatedly punched one of the students in the head and, after pushing her to the ground, kicked her in the torso several times.

A survey focusing on Covid-19-related racism against Asians and Asian-Australians recorded 178 incidents during the first two weeks of April countrywide. The survey, by the community group Asian Australian Alliance, has received about 12 reports a day since April 2, ranging from racial slurs to physical assault. The majority of racist incidents reported – 62 percent – were against women. Australia’s Human Rights Commission also reported a spike in complaints about racist attacks. The Australian National University created a “prejudice census” to better collect information about the surge of incidents linked to Covid-19.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has criticized Covid-19-related racist attacks, telling Australians to simply “stop it.” Alan Tudge, Australia’s acting minister for immigration and multicultural affairs, also strongly condemned the rise in racist attacks, and a Labor parliament member, Andrew Giles, and other opposition leaders have called for the government to restart a national anti-racism campaign.

India

Hate speech against Muslims, already a serious and growing problem since the election of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2015, increased in connection with the spread of Covid-19.

In April, social media and WhatsApp groups were flooded by calls for social and economic boycotts of Muslims, including by BJP supporters. Several physical attacks on Muslims have also occurred, including of volunteers distributing relief material, amid falsehoods accusing them of spreading the virus deliberately.

Hate speech against Muslims appears to have grown after Indian authorities announced that a large number of Muslims had tested positive for Covid-19 after attending a mass religious congregation in Delhi, organized by the international Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat. BJP officials fanned the flames by calling the Jamaat meeting a “Talibani crime” and “CoronaTerrorism.” Some mainstream media supportive of the BJP have used terms like #CoronaJihad, causing the hashtag to go viral on social media.

The situation grew so serious that the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a statement of caution, noting that “it is very important that we do not profile the cases on the basis of racial, religious, and ethnic lines.”

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not explicitly condemned hate speech against Muslims, but tweeted “COVID19 does not see race, religion, colour, caste, creed, language, or borders before striking. Our response and conduct thereafter should attach primacy to unity and brotherhood. We are in this together.” But Indian authorities at the

national and local level have not taken adequate steps to stem the increasingly toxic atmosphere or conduct adequate investigations of attacks where appropriate.

Sri Lanka

Several government officials have made stigmatizing public comments about Sri Lanka's minority Muslim community in the context of the pandemic, as hate speech has been reported across the country. This includes claims that Muslims are responsible for deliberately spreading the pandemic, along with calls for boycotts of Muslim businesses. Muslim organizations wrote to the government on April 12 to draw attention to an increase in hate speech in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan government issued a rule on March 27 that anyone who dies from Covid-19 complications must be cremated, which is at odds with Islam religious practice. The WHO has said that cremation should be “a matter of cultural choice and available resources,” and is not necessary to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Four UN special rapporteurs issued a communication on April 8 finding that the rule was a violation of freedom of religion and also drawing attention to anti-Muslim hate speech and the stigmatization of Muslims who had tested positive for Covid-19. A Muslim man, Ramzy Razeek, who wrote against the cremation rule on Facebook, received death threats. When he complained to the police, he was arrested on April 9.

International Legal Obligations

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination obligates countries to “condemn racial discrimination” and undertake measures aimed at “eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and promoting understanding among all races” while undertaking “not to sponsor, defend, or support racial discrimination by any persons or organizations.” Countries need to “prohibit and bring to an end, by all appropriate means ... racial discrimination by any persons, group, or organization” and “discourage anything which tends to strengthen racial division.”

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), set up to monitor the treaty's provisions, has stated in a general recommendation on combating racist hate speech that “[f]ormal rejection of hate speech by high-level public officials and condemnation of the hateful ideas expressed play an important role in promoting a culture of tolerance and respect.” The CERD committee recommends that governments undertake “information campaigns and educational policies calling attention to the harms produced by racist hate speech,” and that training for police and legal systems is “essential” to foster “familiarization with international norms protecting freedom of opinion and expression and norms protecting against racist hate speech.”

Given the upsurge in anti-Asian and other racism and xenophobia related to the Covid-19 pandemic, all governments should adopt new action plans to address emerging forms of discrimination and xenophobia tailored to the new and changing circumstances, Human Rights Watch said. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights outlined best strategies for adopting action plans in a set of guidelines released in 2014.

Region / Country

- Africa
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- Europe/Central Asia
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- United States
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