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Franciscans International

A voice at the United Nations

Defending human rights in times of Covid-19

The dramatic spread of the novel coronavirus has created a global and multifaceted crisis. As the world struggles to overcome the pandemic, human rights have come under renewed pressure. Covid-19 has exacerbated many existing inequalities, leaving people who are already marginalized even more exposed. In their urgency to respond to the pandemic, many governments have ignored their human rights obligations, while some have used it as a pretext to impose new restrictive policies. However, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly [pointed out](#), “human rights cannot be an afterthought in times of crisis,” especially if we want to build back stronger.

Over the past month, Franciscans International has continued its work at the UN to make sure that these concerns are heard. Even more than usual, we rely on our extensive network of Franciscans and other grassroots partners to gather information, reports, and testimonies. This documentation is the basis on which our advocacy continues, despite the lock-downs and other restrictions that have been imposed.



Franciscans in São Paulo hand out food to local residents during the Covid-19 lockdown. Image by SEFRAS

Our sisters and brothers at the United Nations



Armando González OFM
JPIC Guatemala

“We ask you to stop everything that threatens the human life of our migrant brothers.”

Founded in 2018, the Franciscan Network on Migration connects people in the United States, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala, who work to support migrants that are trying to escape poverty, violence, and crime in Central America. The Franciscans in these countries try to protect migrants and refugees through various means, including by

published in April. The first [examines](#) not only the impact of the pandemic on human rights, but also why a structural disregard for them has left the world more vulnerable to this novel coronavirus in the first place. Our second statement [looks](#) at the intersections of Covid-19, poverty, and climate change as key issues that illustrate the need for international solidarity and systemic change. The information we continue to receive has also been used for a number of reports that Franciscans International has submitted to the UN.

Nevertheless, the current restrictions have a direct impact on our work at the UN. A number of important meetings have been postponed, suspended, or cancelled. Others are now conducted virtually, which means there is less opportunity for interactions with our staff, grassroots representatives, and other stakeholders. However, Franciscans International has been exploring new avenues to continue our engagement, including going digital.



A 'hybrid' discussion during the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Image by UN Photo Geneva.

During the 44th session of the Human Rights Council, which took place in July after a long period of uncertainty, three friars were able to address the Council through video messages on the situation in the Philippines and the rights of migrants. Normally, Franciscans International would organize side events during UN sessions to provide a platform for Franciscans to share testimonies from their communities. Unable to do so in person, we now hosted [three webinars](#) during the Human Rights Council and the High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development. Through these virtual events, we could still facilitate discussions on extreme poverty, the right to water, and the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development with participants from all over the world, including UN stakeholders from Geneva and New York.

medical support.

However, Franciscans like Brother Armando operate in an environment that is growing increasingly hostile to their work, and the people they support. Franciscans in Guatemala have been repeatedly threatened and harassed, while a lack of funding continues to be a source of stress and pressure. Meanwhile, hostile government policies, including the militarization of borders, are forcing migrants to take ever-more dangerous routes as they try to reach safety.

Brother Armando addressed the Human Rights Council immediately after the Special Rapporteur on migrants presented a report examining the right to freedom of association for migrants and their defenders. In his statement, he shared some of his recent experiences, and called on countries to abandon inhumane policies like arbitrary detentions and forced deportations.

mindful of the fact that many of the problems we seek to address are not caused by the current crisis, even if their impacts are now more felt. The Covid-19 pandemic should be a wake-up call to help us build back better.

Franciscans call for accountability in the Philippines



Franciscan brothers during the Covid-19 lock-down in Manila.

The Philippines have been plunged into a deep human rights crisis ever since the current government launched its so-called ‘war on drugs’ in 2016. Since then, over 27.000 people – overwhelmingly from communities living in poverty – have been killed by security forces and vigilantes, spurred on by the President who has publicly stated that “if you know of any addicts, go ahead and kill them yourself.” The Franciscan family, together with the wider Catholic Church and civil society in the Philippines, have stood in vocal opposition to these gross human rights violations.

As part of this work, the Franciscans have [repeatedly called attention](#) to this crisis at the Human Rights Council. In a major step forward in 2019, the Council asked the High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a report on the situation in the country. Presented on 30 June, it concluded that there were no realistic domestic ways to pursue justice in the country itself. In response, Father Angel Cortez OFM and Father Christian Buenafe O.Carm, who both have been deeply involved providing support to the victims and their families, addressed the 44th session of the Human Rights Council and asked its members to establish an international Commission of Inquiry, as a first step to end the prevailing impunity and violence in the Philippines.



FI's Asia Pacific Program coordinator Budi Tjahjono delivers a statement at the UN in Geneva

Franciscans International also:

- Delivered statements to the Human Rights Council on the situation in the Philippines and Sri Lanka, as well as on climate change, the rights of migrants, and people living in poverty.
- Joined a [call to action](#) by civil society to realize the rights of the child through a healthy environment. The appeal was made ahead of a meeting of the Human Rights Council where two children human rights defenders directly participated its deliberations.
- Responded to a call by the Special Rapporteur on indigenous peoples by submitting a [report](#) on the impact of Covid-19 on indigenous communities in Guatemala.
- Submitted two written reports on West Papua ahead of Indonesia's

[Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Human Rights Committee.](#)

- [Launched its 2019 Annual Report](#) in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish.



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