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US Human Rights Network (USHRN)

Submission to Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism call:
Combatting glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance

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The US Human Rights Network is a civil society organization with 300 grassroots member organizations and individual activists working on a range of human rights issues that affect multiple communities across the US and US territories. Many of our members have been at the frontlines of community relief efforts as the coronavirus pandemic spread across the US disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable communities who already face ongoing systemic oppression and human rights abuses including lack of adequate housing and sanitation, lack of access to affordable healthcare, and more.
US Human Rights Network compiled this report during weeks of ongoing uprising and unrest in the US as mass protests have spread across the country in response to the police killing of unarmed Black citizen George Floyd. These protests come during a time of historic unemployment rates, disproportionate COVID-19 death rates faced by Black people and other people of color, increasing policing of Black and brown communities, and unending racist rhetoric and policy coming out of the highest level of government since Donald Trump took office in 2017. It is with this backdrop that we offer this submission to the Special Rapporteur’s important call; our report focuses on the US context with 3 parts: 1) anti-Semitism, 2) anti-Asian racism, and 3) anti-Black racism including the effects of the coronavirus on Indigenous Peoples and Pacific Islanders.

1. Anti-Semitism
Anti-Semitism in the United States is at “historic peaks.” The Anti-Defamation League, which has tracked anti-Semitic incidents for four decades, reported a total of 2,100 incidents in 2019—the most the organization has ever recorded. Its report showed additional upward trends, including a 56% increase in acts of assault. In 2019, there were 95 victims of anti-Semitic assaults.

(i) Social Media and COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories
Jewish Americans now face the additional threat of targeted COVID-19 anti-Semitic messaging amidst the backdrop of an already alarming and historic growth in anti-Semitic incidents. The social networking app Telegram in particular has become “a digital refuge for racists and extremists banned from many other sites.” In March, Telegram channels associated with white supremacy grew to 6,000 users, and a COVID-19 focused channel grew by 800%.

Old conspiracy theories have evolved into COVID-19-themed memes, slogans, and slurs. One set of memes is identical to Holocaust images portraying “Jews as insects transmitting typhus”. Other theories blame Jewish people for “purposefully spreading illness” to sell expensive vaccines.

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
(ii) Public Incidents of Anti-Semitism
Though COVID-19 quarantine measures have made “hate more socially distanced — happening largely online,” anti-Semitism has still found its way into public spaces. Demonstrators used anti-Semitic images at protests against coronavirus restrictions. In Illinois, “with antisemitic incidents […] up 340% since 2016, these protests [became] rallying points for hate and extremism.” In New York, where the highest number of anti-Semitic incidents (430) were reported in 2019, a couple was charged with hate crimes “after attacking a group of Orthodox Jews — ripping their masks off and punching them in the face — for supposedly not social distancing.”

(iv) Policy initiatives and best practices
Studies show that “an increase in social tensions is often accompanied by a rise in anti-Semitic rhetoric.” Governments should anticipate an escalation in hate speech and ensure that laws are in place to clearly establish discrimination, while not suppressing otherwise legitimate discourse. Public officials must avoid linking “the COVID-19 virus to any nationality, ethnicity, or specific location.” Lastly, social media companies and Internet intermediaries have a “social responsibility to tackle online hate.” Independent third party and human rights organizations should be engaged to “audit and evaluate the effectiveness of such self regulatory practices.”

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15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
2. Anti-Asian rhetoric from the top, violence on the ground

Although the exact origins of the virus currently remain unknown, it is believed that COVID-19 first appeared in Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China. The geographic origins of the virus have led to a global surge in racism towards people of Asian descent and Asian-appearing people. In the United States, historic racist tropes that labeled Asian immigrants a “yellow peril,” unclean and unfit for citizenship in the US, have resurfaced with a vengeance resulting in thousands of acts of intimidation, exclusion, humiliation, property damage, and bodily violence against Asian people both offline and online.

(i) White House endorses conspiracy theories and Anti-Asian rhetoric

The current US President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus,” reinforcing and inflaming xenophobia and racism against Asian people for weeks, despite the World Health Organization’s guidelines on naming diseases which aims to “avoid causing offence to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups.”19 The guidelines state that disease names should not include geographic locations nor cultural, population, industry or occupational references.20 Multiple national media outlets followed suit in referring to the virus as the “Wuhan coronavirus” or the “Chinese coronavirus.”21

The President’s rhetoric may contribute to the public’s beliefs about the coronavirus. A Center for Public Integrity/Ipsos poll conducted in April found that 44% of Americans say a specific group or organization is responsible for the virus; of those 44% “most blame China or Chinese people; 66% mentioned China. [...] 45% mentioned China or Chinese people generally, 13% say it was caused by a lab in China, and 9% blame the Chinese government.”22

Before lockdowns of the country began, the spread of misinformation and politicized association between Asian people and the virus led to a sharp decline in customers patronizing Asian-owned businesses and Chinatowns across the country, as well as property damage to Asian businesses.23 Merchants in Manhattan’s Chinatown in New York City reported sales drops of 30% to 80% in a two-week period before the city began closing non-essential businesses.24

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/163636/WHO_HSE_FOS_15.1_eng.pdf
20 Ibid.
https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/03/12/media_called_coronavirus_wuhan_or_chinese_coronavirus_dozens_of_times.html
22 New Center for Public Integrity/Ipsos Poll finds most Americans say the Coronavirus Pandemic is a Natural Disaster, Ipsos. April 28, 2020.  
24 Coronavirus anxiety is devastating Chinese businesses in New York City, CNN. March 2, 2020.  
(ii) Surge in reports of Anti-Asian racism and violent acts

The US has seen a surge in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, including verbal, physical, and online attacks against Asian and Asian-appearing people. Between March 19 and May 13, 2020, the STOP AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) HATE reporting center received over 1,700 reports of coronavirus discrimination from Asian Americans across the US.25

STOP AAPI HATE reported that 90% of respondents believed that they were targeted because of their race; 37% of incidents took place at public venues, including streets, parks and transit; and reports came from 45 out of 50 states across the nation and the capital Washington DC. “The group reported hundreds of cases in which Asian-Americans were harassed in public or barred from businesses or transportation [...] or refused transport in car services like Uber or Lyft.”26 A few of the racist incidents highlighted in their press release include:

• “A couple walked by our street [...] and the male took out a marker and tagged my parents' car with the word COVID-19 on the driver side door.”
• “White man in his 50s [...] dragged an elderly Asian man out of the store by the arm and proceeded to shove him outside the store, causing the elderly man to fall on his head and back. Victim was a 92-year old Asian man.”27

On March 14, three Burmese family members, including a 2-year-old and 6-year-old, were stabbed in a grocery store hate crime in Texas by a man who said they were spreading the coronavirus.28 Many other incidents have been recorded on video and published online, which involve not only overt racism and physical attacks, but also attacks on public health -- videos have surfaced of attackers ripping face coverings and masks off of Asian people, and attackers spitting and coughing on the faces of Asian people.29 These types of attacks are not only racist and violent, but they also increase the victims’ susceptibility to contracting the coronavirus.

Online attacks against Asians in the months since the pandemic began have also soared.30 “After analyzing millions of websites, popular teen chat sites, and gaming platforms, AI-based

27 Ibid.
startup L1ght recorded a 900% increase in hate speech directed towards Chinese [people] and [...] 200% increase in traffic to hate sites and specific posts against Asians. Online and offline racist attacks are affecting mental health; “Crisis Text Line, a group that provides mental health support via text message, said its counselors have received a 39% increase in texts from Asians” between January and March.  

(iii) Policy initiatives and best practices

Anti-Asian racism is a systemic issue in the US, beginning with the first wave of Asian immigrants in the 1800s; Asians have been scapegoated, excluded, and attacked in various ways since their first arrival to this country. Any efforts to stop anti-Asian racism must include public education to counter the issue of Asian invisibility in the US. Civil society efforts to counter the “model minority myth” and the history of Asian erasure include PBS’ new series titled Asian Americans which includes lesson plans for teachers, and an in-progress curriculum created by Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

H.Res 908 / S.Res 580 were joint resolutions introduced in the House and Senate in response to the surge in Anti-Asian racism; “The resolution recommitts the United States to serving as a world leader in building more inclusive, diverse, and tolerant societies by (1) prioritizing language access and inclusivity in communication practices, and (2) combating misinformation and discrimination that put Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at risk.”

3. Coronavirus exacerbates impacts of structural racism on people of African Descent

Black people in the United States have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic in terms of “loss of livelihoods, inadequate compensation where/when eligible, evictions, unemployment, access to health, number of deaths, and police violence where during the state of alarm law enforcement bodies are taking advantage of their increased social control power.”

31 Rising Levels of Hate Speech & Online Toxicity During This Time of Crisis, L1GHT. 
32 Federal agencies are doing little about the rise in anti-Asian hate, NBC News, April 16, 2020. 
33 Asian Americans, PBS Learning Media. 
   https://az.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/asian-americans-pbs/
   https://advancingjustice-la.org/what-we-do/curriculum-lesson-plans
35 S.Res.580 - A resolution condemning all forms of anti-Asian sentiment as related to COVID-19, Congress.gov. 
(i) Employment and unemployment
Black workers are disproportionately represented in frontline jobs with high risk to coronavirus exposure. In New York City, Black people comprise 24% of the city’s population but make up 41% of public transit workers; 33% of trucking, warehouse, and postal service workers; 32% of healthcare workers; and 32% of childcare, homeless, food, and family service workers.\(^\text{37}\)

While over 40 million Americans have filed for unemployment benefits during the pandemic and “unemployment skyrocketed for [both] black and white workers in the COVID-19 labor market, the unemployment rate is higher for black workers. […] As of the latest data, the black unemployment rate is 16.7%, compared with a white unemployment rate of 14.2%.”\(^\text{38}\) Additionally, while “Black-owned businesses are a small share of overall business, [they] are most likely to be in industries impacted by COVID-19 shutdowns.”\(^\text{39}\)

(ii) Uneven healthcare and disproportionate death rates
The US currently has the highest number of recorded cases and deaths from the coronavirus pandemic; the country is approaching 2 million cases and has surpassed 100,000 deaths, with Black people making up nearly 23% of reported deaths despite making up around 13% of the US population.\(^\text{40}\) According to the Harvard Business Review, “blacks are only 22% of New York City’s population, as of mid-April they constituted 28% of fatalities from the virus. In Chicago, where blacks are 30% of the population, they comprise 70% of those killed by Covid-19. In the state of Louisiana, blacks are 32% of the population but 70% of those dead from the disease.”\(^\text{41}\)

According to recent research from APM Research Lab, “African Americans have died from the disease at almost three times the rate of white people. […] More than 20,000 African Americans – about one in 2,000 of the entire black population in the US – have died from the disease.”\(^\text{42}\)

(iii) Native American and Pacific Islander death rates
It is important to recognize that the coronavirus pandemic also affects Indigenous peoples and Pacific Islanders in the US at highly disproportionate rates when compared to their population size. As of May 27, the Navajo Nation had the highest infection rate per capita in the country. In


\(^\text{39}\) Ibid.


the Navajo Nation, 40% of residents live below the poverty line and 30-40% of residents do not have access to running water. This lack of adequate housing and sanitation make practicing key prevention strategies like frequent handwashing difficult. In addition, as a result of cultural genocide and a striking lack of health and wellness infrastructure, Indigenous Peoples, like Black people, are disproportionately affected by diseases that pose additional risk factors for COVID-19 including diabetes, heart disease, and respiratory illnesses.

While the data on Pacific Islanders is lacking even more severely than already poor data on the coronavirus’ impact on people of African descent, “as of May 3, the novel coronavirus had infected Pacific Islanders at a rate more than twice that of the state [of California] as a whole — and killed them at a rate 2.6 times higher” -- numbers that mirror death rates for African Americans.43 According to the University of Hawai‘i, their “research showed as high as 217.7 cases per 100,000 in NHPI residents in at least five states—Hawai‘i, California, Oregon, Utah and Washington. The rates of COVID-19 positive cases within these states are greater than those reported for African Americans and American Indians.”44

(iv) Over-policing and police brutality
Early data from New York released in May showed that 68% - 90% of arrests police made of people violating social distancing orders were of Black people. Much of the remaining arrests were of Latinx people, while few arrests were made of white people or other groups. Videos and photos spread online showed disparate treatment of majority white communities versus Black communities violating social distancing orders -- police handed out face masks to groups of park-goers, while video after video depicted the physical brutalizing of Black men and women participating in seemingly innocuous activities like walking their dogs. Data show that many social distancing related arrests were made in majority Black neighborhoods, demonstrating the exacerbation of ongoing police targeting of these communities during the pandemic.45

We must blame the disproportionate burden of coronavirus experienced by Black people in the US on structural racism that causes poverty, chronic illnesses, and racial health disparities. The protests that have occurred everyday across the US since May 26, with Black coronavirus death as the backdrop, have been met with police repression and violence. Police forces in many states have deployed pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets, and in a few cases live ammunition on protestors. At least 4 protestors have died from police gunfire, with scores more injured, and at least 11,000 protestors arrested. Protestors are facing jail time in facilities with known coronavirus outbreaks.

(v) Policy initiatives and best practices

Racism against people of African descent in the US is a structural issue originating in hundreds of years of slavery and ensuing discrimination, the legacy of which continues to affect disproportionate rates of socioeconomic status, incarceration, poor health outcomes, and more. Tackling the deep-rooted issue of structural racism will require a multi-pronged and multi-level approach with significant changes in political will and commitment. Many organizations including the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) have created policy platforms which include demands for reparations, economic justice, and more, available on their website.\(^46\)

M4BL’s National Demands for COVID-19:\(^47\)
1. There must be a thorough plan to release people from jails, prisons, and detention centers.
2. All relief efforts must prioritize Black families and communities over corporations.
3. All barriers to housing, healthcare and education must be removed.
4. Every person should be able to vote.
5. Emergency powers must not be abused and people’s health and safety must be a priority.

M4BL’s Policy Platform to Respect Protestors:\(^48\)
1. Violations of property should never be equated with the violation of human life.
2. Local and state officials must ensure that there are no abuse of powers
3. No use of lethal force on protestors.

\(^{46}\) The Movement for Black Lives. [https://m4bl.org/](https://m4bl.org/)


\(^{48}\) Respect Protestors, The Movement for Black Lives. [https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/respect-protestors/](https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/respect-protestors/)